

## Parkway Five

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*John Hodges*

Corey watches from her spot on the porch the black clumps of seaweed washing onto the beach, hissing and roiling, lining the shore with bloated snakes.

"Fuckin bitch don't realize I ain't got no money!" comes the voice behind her, the shouting voice in the house that never stops. "They got money! They should pay it their own damn selves. I work for my money. I'm a honest tax-paying citizen!"

Corey has a picture in her head of a lady she has never seen. It is the woman Bobbyman killed, in the sand, face down, wearing clothes like her teachers, with heels and red lipstick. And the worry-heavy, thick, black like night when she closes her eyes, is all inside her. She thinks the dead lady might come get Bobbyman. The dead lady can get me too, she thinks. At night, and cut off my feet so I can't walk. And cut off my head.

They'd gone for pizza seven miles away and didn't come back for two days. That's when Bobbyman drove the truck into a woman.

As Corey looks across the water, a shiver creeps up her spine onto her neck. The shucker at Eaters told her people never died, that inside was a soul that went to live with God. "What's God?" Corey had asked. And the shucker told her the Wind.

The rusted spring of the screen door stretches its noise in Corey's ears. Her back tightens.

"Gonna be a big one," Bobbyman says, and the door behind him slams. "Nothin but niggerhair in that sky."

Corey looks at her feet, moves her toes, doesn't know how it is her toes move when she wants. Just do. And she thinks of the dead lady.

"Feed the dogs?" Bobbyman says, cupping his hands to light a cigarette.

Corey's heartbeat quickens. Her eyes climb the man, starting at his black galoshes and moving up his filthy jeans, into the shadowed swoop of his naked upper body.

"No daddy."

Bobbyman looks out at the water, blowing smoke which whirls away into the wind.

"I forgot," Corey says.

"What else is new." Bobbyman snorts a glob of snot into his throat and spits it off the porch.

"I'm sorry, daddy," Corey says.

"Story my life." He turns on his heel, looking down at her. "I don't ask much of you do I?"

"No daddy."

Bobbyman shrivels his face, raising his upper lip and flaring his nostrils with such disgust it makes Corey shudder. He raises his arm as if to lash her, and she wants to run, but can't. Her legs are stiff, feet woven into the porch like splinters. Corey closes her eyes, but the blow never comes. Instead her father chuckles. She opens her eyes and he is there, swaying above her like a piece of raw flesh on its nub.

"That's all right," he says warmly, putting his hand on Corey's head. "We all forget now and then." He looks back into the horizon. "You can do it later. I reckon somebody's gonna get weter'n a motherfucker." Bobbyman flips his cigarette off the porch. He coughs a little, then goes to the couch and plops himself down.

Corey knows what to do. As her father empties sunflower seeds into his mouth from a pack of *David's*, she kneels before him on the floorboards, stretching her hands around the slimy black rubber of one of his boots. Using all her weight, she pulls, and the boot slips off. Then she takes off the sneaker, the damp sock. She does the same with his other leg and begins her job of squeezing his feet.

"Oysters were bastards today," Bobbyman says. "How can a man spec to pay a funeral when oysters are bastards?"

"Beats me."

"Well, it damn sure beats me too, Corey. Your mama says I got to do it, but I ain't got to do shit do I?"

"No daddy."

"That's my girl."

Corey digs her thumbs into the wet wrinkly flesh as the familiar smell is loosed about her face. His foot is like a dead fish. Worse, because it is alive. Sometimes after school Corey gathers dead fish and makes towns of them on the beach. She gives them voices, strokes their backs and moves them through the sand like toy trucks.

"One day when you're a woman," Bobbyman says. "I'm gonna take you out in the boat w'me just to show you how much a bastard a oyster can be."

Last time Corey was in one of those boats, Bobbyman got it in his head to pierce her ear. Said she needed to be more ladylike. The other guy in the boat held her arms while Bobbyman ran a hook through her lobe.

"Have a good day in school?" Bobbyman says.

"Yes daddy."

"Well good. I'ont want you going up to be like your mama. That woman has caused me nothing but trouble, and you know what? I can't even be sure if you're my own damn daughter. Ain't that a load of shit?"

Corey grabs the other foot, pulling her fingers through Bobbyman's toes.

"Answer me."

"You said somebody might could've switched me in the hospital."

"Don't you dare back talk me, girl," Bobbyman says, raising his hand up again.

Corey pulls back, blinking her eyes, wishing she had blue ones like Bobbyman and Alma.

"It's a crime," Bobbyman says. "A woman should stick to the house. You know what that would make you, Corey? If it's true you ain't even mine?"

Corey squeezes his foot, hard the way he likes. "Yessir," she says.

"Look at me when you speak."

Corey raises her black eyes, ashamed, looking into the man's blue ones. He is so big. Skin dangles from his brows like the edges of oysters.

"See to it you don't go a'whoring, understand?"

Bobbyman's tongue slips out with bits of shell. He spits them, stretching his toes and taking a deep breath of wind. Blond streams of hair whisk across his face, and his cheek twitches how it sometimes does.

"What are you?" Bobbyman says, nibbling more seeds.

Corey knows how to answer. "A bee," she says.

"Say it right."

"A bitch."

"And don't forget it. You take that one to Mama."

"Yessir."

Bobbyman snatches his feet away, grabs his shoes and boots and goes back in.

Now Corey can feed the dogs. She glides down the concrete steps around to the side of the house. The air is salty and rumbling, cracking like a belt. The dogs barking, and Corey grabs their silver bowls as they snap chains, licking her, clawing her arms and dress. It begins to drizzle. Take it to Mama. Always take it to Mama. Corey takes the bowls to the dilapidated stationwagon, opens the door and scoops out some food from the big red barrel. He once put a collar on her and made her eat dogfood. Take it to Mama, he said when she cried.

Corey is in the bathroom, her favorite place. A loud bang shakes the earth, searing the clouds and it comes down hard, like oysters on the rickety tin roof. Lightning strikes, the bulb flickers, goes out.

She is in the dark now, sitting on the toilet and alone. She can hear the wind roaring outside the window, and Bobbyman groaning beyond the door somewhere. Corey hopes the dead lady isn't left on someone's picnic table because she'll be getting wet. It might make her angry. Corey imagines the dead lady jumping up into the wind and flying to a shed where it is dry.

Alma shouts. Her voice rises up over the thunder. She calls Bobbyman a whore, and he yells back, telling her to shut up, and calling her a liar and a whore whose wings are gonna get broke if she doesn't shut up and, "Those are my cigarettes bitch, I got them with my own money, you go out in the rain and find your own damn cigarettes."

"I know you're awake," Alma says.

Corey's body is half swallowed by the cushions on the loveseat. Every night the brown marshmallows suck her down into the earth where fish wear clothes and girls fly.

"You can get up now. I made you oatmeal."

Corey doesn't stir. She is watching the dead lady walk, red heels clicking in front of the oyster mountains, fat pelicans riding the air.

"Corey!" her mother shouts. "Please get up. I want to sit down."

The dead lady smiles and says, "I want to sit down."

Corey opens her eyes. "Do I have to," she mumbles.

"Yes," Alma says. "Now hurry up, child."

Corey brings her legs around, and Alma sits down, plopping the steaming bowl in Corey's lap.

"The rain is going back to the sky now," Alma says.

Corey imagines a worm poking its head out of her oatmeal.

"Did you know that, Corey?"

"No."

"It's true, child. Haven't you ever wondered where all that rain goes?"

"The golf of Mexico."

"No, that ain't right," Alma says. "Raindrops get sucked back in the sky."

Corey raises the silver spoon heaped high with mush. She takes a big breath and blows on it.

"It's because of the sun," Alma tells her. "When the sun gets thirsty it drinks the rain."

No wonder the sun is so big, Corey thinks. Miss Henderson said over a billion planets could fit in the sun. Corey puts the food in her mouth and chews.

"Mama," Corey says. "What did that lady look like?"

"What lady? Damn, I wish I had a cigarette."

"That lady y'all killed?"

Alma purses her lips and squints one eye at Corey. "What you wanna know about that for?"

"I don't know."

"She was tall," Alma says.

"How tall was she, Mama?"

"Taller'n you."

"Did she wear glasses?"

"Hush girl. Eat your food."

Corey lifts her spoon and puts more in her mouth. "What she said, Mama?"

"No," Alma says. "She didn't say noth— Corey, don't ask me about her. She's dead." Alma shakes her head and sips her tea and looks over at Corey and messes up Corey's hair. Then Alma smiles affectionately. "We was talking about you, honey," she says, winking.

"Me?"

"Yes, in case you got to know, Corey. We run her down when we was talking about you."

The front door is open and Corey can see the water from where she sits. It is a clear day, bright and fresh from the all-night rain. A group of pelicans fly by, calling Corey to the beach.

The sand is warm on Corey's knees. Her hair already hot from the sun. She kneels in front of her new town of dead fish, eyeing them suspiciously as she trucks them around.

"I'll bite your tail if you don't stop tickling my nose," she says, from one fish to another.

"No, don't bite my tail," she says, speaking for the other fish.

"I'll eat your tail," Corey snaps.

"Ow, no, don't eat my tail."

It is five fish in all. The sand shark is the biggest. Corey puts the shark at the front of the train, and moves it forward a step, then the next, and the next, until all fishes have advanced.

"Wait for me," Corey says, grabbing the last one's head. It is a sickly thing, rotted, with an array of bones showing through the meat. She holds it to her face and looks through the spikes. The sea is a million pinches, white at the tops, and gulls drift between the bones, cawing in the wind as they roll their eyes in big circles.

The shucker once told Corey she was pretty. Said her eyes were black pearls, and rare, that any mother would be proud. Corey remembers how he sat on a bucket with his fat stomach hanging between his legs. "That's a fine dress," he'd said. He could split an oyster with one hand. "And you got some

pretty legs too," he said. "If you was my daughter, yessirree, I'd be happy as a trout."

The wind still blows from the night before and dozens of oyster boats rest along the horizon. Sticks. She knows her father is in one. She wishes her daddy was the shucker. She has only seen that shucker three times, but he was so nice. And what he said about people living in the wind. When Corey told her mother about it, Alma laughed and said it was a lie because everybody knows God is the man who lives on the moon. But Corey didn't believe that because Miss Henderson said nobody could live up there because there wasn't any air.

The fish in Corey's hand is slimy like her father's feet. She wrinkles her face at it and sticks out her tongue. "Fuck!" she says, nastily. "You're a bitch!" She clutches the tail and slaps the shark with it. The head breaks off and rolls in the sand.

"Take it to Mama!" Corey yells, grabbing another fish and hitting the shark with it.

When Corey took it to Mama she was slapped so hard everything went black. When the light came back, Mama was kneeling over her on the kitchen floor saying she was sorry. She kissed Corey's cheek, but Corey never took it to her again.

"That's a fine dress," the man had said. Corey wonders if the shucker is really the man on the moon come down to see how things are going.

Corey grabs the shark's body and runs a finger over an eye. It feels like a jellyfish, and she sees her face in it, tiny, and the whole world all around it like the globe on Miss Henderson's desk.

Corey unlatches the safety pin from where the top button used to be on her dress. She runs the needle around the eye of the shark, causing it to pop out a little. She grabs it with her fingers and pulls.

Corey puts the eye in her palm, holds it in the sun. It looks like an oyster in its juice with bits of blue and green. She squashes it up and holds the pieces against her eyelids.

Corey laughs. She has new eyes. And remembers how it was when her parents didn't come back from getting pizza. She had walked in and out of the house slamming the door and yelling for the dogs to shut up. She could do anything, and the next night when Corey was alone, she left her dress in the yard and went to the shore and made like a pelican in the sand. Gurgling in the wind, she watched the others purring and feathering in the moonlight.

Corey pulls her hands away and opens her eyes. The sticky clumps roll down her cheeks. She looks at the sky and sees a floating buzzard. The nearby palms are snapping, and even the pines in the forest she can hear. She puts her hands to her chest and flaps her wings, but the wind doesn't lift her.

"Make me a pelican," Corey says.

Nothing.

She falls back in the sand amongst her family of dead fish, staring at the sun, seeing the rusty doorknob of her house. She can walk right out the door if she wants, down the steps out into the fast road.

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Corey's first step is the silver pin she throws into the bright sweeping sand. She looks across the road. Her house glows. She whispers goodbye, and runs, with her dress hanging open like a wishbone against her chest. She walks and walks, seems like days. And her legs are tired and wobbly. She is thirsty, looking for puddles of rain, but the sun is thirsty too. Beer cans, trash, and styrofoam cups litter her trail of tall weeds and glass. She is a dwarf in the green weeds and small as the grass. Only breezes come from cars that honk as they speed by. The shiny chunks of metal leap across the land. Heads turn in the windows, and Corey wonders what they think. Do they have water? She wonders if they know about the dead lady.

Corey topples to the ground. It feels like something bit her. Then comes the pain, setting in slow. And the blood. It was broken glass that cut her. Shoots tower above her, hiding her from the road, competing for her air. She holds her foot in both hands, studying the wound, so big that it makes her cry. It looks like a laughing smile bleeding red from the corner of its mouth. So she licks it, thick and sweet. And looks inside the gash to see if she can see her soul in there. But all it is is red. Still, she worries that maybe her soul can get out and mix with the wind. She pinches it shut, and crickets buzz around her with sun and the ants on her thighs. A ladybug on her shoulder.

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Mostly when Corey bleeds, she takes dirt and smears it in the cut, but the ground is so thick and rooted with grass that it only hurts her fingers trying to get some up.

So she sucks at the smile in her foot, trying to quench her thirst, and thinking of all that water she could drink if she was home. In the bathroom she could wrap her mouth around the faucet and let the water stream down her throat. At home she could sit on the toilet watching between her legs the dark mirrored face floating on water. Everything in the bathroom was safe. The tall white sink and tub were always shiny and cool to her touch. Corey sometimes climbed in the tub pretending she was dead.

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Her dress is sticky against her, a skin that isn't hers, wet and cumbersome. Despite the pain she continues. The sun moves. Soon, Bobbyman will need Corey to take off his boots. He will need her to feed the dogs, rub his feet, listen while he talks of Mama, oysters, dinghyboys, people he used to know, and what he should have done in this or that situation. Bobbyman needs Corey. For his life—to fetch beer, smile, get scared, light cigarettes and agree about Alma the whore. The least Corey can do is light cigarettes and agree about Alma. Don't you know I work all day so you can eat my food? I work like a nigger, break my back in the sun so you and your shittyass mother can eat my food and spend my money. You think I like that? Do you?

Corey limps along, legs crossing each other like a warped pair of scissors. In the distance appears a figure that seems to be moving toward her. She wonders. Could it be the dead lady? Her heart flutters and she imagines a truck screaming across the road and slamming into her. "Goddamnit!" she hears her father say. She hears Mama crying, sees the dead lady with blood on her face, but the dead lady is still in the distance, dark, with steam on the green ground.

You want me to box you?

No daddy.

A pelican flies by, turning its nose at Corey, looking her up and down.

Did you feed the dogs like I told you?

Corey waves and the pelican blinks its black eyes. It continues down, flying over the dead lady and cutting over the density of trees at the other side of the road.

The dead lady is closer now. Corey's throat dry, tongue dry, swallowing no spit. She can see the color in the dead lady's clothes. She wears a red skirt, a yellow shirt. The figure grows with each step and she can see the dead lady's face, sagging from her face-bone and rotting like her fishes in the sand.

There is a flashing--the sun catching the rim of the dead lady's glasses. Corey thinks it means the dead lady is mad about her casket. Corey decides that if the dead lady comes after her, she'll lie and say she'll pay for it herself. Trick the dead lady, because all Corey has is twenty-eight cents she stole from the rug. She has it hidden in a brick-hole in the back yard.

Corey's heart thickens in her ears, drumming with insects and buzzing in the sky. The world is so bright and colored. It sizzles, breathing beneath her, and the dead lady looks hungry. Corey thinks she hears boats grinding against posts, then a huge metal snake slithers into the grass behind her with a terrible whipping sound.



"Hey!" cries a voice. "Ain't you Bobby Basum's little girl?"

Corey looks back and sees the face behind the wheel. It is the shucker, and he looks mad, and Corey suddenly knows the shucker is God, coming to punish her for whoring. Corey turns and runs fast and hard, falling down and getting back up again and running for the dead lady bobbing up and down inside her eyes.

The car door slams. "Where you going?" God shouts.

Heavy footsteps punch the ground, after her, and Corey screams. There are crickets inside her, jumping crazy, and she falls, washing into the tall green weeds, a slab of meat, roadkill. And gets up, not feeling her feet anymore, and runs. Falls. And God reaches down and pulls her from the grass.

"Let go!"

The dead lady is holding a plastic garbage bag over her shoulder.

"What's gotten into you, girl?" God says.

The dead lady bends over, reaching for something. Her face is withered, wrinkled and brown.

The shucker chuckles. "Damn girl. You need to calm down." He grips her easy as an oyster. Fat calloused fingers coil around her, pulling her legs, wrapping her in hot seaweed. He is brushing the dirt from her dress and skin, wiping off barnacles, grit, getting her ready to split. Will pull the knife between her ribs and crack her, reach in, yank out her soul and stuff it in his mouth swallowing.

The dead lady opens her sack and throws in a can.

"Wait!" Corey cries.

And the dead lady stands up straight, tilts her head sideways, looking at Corey as if trying to remember something.

God opens the front door of his Plymouth and throws Corey in, shutting away the outside between a quickly narrowing pair of metal walls. A dog barks wild in the back. The engine snorts and roars and Corey doesn't move. She is laid along the red cushion seat as if dead, too scared and too drained for anything but wishing she was gone, or a bird, huddled with others by a mountain of shells. ■