

A Pearl for Mama

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I was eleven going on twelve when electricity first came to Lebeau. It was a big deal. People had been talking about it since a year before when it came to Pearl River City just west of us. Skeeter and Bubba, my little brothers, had been running around the house pretending to turn on lights for weeks, and Mama was "fixing to put away the coal oil lamps" just any day.

Lebeau was a community of ten, maybe fifteen, families just on the edge of Pearl. It was named Lebeau because a lady living there by that name had a vision. An angel told her to name it that. But the folks in the big white houses in Pearl called it "The Colony," like we were lepers or something. Sister Lebeau said we were the chosen of God to proclaim the days of judgment, which were just around the corner, so to speak.

It was July, so hot you could about see steam rising from the dry clay dust. Mama spent most of her time, when she wasn't helping Sister Lebeau, sitting and rocking, fanning herself with one of those cardboard fold-out fans she'd "borry'd" from the church. It had a picture of Jesus in the Garden on it in color, and printed below that was ROCK OF AGES FUNERAL HOME, 112 Main, Pearl River City.

Mama was sick a lot that summer and the heat like to have killed her. Sister Lebeau said it was high blood that caused it, but she never saw a doctor. Skeeter and Bubba and I spent most of the days fishing in the Pearl River that was close by, even though Mama always said, "Queenie, a girl ought to be learning something 'stead of fishing and playing all the time." But we always caught a mess of cat and they came in good with Mama's biscuit and white gravy for supper.

The day the electric came to our house I was sitting out on the front porch starting at daylight. We knew it was coming that day because Sister Lebeau had talked to God about it the last Sunday and He told her that He saw fit that we'd have it that week; Wednesday, in fact. So that morning I got up before light and stirred up some oatmeal over the wood stove. Skeeter and Bubba didn't like oatmeal but that was breakfast. Mama had a picture of Eleanor Roosevelt off the cover of a magazine tacked to the wall. "You all are going to look like that," I said, "if you don't eat your oats." And just like always they tipped up their bowls and let it slide down their throats, saying, "Not me, I ain't." Then they took off down the road toward Sister Lebeau's house so they could get some chopping done before the sun got up too high. We lived in one of her houses. Free rent if we all pitched in on her tomatoes and watermelon. And she was nice. Sent down a gallon of warm, fresh milk every day or so and a sack of eggs when Mama did her ironing.

Mama was rocking and fanning and I was squatting on the front porch picking my nose when I saw dust rising from something big coming down the road. "Mama, here they come!"

Mama came out on the porch, shaded her eyes like an Indian scout. "Well sure enough now," she said, as if amazed. "Y'all go wash your face." Whispering as if those men could hear in that loud truck; as if they'd care anyway. Skeeter and Bubba had seen the moving dust cloud too and had cut across the field to beat the truck to the house. "I seen it first," each called as they high-tailed it around back to the cistern. I heard the bucket drop and the old rusty pulley squeaking and grating as the rope came up with the cool, stale water. Not me. I wasn't going to wash up for no 'lectric men.

"Queen Esther Jones!" Mama shouted. "Get your skinny ass out there and wash up!" She always called my whole name when she was mad. I wriggled my bare toes in the dust and watched old mother-cat panting beside me. Fleas came to the surface of her silky yellow fur, then dived back down when they saw daylight. "What if your Daddy was to come home right now, see you looking like a ragamuffin in front of strangers?"

She always brought up Daddy. But I had a feeling he would

never come home. I remember hearing Admiral Nimitz talking one day on Sister Lebeau's wireless radio while Mama was doing the ironing. I'd run errands, feed the cows and chickens, then I'd rest and listen to the radio every chance I'd get. I was sitting there picking my nose and asking questions about the news.

"Shush now," says Mama. "That's Daddy's boss talking." Admiral Nimitz was talking about the war.

"That's a sign of worms," says Sister Lebeau, looking over her specs at me.

"Boss says another ship was sank yesterday," says Mama. "But I don't believe Jesus would let it be Daddy's."

"Ever checked her for worms?" asks Sister Lebeau.

"Daddy ain't never coming home," I says, still picking my nose.

"Lord going to strike you dumb someday, Queenie," says Mama. "Got to have faith."

"Vermifuge," says Sister Lebeau. "Give her a dose of vermifuge. Can't hurt nothing."

"His eye is on the sparrow," sings Mama, pressing a lace petticoat. Sister Lebeau had word from Jesus that Mama had a secret sin and just as soon as she quit it Daddy would come home. I never could figure out what it was. Mama always seemed as innocent as a sparrow to me.

The truck drove up into the yard in a swirl of dust. Mama lined up with Skeeter and Bubba on the front porch, smiling faces all ashine. I sat on the steps and studied a flea I'd caught between my fingers. "Impudent sinner," Mama said from between smiling, clenched teeth. She wiped her hands down the sides of her dress.

They always said I was no account and impudent. Wasn't scared of anyone, except God maybe. Then I checked Him out and wasn't scared of Him anymore either. Mama said if I didn't quit playing with myself that God would strike me dumb and make me forget my name. Being no account and impudent I figured I'd have to chance it. I played with myself all one night, saying my name every so often. In the morning I got up and went straight to Mama and said, "Queen Esther Jones, so there!"

The electric men got out of the truck. Three of them. Mama ran out like a fool and said, "Y'all going to put us in some 'lectric?"

"Yes'm," said the driver looking her over. He was a skinny sawed-off fart with a little pinched up face. He looked over at me. I pulled my legs together and hugged up my knees. I was wearing a raggedy old rayon dress Mama had dug from the bottom of a Salvation Army box. It smelled of mothballs and mildew. The side zipper had been ripped out and the buttons snipped off.

"How long's it going to take you?"

"Could take all day," said the driver, sidling up to Mama.

"You mean we could have lights tonight?"

"You got a light bu'b you can," he said. "If you got the bu'b I got the juice." He turned and laughed toward the other men.

"I don't have no light bu'b," said Mama. I could see her wondering how we were going to have light with no bulbs and no money to buy any. We hadn't had any cash money in the house since Daddy left. She'd already polished the coal oil lamps and put them away, having faith in Sister Lebeau's message from God that we'd have lights on Wednesday night. She'd promised the kids that they could sit up half the night and we'd play hide boogie man.

Skeeter stood looking at the ground twisting his fingers. Bubba's lower lip dropped down and he walked over and kicked mother-cat. "I hate Jesus," he said. But Mama let it pass.

"Where's your old man?" asked the driver, getting up closer to Mama. I jumped up and stood in front of him.

"Daddy's fighting in the war. Be home any day though," I said. "Might be he's in Pearl River City right now waiting for a ride out here."

He slid his hand across Mama's broad hips and around her waist. "Reckon I could see to it you get your light bu'b." He turned and winked at the other two men. I got as close to his face as I could. Standing on my toes looking up I could see every wrinkle in his ugly little face.

"Mama's got high blood," I said loud.

He looked at me hard, spat on the ground near my feet and said, "Aaw she-ut."

We watched them all morning as they dug, put in the pole, and rolled out the line. That line came straight from Sister Lebeau's house to ours. It was like being linked up to God. Every so often Skeeter would proudly bring out a fresh bucket of cool cistern water. Never mind the wigglers in it. It was cool. Mama went into the house and came out dressed in her real silk kimono from Japan. She'd found it in that same box my dress came from. That was all she had on. You could see her nipples tickling the silk in the front. She was beautiful, smiling like the Mona Lisa would have if she'd had nice white teeth like Mama's.

Driver looked at me, then at her. Skeeter and Bubba sidled up to the truck trying to look in; see all those buttons, levers, indicators. Driver winked at me. "Son of a bitch," I said between my teeth. Mama stuck me with her elbow.

The men stopped work about noon and brought out their lunch pails. Their backs were dripping sweat. The sun just wouldn't let up. Even old mother-cat had gone under the porch to watch in the shade. Driver sat under a live oak tree and brought out a meat sandwich on white bread. Skeeter and Bubba stood slack-jawed like fools and watched every bite. He tossed the last of his sandwich into the dust and opened a coke soda.

"Piss ant," I said.

"Shut up, Queenie," Mama said. "Jesus hates a dirty mouth. 'Sides these men are nice enough to come out here and put in 'lectric for us so's we can read at night, play a radio, things like that."

I looked up at Mama. We didn't have a radio, Mama couldn't read, and "things like that" didn't cover much territory.

"Never mind," said the driver, grinning with his brown teeth, "I like 'em with spunk."

"That's the way I am," said Mama. "Spunky. She gets that from me."

Across the creek watermelon was ripening in the field. The driver stood grinning at me and pulled another sandwich from his rusty lunch pail. Mother-cat rubbed against my leg. I gave her the sandwich scrap he'd thrown away. She'd never eaten

white bread before. I thought about how the creek fed into the Pearl and the Pearl fed into the Gulf and from there into the great wide ocean which touched every faraway land. Where there were wars and rumors of wars and God was visiting His 'niquity upon the third and fourth generations. Revelations was coming to pass. Sister Lebeau said so. I used to take half a peanut shell and sail it on the creek water like a boat. I'd say, "Sail away far across the ocean to my Daddy and tell him to come home. Tell that old goat, Nimitz, he don't need him no more." Once I'd found a real pearl when I opened a mussel shell from the bottom of the river. It wasn't perfectly round or perfectly white, but its pearliness flickered and shimmered in my palm like the light of the sun and moon put together. I put it in my mouth under my tongue so I wouldn't lose it and carried it home to Mama.

The driver sat down by me on the porch to eat his sandwich. His coke soda was right by my hand but I didn't touch it. He grinned in my face and his breath smelled like bologna and mustard. "I wouldn't eat none of your shitty white bread on a bet," I said, giving him the middle finger as I walked stiffly into the house. Bastard bastard bastard, I sang under my breath. I sat on the bed twirling my bead chain with Daddy's dog tag on it. He'd left it under the bed the morning he went away to war. I didn't think about the meat and white bread. But my stomach did. And it chewed at my guts till my throat hurt.

I heard the driver tell the men to go into town and get a socket with a pull chain. "Bring back a forty watt bu'b too," he said. I heard the truck pull out and then Skeeter calling to me. I cracked the front door to take a look.

"Hey little lady," driver said. "How about taking me across the creek, help me pick out a watermelon?"

"I can pick one better," said Mama, smiling extra pretty.

"Like hell," I said under my breath, stepping outside.

Driver took my hand and grinned. "Come on, Queenie, you little spunky thing," he said. "You're just a wild deer ain't you?"

"The man says he'll bring us out some white bread and meat," whined Bubba, "if you go with him to get the watermelon."

"Piss ant," I said.

"Says he'll pay cash money for the watermelon," said Skeeter. "And get us a light bu'b."

"And let us set in the truck too," added Bubba. They jumped up and down chanting, "Please! Please! Please!"

"Piss ant," I said, trying to break his grip on my wrist.

"I like to hear 'em squeal," he laughed, holding me easily. I clamped my teeth into his hand and held on. I could taste blood before he hit me across the bridge of my nose.

"She ain't no wild deer," he laughed. "She's a wild cat!" He pulled me toward the creek. The water was cool on my feet. I didn't look back.

"I don't want no 'lectric," shouted Mama. "Take it back!" I jerked away from him and walked on ahead down the dusty path to the watermelon field.

Far away across the ocean Admiral Nimitz was laughing. A shell sailed away down the Pearl River and across the water to the war. I opened my eyes looking straight up from between two rows of watermelon. Great rain clouds, thunderheads, were moving in. I made pictures out of them, just like when I was a kid. Jesus was there. And the war in slow motion. And Sister Lebeau talking about the Lord.

I saw a queen with a pearl necklace smiling at me. A red ant bit me between my bare toes. I got up and went across the creek to home.

The truck was back and they were eating watermelon. Mama was in the house. Nobody would look at me. Maybe I was invisible now. Truck driver was telling Skeeter and Bubba about the levers and meters in the truck. The other two men sat under the tree laughing and talking. Driver got out of the truck. "Let's us all chip in on the watermelon, you guys." He held out his hat and threw in a fifty-cent piece. The men dug in their pockets for change.

I watched the dust rise after them. It turned the sky red as they passed Sister Lebeau's house. The thunderhead moved north without letting down a drop. Night crept slowly across Lebeau. The red hot sun hung in the live oaks on the edge of Pearl River forever. We sat at the table looking up at the light

bulb hanging from the ceiling. Then Mama lifted up Bubba and had him pull the bead chain. "Let there be light," she said.

Mama and I sat at the table and let the kids play boogie man, turning the light off while one would go hide, then back on till we heard a wild screech, meaning he'd been found. Sister Lebeau came over and made them stop so we could sing hymns. Then she sat in Mama's rocking chair and talked about the war and how it was a sign of the end of the world. How we'd have to repent and work for the Lord. "Queenie," she said, "you got to quit that fishing and playing and picking your nose. You're a adult woman now."

"Yes'm," I said, watching Skeeter and Bubba get sleepy-eyed.

After Sister Lebeau left, the kids crawled into bed talking about growing up to be 'lectric men with giant trucks and all the meat and white bread sandwiches you could eat; all the coke soda you could drink. Mama turned out the light and we sat silently at the table listening to the crickets and swatting mosquitoes off our legs. Mama was beautiful even in the dark. She had big sorrowful eyes, and her skin shined like gold from the reflection of the full moon through the window. Not a sign of a secret sin anywhere. She reached across the table to me with her large, rough hands.

"Let's get us one of them white hob-nail lamps," she whispered, not to wake up the kids. "They've got them now at Pearl City."

"Sure, Mama."

"I seen one in the window of the five and dime."

"Yes, Mama."

"You can learn me to read before Daddy gets home."

"Yes'm."

July nights are cold near the Pearl River. The wind whips off the water and around the mossy live oaks right into your bones. I got up and tip-toed to the back door.

The moon was high. I sat on the back step, my bony bottom cold against the damp boards. A silvery cloud the shape of a grave passed in front of the steadfast moon. Daddy would never come home. I felt the moonlight cool on my face and listened to the sounds of night. The midnight train cried

mournfully as it passed through Pearl River City. Mother-cat purred against my legs, looking up at me every now and then; playfully batting at a loose thread on my dress. "It's time for you and me to grow up, mother-cat," I whispered. "Put away childish things. I'm a adult woman now." I went back to bed and shivered under the flannel sheet.

Toward morning I heard Mama sniffing and crying. I got up and tip-toed to her bed and crawled in beside her. She was soft and warm. Her skin was satin-smooth and her hair smelled like biscuit and white gravy. She spit on the hem of her kimono and dabbed at a spot of dried blood between my legs. She drew me close, smoothing my matted hair, kissing the bridge of my nose where it ached. I cuddled in between her large soft breasts and slept. Dreaming of tomorrow. Dreaming of fishing and playing in the sun by the Pearl. 🐱