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# Selected Stories

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# A Swallow of Cola

My mother calls me "yellow" like it's my name — calls me this 'cause she says beneath all of my dark, there's the yellow I once was as a baby. "Your father was so stingy," she says a lot of the time when she's at the sink washing dishes, her back to me, "he had to take his color along with him when he left!" And she means it — acts as if, before he took off, he leaned into the crib and took back his yellow. She shows me pictures of when I was a baby and I was as yellow as she says. In the supermarket, in the dairy aisle, she'll recall that yellow and say, "You was real yellow, like butter." At the beach, when the sun is full on us, she'll recall that yellow and sing, "You was yellow alright, just like the sun." And if it weren't for those pictures, I wouldn't believe her. I'm dark — like my mother, like her sisters, like her mother, like her father. Dark. Nobody believes the picture on the table by the sofa is me as a baby. Folks' jaws drop and they get that "what happened?" look to their eyes. You should see my mother proving that it's me. "See right there, that mark on the left side of her chin — she still got it." And the folks say, "Ah! Sho' is her then!" And they shake their heads — swear up and down my dark is the work of some hex. But my mother says my father wouldn't put a hex on me. "He didn't love me enough to wanna hurt me by hurtin' my child," she tells them and they nod. "He was just stingy is all," My mother says to company, "only wanted that yellow for himself." And she means it — makes them believe my father put my yellow in a sack, tied it 'round a stick, and took off.

But you can't steal skin, my friend José says. He says all babies are born with no color just about. I tell him I know that and that it's just my mother talking crazy. José says he can't picture me yellow nohow — says it was alright on me as a baby, but as a grown girl he says "No way!" and frowns as if yellow is the nastiest color in the crayon box. My mother says José don't know what

he's talking about. "Yellow, girl," she says, "your father is a thief. He got hold to your yellow and run off — that's what he did." When I tell José this, he laughs and says of my mother (imitating and sounding just like my grandmother): "Your mother's loony as a jaybird."

José is silly, but he knows what he's talking about. My mother says I gotta watch out for José. She says he may be silly and all the time laughin' and smilin' and imitatin' folks, but "he's got a meanness in him," my mother says. She says she can see it in his eyes. "Yellow, girl, keep your eye on that José. He might just steal something from you one of these days," she said once while brushing my long, curly hair — the hair she says my father had sense enough to leave behind. "Still stingy, though," she says. I don't know about this meanness she thinks José has. José wouldn't steal a thing — wouldn't even steal his own bike back if he had the chance. She thinks twelve is too young to know what she means by "something" when she says that he might steal something from me one of these days. I know what she means. And José ain't studying me about that. He just likes me the way I am. He likes my hair when it's pinned up and hiding its length; he likes the mark on my chin and the nicks on my shins; he likes the chipped nail polish on my short, round boy-nails; he likes the hair starting to grow under my arms and he likes the smell there when my deodorant is wearing off. "You smell like something cooking," he sometimes says when he smells me after I've been running and jumping around — my deodorant long wore off. Once when, on one of those days I had been running and jumping around, we were leaning against his fence, he told me:

"If your father did do what your mother say — steal your yellow — that's the best thing he coulda done for you."

"Why you say so?" I said, biting my low nails.

"Because I like you dark," he said yanking my hand away from my mouth but not in a mean way 'cause José don't have meanness in him like my mother says.

"Even if Luther don't?" I said putting my hands in my pockets. Luther is a boy at school who pokes fun at my dark. Luther says people ain't dark like me no more. "Everybody's mixed with somethin," Luther says," 'cept you."



"I'm not thinking 'bout Luther," José said and he puffed out his cheeks to look like Luther. We were quiet for a while after that until José smiled and said he could smell me.

"You don't smell yellow," he said sniffing me up close.

"And what yellow smell like?" I said letting him sniff me.

"Aw, yellow smells like," he said, "… like … like … like a garden with too many flowers, with too many humming birds, with too many — "

"Nothing wrong with that, José," I said and I meant it. I moved away from the fence then and told him I had to get home.

"Yeah, but I don't like it," he said and grabbed me back by my elbow but not in a mean way 'cause José is the kindest boy on our block. I didn't say a word after that, but José kept waiting for me to say something. When I didn't, he said, "You know what I like?" I shook my head and he still had a hold of my elbow. "I like — " and he went on and on about how he liked how my dark smelled like back home and how if his grandfather was alive his grandfather would say the same thing. Oh, he kept saying, you smell like back home. He said his grandfather used to say that all the time to some lady he started seeing (who was dark like me) after his wife, José's grandmother, died. But he never said where back home was and nobody knew where José was from — not even José.

"You know what?" he said catching up to me 'cause I had started to head home because I knew my mother would start hollering for me soon.

"What?" I said slowing up just a little.

"Every time I see you, I want a swallow of cola," he said smiling like he made that up. I knew he was probably saying something he had heard his grandfather say, but I didn't mind so I smiled too. "I like that you're the color of cola," he said and I knew he probably got that from his grandfather, too.

"Ha!" I said.

"It's true," he said and smiled and in one hop he was at my side.

# Plum-Woman

Mama's got a name made for trouble. That's what the meat-man down at the store said. "Vyla," he said, "now that's a troublemaker's name." (He said troublemaker as if it was the same as a shoemaker). When he had finished up slicing mama's ham he said, "How many hearts you done broke, Vyla?" Mama didn't answer; she just said thank you for the ham, told me to come on, and walked off. I could have answered for her, though. Could have said "three" and named them, too — daddy, Jasper, and Clementine.

Now daddy had it coming. He let mama run all over him. When we had but one car in the garage, he always let mama have it to go wherever she needed to go. He'd take the bus or walk. "Vyla," he'd say, "I got that car for you." Knowing full well he bought the car for himself 'cause I was with him when he bought it. He had told the car-man to give him somethin' in red. "I love red," he told him and they went up and down the lot looking for the red that suited him — not wine-red, not blood-red, but cherry-red. He knew it when he saw it and that's the car he bought. He drove that car but twice — once off the lot and once to take my mama to the hospital when she had this fever that wouldn't go down. Fool, that's what the people in the neighborhood called him — behind his back and to his face. Didn't he know, they said, what all Vyla was doing around town in that car? Didn't he know, they said, she had another fellow in the passenger seat most times? And sometimes they had even seen that fellow behind the wheel — driving daddy's cherry-red car like it was his. But daddy would just say how town talk was just that — talk. But it wasn't just talk. Once, when I was standing outside the candy store with a boyfriend of mine, I saw mama fly by in daddy's car. Then a few minutes later, she flew by again with Jasper in the car. Jasper was the fellow the people in the neighborhood tried to tell daddy





about. My boyfriend said, "Ain't that your mama?" And all I did was nod. My boyfriend said, "But that ain't your daddy in the car with her — that's Jasper McGhee!" And he went on tellin' me how Jasper was the football coach for the high school two towns over and how Jasper was gonna turn that team around. "So!" I said and something in my stomach made me spit out the gum I was chewing. "So," my boyfriend said "if your mama's messing around with Coach Jasper, your father don't stand no kind of a chance!"

And he was right because when my daddy found out about Jasper, it was too late — mama was already round-and-radiant with Jasper's child. Daddy had tried to put his foot down — had said, "Vyla, I'm sick of this foolishness." And he buried the car keys in the backyard as if the car was the real problem. But mama just smiled and said, "You act like Jasper don't own a car." My father was through with her after that. He dug up the keys out the back yard and left. Before he left, he kissed me and told me to look after mama 'cause "she needs lookin' after." But I didn't have to look after her on my own; Jasper moved in shortly after daddy left and he and mama were always off at the doctor's office 'cause mama was always complainin' about being so sick. "I can't do nothing but lay up," she'd say and point the finger at Jasper. She got sick of Jasper real quick, so he was with us but only for a little while. Mama got to the point where she couldn't even stand the sight of his face. "Look at him," she said to me once while Jasper was out in yard mowing the lawn, "don't he gotta face like bruised fruit?" And she laughed. I wouldn't have laughed like I did if it wasn't the truth. She put Jasper out shortly after that and that boy who used to be my boyfriend said Coach Jasper wasn't the same after my mama had got hold to him. No sooner had Jasper gone, mama's roundness and radiance had gone too. "What I want with another you," she told me while we ate breakfast and that was that. A few weeks later, I told mama how I missed her belly. Her eyes got real big and I almost thought she'd hit me, but she didn't; she just hugged me and started crying — real tears, too! And mama hardly cried. She said that she had missed her belly, too. But that didn't last long 'cause in no time, she was wiping

her eyes and laughing, saying, "Supposin' the baby had been a boy, huh?" And there were no more tears. She said, "And what I want with a boy taking after Jasper Mcgee with that bruised fruit skin of his!" I didn't laugh this time; mama did and she kept on laughing, too, until her dinner got cold. But she was sad about the baby, I could tell — every day, she'd be on the phone with her friend Clementine talking low and gloomy-like. Once I overheard her on the kitchen phone talking to Clementine. She said, "Clem, you know, I have these dreams about what I done…" And in no time, Clementine would be sitting at our kitchen table rubbin' mama's back and listening. Sometimes, she'd come over to fix up mama's hair.

"You can't be sitting around the house like this, Vyla," Clementine said to my mama one night.

"Why not," mama said and Clementine went on and on about how mama never used to let herself look like this — this unkempt, this slouched over.

"Ever since I've known you," Clementine said, "you'd put on lipstick just to sit around the house — this ain't you!" And she fixed mama up and dragged her out the house.

"You gon' be alright here by yourself," Clementine said to me and I nodded and said "Yes ma'am" like I was told to call her. Clementine didn't look like a ma'am, though. She was a slim girl with slim fingers and slim, long, feet. She wasn't bad looking, but she never had a man. Mama said it was because "Clem is real picky, you know?"

Well, when they got back the next morning (goin' on somethin' like six in the morning), mama was all better. They came in the house loud as morning roosters — waking me up. So I joined them in the kitchen. You should have seen mama showing me the moves she and Clementine did on the dance floor — they were hand and hand and leaning all over each other.

"So y'all went dancing," I said, having nothing else to say.

"Mmm hmm," mama said, "and can't nobody dance like Clem!" At first I thought she had said him and I was going to say, "him who?" But she said Clem. I made a face and said:



"Mama, what y'all doin' dancin' together? I bet y'all looked funny."

"Naw," Clementine said, "we didn't look funny. We were the best dancers out there."

"Mmm hmm," mama said and she grabbed Clementine by the waist and started dancing to the tune Clementine was humming. They were drunk, too, so I left them in the kitchen dancing while I, up for good, went to bathe. All throughout the day, though, Clementine and mama couldn't stay away from each other and Clementine would be all up under mama like she was her man — tucking mama's hair behind her ear and whispering in it. She started staying over nights. Sometimes, they'd go out dancing. Sometimes, they'd stay in and watch a late night movie in the living room. Then it got so Clementine was never leaving. She'd be here for breakfast, go to work, and come back for dinner and stay. We ain't have but two bedrooms and Clementine wasn't sleeping on the sofa downstairs. I don't know what mama thought I thought, but I know woman-woman love when I see it. I just kept my mouth shut the whole time Clementine was with us. I made like I was too young to know what was goin' on. I thought, this one day, Mama might sit me down and tell me what-all was goin' on between her and Clementine. This one day, we were on the front porch while Clementine was at work, and mama sang a little ditty about her Clem being as sweet as Clementines (the fruit).

"You made that up?" I said

"Mmm hmm," mama said, smiling. "I didn't even know I was singin' out loud."

"You must be happy, then," I said.

"Sorta," mama said and closed her eyes. I left her on the porch — that ditty stuck in my head. Something about that ditty got under my skin, made me miss daddy and even miss Jasper. My old boyfriend stopped by one day and said, "Your mama messin' with Clementine?" And I told him no. I said, "I don't know what you're talkin' about." He didn't believe me, though. He just laughed and said that folks were talking and that Jasper McGhee was going crazy over the idea of being replaced by Clementine. "He don't feel too

good about that," my old boyfriend said, looking back at me, as he walked down the street. I knew folks were talking about mama and Clementine — the same way they talked about Jasper drivin' daddy's car. But this was different; they had laughed a little at Jasper behind the wheel of daddy's cherry-red car. They weren't laughing now. They talked about mama and Clementine in the grocery store with frowns on their faces. Even the meat-man joined in on the talk, saying to this one woman: "I hear Clem got Vyla wearing a ring." And that was no lie. Mama was wearing a ring — nothing fancy, just this gold band on her ring finger. Clementine brought it home one day and mama just put it on. Just like that. But I knew that ring would be the end of things. Mama don't like being owned and, to me, that ring was Clementine trying to own mama. She said that's what Jasper was trying to do when he slipped that baby in her. "He was trying to own me," she had said. And so I told the meat-man, when my number had been called and it was my time to place my order, I said, "Nothing's goin' on between mama and Clementine." And he laughed this laugh that told me he thought I was just a young'un who didn't know woman-woman love when I saw it. But I only said what I said because I knew soon what was goin' on between mama and Clementine would be over. 'Cause I knew mama would get sick of Clementine the way, say, plum-people, who, trying somethin' new, get sick of peaches after a while. And mama is a plum-woman — that is to say, if plum were men. And I was right because no sooner had that ring gone on, it came off. She wore it for about a month and then one morning she told Clementine she had dropped the ring down the sink. Clementine got down on her hands and knees and unscrewed the pipe and searched for the ring. She hollered for me to "get in here and help me look for this ring!" I said "Yes ma'am" and helped her.

"Ain't no ring here," she said and I knew then mama had probably tossed that ring in the trash somewhere. "You see a ring anywhere?"

"No ma'am," I said with the biggest smile on my face. They fought long and hard the rest of the day — Clementine accusing mama of lying about the ring and mama hollering that she did drop the ring down the sink.



"How can a ring just up and disappear, huh?" Clementine said and when she left the house, she was shaking with anger; her face wet with tears.

Mama's cousin Lew came to stay with us after that and he brought his gun. He didn't like what mama had said about how angry Clementine was when she had left and he felt like Clementine might could do somethin'. He told me to stay away from Clementine if I saw her in the street. Clementine didn't bother us, though, but cousin Lew stayed just the same. I don't know if Lew was really mama's cousin or just somebody she called cousin, but he stayed with us and kept his gun on one of the pantry shelves. He called that gun "Clem" 'cause he said it was only to be used on Clementine. Something in his eyes told me he'd use it on her even if Clementine had just come over to pick up something she had forgot — like that bra she left hanging on the door knob on mama's closet. And it's a good thing Clementine never did show up for that bra; I don't think Lew cared too much for what went on between Clementine and mama. I think, maybe, someone sent him up here to watch mama 'cause I heard mama and Lew talking one morning in the kitchen. Mama had said, "You don't have to worry about me, Lew, I like my lovers thick-necked and wide-backed." Lew laughed at this and as soon as mama was gone out the kitchen, Lew got on the kitchen phone and told somebody on the other line about how he had knocked that nonsense right out of mama.

# Her Own Age

When mama was pregnant with me, this man, 'bout 70, came up to her in the supermarket and told her, "I wish my wife looked like you when she was carryin" and before you knew it, mama (with me in her belly) had moved in with the old man. He had a country house, she said, but it was near the city. She said the house was about as old as he was and she loved it — from the wood-framed windows to the heavy wood doors to the screen ones, too, to the garden on the side of the house to the splinters she got from the floors. He kept real maple syrup in the house, too, she said. Wanted to stay there forever, but by the time it came time for me to be born mama said the old man turned mean — started getting jealous and suspicious. He'd almost break his neck rushing, trying to get to the phone before she could. "Where are you going now?" he'd say every time he heard the screen door open. He could be asleep, but when he heard that door, mama says, he'd wake up and run to the door trying to block her from going out. This one time he blocked the door, mama shoved him and he fell down the front steps — "Nothing broke but his heart," mama says. And a few weeks after that that's when the old man kicked her out (with me in her belly).

The next week, at her Aunt Dexi's house, I came. Mama pushed once, mama pushed twice and there I was. She named me Dexi because her Aunt Dexi was so good to us then, but she called me (and still calls me) Willie after the old man because she loved him. "Willie," she often says to me, "I wish you woulda known the old man — jealous as he wanted to be, but he sure did baby me. Took real good care of me." And then she smiles like Willie is in the room. She's been talking about him lately because Willie died last week at the age of 86. Mama found out about it in the paper. She cried for a day or so after finding out and told everyone she knew about her time with Willie. After she





heard the news of his passing, she invited some folks (all of them women) over and talked on and on about him: "He used to call me Sugah," she said, "no R, just sugah." And the women leaned in close, listening — half of them wishing (I could see it in their eyes) that they had a man that cared enough to call them Sugah.

Then after talking about Willie, she'd start in on my father and how he wasn't worth a flip. Took off the day she told him the news of me. He packed up all his stuff while she was at work, she says, and she hasn't seen him since. The folks she had over just listened and nodded and said "mm hmm" and cried a little bit when mama would start crying. Well, Miss Lily didn't cry. She frowned most of the time while mama talked. When Miss Lily was leaving, I heard her say to Miss June: "I don't understand why she was messin with that old man in the first place. She was barely 25 and living with a man almost dead." Miss Lily called herself whispering, but I heard her. Miss June just smiled and said nothing. She knew I had heard Miss Lily so she didn't want to get caught agreeing because she knew as soon as they were gone, I'd run and tell mama what was said. Mama didn't care, though, when I told her about Miss Lily. She just said, "Ol' Closed-legs-Lily wouldn't understand" and she started cutting the obituary out of the paper like she was cutting coupons. I don't know how many papers she had with Willie's obituary in it, but I know it was more than five.

But there is something I heard Miss Lily say that I didn't tell mama. I started out to tell her, but then I decided not to. One time, in the grocery store, a few days after mama had had those women over, I overheard Miss Lily and Miss June (Miss June is always with her) talking in the fruit and vegetable aisle. Miss Lily said:

"First, it's the old man — next it's gonna be that young fool."

"What are you talking about, Miss Lily," Miss June said, looking around. She couldn't see me, so she wasn't worried this time about keeping quiet now.

"That young boy at the drugstore — one that runs the register," Miss Lily said. "He's barely out of his twenties good and I see Mary (that's my mama's name) giving him the eye." Miss Lily put her nose up to a peach and threw it back, then said:

"And he's been givin her the eye right back. I even saw him let her get away without paying for a bottle of nail polish remover. I started to say something, but I said to myself 'Lily this isn't your business.'" I had to laugh at that because everything is Miss Lily's business. I think they mighta heard me laughing, but that didn't stop them; the ladies went right on talking about mama and how she don't ever mess with anybody her own age. Miss Lily said, "Even Dexi's father wasn't close to Mary's age. He was a kid when Mary got hold of him." Miss June just nodded and mm-hmm'd like she was humming a tune. Sometimes I got the feeling Miss June wanted to say something, but Miss Lily was doing most of the talking. Though Miss June did finally get a word in. And when she did, she said to Miss Lily:

"Now I don't really care for the things Mary does, but it ain't our business." Miss June frowned, disappointed with the peaches too. "But to tell you the truth Lily, I don't think age really matters none." Miss June said this almost in a whisper, but Miss Lily (of closed legs, but open ears) caught it and she roared with laughter — she had to hang on to her shopping cart to keep from falling over from her heavy haas and hees.

"June," Miss Lily said, "the heat must be getting to you." And she kept on laughing up and down the aisles.

# A Little Bit of Syrup

My favorite aunt lives in North Carolina with a man who isn't hers. He, Mose, belongs, is married to, a woman up here where I am, in Pittsburgh; he ran off with my favorite aunt, Aunt Wednesday (we say Winds-dee), when she pulled into the gas station where he worked. She was on her way back to North Carolina after visiting us — my ma is her older sister. As soon as she pulled up to the pump and Mose came running out and laid eyes on her, he wanted her. He pumped her gas and hopped right into the passenger seat and went to North Carolina with her — well, this is how Will tells it. Will used to work with Mose at the gas station. He said once Mose got to North Carolina and was all settled into my aunt's place, he wrote a letter explaining it all to Will. Will, the letter said, I guess you know by now I ain't coming back to pump gas. Will also said Mose asked him to tell his wife exactly what happened. If Laverne, the letter said,woulda kept herself up, Wednesday wouldn't have even turned my head. Laverne used to be real fine back then, but her bottom got so wide and her titties… that's all I heard of that letter 'cause my mother told me, at that part, to run into the gas-station-store to get some soda and gum. Will — bent down at the window while he waited for our gas tank to fill — told my mother most of what was in the letter. When I got back to the car, Will was saying to my mother how he wouldn't dare tell Laverne that Aunt Wednesday was kin to us. "She'd probably hunt you down," Will said and we drove off. Ma kept saying as she drove, "Keep your mouth shut about what you heard, okay." And I told her my mouth was shut for good 'cause I didn't want some woman hunting us down, or worse, hurting my favorite aunt. This all happened a year ago.

Aunt Wednesday is my favorite because of her red-brown hair which hardly even covers her head, but since it's curly and looks good in the sun men don't mind how short it is. I like her arms,

too, they are thin and the bangles she wears always look as if they'll slip off. And you should see her legs — so long and always just a little bit hairy. My father says she must keep them hairy because that's a whole lot-a leg to shave. Ma gave him a nasty look when he said this. I wonder if ma wonders why she didn't get Aunt Wednesday's arms and legs. After all they are related; they're more than related — they're sisters with the same mother and father! I'm glad I'm an only child because I couldn't stand having a sister looking that much different from and better than me. I don't see how ma stands it. Maybe that's why she moved all the way up here, to get away from Aunt Wednesday — Aunt Wednesday with her birthmarks on her thigh and belly. She showed them to me once when I visited her down in North Carolina. "You got any birthmarks," she had said. When I said I didn't know what birthmarks were, she rolled up her tee shirt to her breasts and showed me a reddish bruise-like mark a-ways up from her navel. Then she rolled up the edge of her shorts and showed me a birthmark on the back of her left thigh. When I said that birthmarks look like a hickeys, she laughed; she said, "You don't know what a birthmark is, but you know about hickeys!" And she tickled me then with her long, skinny aunt-fingers.

That was four years ago. I was no more than nine then. I overheard my father say once that men are wrapped around Aunt Wednesday's fingers. How can that be, I asked him, when rings hardly even stay on her fingers? My father laughed long and hard at this. "No baby," he said, "that's not what I mean." I found out what he meant, though, later, when I went grocery shopping with my friend Ruby and her mother. When we got to the counter, the man in front of us looked at Ruby's mother's groceries (wasn't nothing but a box of Popsicles, a box of tampons, and some cheap grocery store lipstick the color of Ruby's name); the man told the cashier to ring up Ruby's mother's groceries with his own (and he didn't have that much — just some ground beef and foot powder). Ruby's mother let him. She thanked him and when the man had gone about his merry way and we were backing out of the parking lot, Ruby's mother turned to us in the backseat and said to her



daughter: "I got these men wrapped around my finger." I knew what daddy had meant then. I made up my mind then, in the backseat, sucking on a cherry Popsicle, that I wanted to be like Ruby's mother and Wednesday, too. Ruby said to me that day in the backseat: "What are you thinking about?" I told her I wasn't thinking at all. She rolled her eyes and said the Popsicle made my lips look like I was wearing lipstick. This made me smile. Ruby's a good friend, but we're as different from each other as she is from her own mother.

Once and a while I almost open my big mouth and almost tell Ruby about how it was my favorite aunt that ran off with Mose. Ruby is always talking about how Laverne looks so sad now that Mose is gone and I always say: "If she woulda kept herself up…" and Ruby always shouts, "The woman's not always to blame!" When she gets like this, her upper lip curls and her teeth show. Sometimes Ruby's mother hears her saying these things and she gives Ruby this nasty look; sometimes she says to Ruby, "I don't know what I'm gonna do with you." Once, when I was on the porch alone with Ruby's mother (Ruby had gone into the house for some water), Ruby's mother said to me, "Some days, I think that child of mine is a boy. I couldn't pay her to put on a skirt!" I said, sounding like my mother, "Ruby'll grow out of it." Her mother is always saying how Ruby didn't get the roundness that she got. "Ruby takes after her bony daddy," she had said that day on the porch and I said, "My Aunt Wednesday is bony, but she's still all woman like you." And thinking about my Aunt Wednesday made me say again with more sureness: "Ruby'll grow out of it." Ruby's mother patted my thigh then and smiled.

And I'm going to take it upon myself to make sure Ruby grows out of it! Aunt Wednesday wants me to come down this summer. I'm thinking of asking Ruby to come down with me. I know her mother will let her go. I want Ruby to see Aunt Wednesday's birthmarks. Aunt Wednesday says Mose got a dog, a big one, and she hopes I'm not afraid of them like my mother is. I don't know if I should call Mose, when I go down there, my uncle or not. Ma says I shouldn't. "If you do go down there this summer," my

mother says, "Don't you even speak to Mose and if you have to, just call him 'Mose' — no Uncle, no nothing." My father laughed at this and called ma foolish. I don't know if ma is foolish, but I know she worries too much. I also know that if she doesn't let me go see Aunt Wednesday this summer, I'm going to go anyway. I'm going to make my own way down there. There's something about Aunt Wednesday that I just got to be around — I think it's the way she smells. You ought to smell her — it's a little bit of syrup, a little bit of honey, and something else; I don't know what. It's gonna bug me until I find out. When she showed me her birthmarks that day, I told her that she smelled like syrup and honey and something else. She flung her hand at me and those long fingers almost caught me in the eye. She said, "That's just my natural scent, child."

# Trouble

Even though his name is Samuel, he's called Clyde's Boy. His mother Billie Jean, stubborn as she is, isn't too fond of juniors. So when it came time to name her son, she turned to her husband (at least this is how my mother tells it) and said, "I know I promised you a Clyde Jr., but what do we need with another Clyde? I'm calling this child Samuel." At first, Clyde Thompson wanted to know where the devil she got a name like that. My mother says (as though she was in the birthing room herself with the woman) that Clyde didn't give in until his wife Billie Jean promised him two things: one, that Samuel wasn't a name of some man she still had feelings for; and two, that he could call their new son "Clyde's Boy." Mean, mulish Billie Jean gave in. It was the drugs that made her give in, my mother says.

And that's how Samuel was introduced to the town: Clyde's Boy. Most of the town don't even know the boy's real name. Clyde's Boy is what they were told and Clyde's Boy is what it was and stayed. It caught on fast, calling him Clyde's Boy. It even started to sound like his name. It got so that whenever my mother would tell the story to relatives-in-from-out-of town how Clyde's Boy's name came to be, Samuel sounded foreign. Of course, she couldn't tell the story without bringing up his given name. Samuel, Samuel … it doesn't even ring right when you hold up a picture of Clyde's Boy and say, "Samuel." I've tried it many of times; that boy just wasn't meant to be named Samuel. Even Billie Jean knows it, for even she took to calling him Clyde's Boy. My mother claims Billie Jean said once, "Sometimes I forget that child's name is Samuel."

So, in a way, Clyde Thompson got his junior.

Once, in the grocery store, I saw Clyde Thompson and thought it would be funny to call him Samuel's Pa. He didn't like that and he told my mother as much. Of course, my mother told my father and my father told my bottom with his hand to not go

around disrespecting folks. "He's Mr. Clyde Thompson to you," my father said, and I said OK. But I didn't mean it. A grown man telling on a little girl isn't right, so in my head, I continue to call him Samuel's Pa or Tattle Tale Clyde. Coming up with names for him is funny and gets me through those boring hours at the auto shop where my father works and where I have to help out sometimes when my father is in need of extra hands. This is why my father was so quick to lay his hand against my bottom for disrespecting Big Mouth Clyde. Clyde is always at the auto shop needing something or another fixed on that noisy old brown car of his.

Though, I'm wandering from the real reason I started to tell you about Clyde's Boy in the first place. Clyde's Boy is in some kind of trouble. Right now, he is in my father's shed hiding from somebody (I believe it's a woman). It's a good thing my father hardly goes out to that shed because if my father was to catch Clyde's Boy in that shed, Clyde's Boy wouldn't have to worry anymore about that somebody coming after him. My father would kill him! So I can't tell a living soul who I got in the shed. It's not fair, though. All the girls (including my sisters who are more 'round Clyde's Boy's age than I am) are crazy about Clyde's Boy. And he's in the shed out back! I just ran him out a glass of tea and a plate of cold beans — cold because right when I was about to heat them up, one of my nosy sisters came darting down the stairs. So I had to take him what I had in a hurry.

He always stares at me when I hand him his food and drink. He often says he knew he could trust me because of how quiet I am.

"What that got to do with anything?" I said once when my folks were gone and I knew I could linger longer at the shed door.

"Quiet people never want to start any trouble," he said and gave me a look.

"Oh," I said and sat down on the patch of grass beside the shed. I thought back to how he had approached me about his situation. I had been waiting outside the package store for my mother to finish playing her numbers and he had come around the corner in a hurry with these wild eyes, saying: "Sally, I need you to open up that shed in your yard tonight." And that was all. "I'll unlock it around



eight," I said and I don't know what made me say it. Maybe it was because of the way he said my name (as though he knew me from way back, when really any other time he didn't know me from a can of paint). Maybe it was because of those wild eyes — similar to my Uncle Jesse's eyes when he gets a hunch about a number. So eight it was and Clyde's Boy agreed. Eight is the time when my folks start heading upstairs for TV watching and my sisters start leaving the house, one by one, on dates. I didn't think to ask about the trouble he was in; I just unlocked the shed and left a plate of cookies and a can of soda on some unsteady old table my father called himself making. I must have been asleep when Clyde's Boy slipped in, for the next morning when I went to the shed to check, he was there, curled up on the floor like some small child in deep, deep sleep. I kicked the bottom of his foot to make sure he wasn't dead and that's when he said for the first time about his knowing he could trust me. He asked for something more to eat and I got it and I am still getting it.

It's been little over a week now. Sometimes he leaves the shed (when I give him "the all clear sign" — throwing a rock at the shed door from the pantry window) and comes back later. Though, most times I am running back and forth for him. I don't know what he's going to do when summer is over and I have to go back to school. I've been taking the blame for missing cookies, fruit, soda, and candy; I don't mind because I am starting to think of Clyde's Boy as my man. I'll be sad when he goes. I wonder what kind of trouble he's in. I bet it's about some woman or another. One of these days, I am going to have to start asking around. My mother said at the dinner table last night that Billie Jean doesn't know where Clyde's Boy could be. I just sat there eating, saying nothing. When my mother left me downstairs to wash the dishes, I snuck out and took Clyde's Boy some left-overs. This time, Clyde's Boy had an odd look on his face like he was hungry for more than just food.

Sometimes I think maybe if he went by the name Samuel he wouldn't be in this mess.

# Please

I don't like wedding rings. You couldn't get me to wear one even if Lenny (that's my man) paid me by the hour to wear one. I just don't particularly care for wedding rings — all day, every minute on your finger shining like it ain't no ordinary ring. When me and Lenny got to talkin' about getting married, I told him I didn't want no ring and he said, "the folks gon' think I couldn't even buy my woman a ring." And I told him not to worry about those folks, but he went on and got a ring anyway — a little piece of diamond here, a littler piece of diamond there and some gold. It was a nice ring, but not for me. After we was married, I wore that ring but one day. The day after the wedding, I walked into the grocery store with that thing on my finger and folks who knew me got to looking at me like I was different. I couldn't stand that. As soon as I had my groceries in the trunk good, I took that ring off and threw it in the glove compartment. "What I need to wear the ring for," I said to myself, "I already got his last name and child." And I never put that ring on again. Lenny come asking me later that day, "Where your ring at, Gal?" (Gal's my birth name). I told him where it was, in the glove compartment, and he got this frown on his face like I done told him some death news or something. He said: "Aw baby, a ring don't belong in a glove compartment" and he went to the car to get it. He tried to get me to put it back on, but I told him, I said: "I told you I didn't want a ring in the first place." Then I tried to put the fear in him, I said: "Supposin' I was out late at night walking down Sadie Street and one of them young mean suckers caught sight of my ring just a-gleamin' and decided they wanted it for themselves?" Lenny started nodding then and rubbing his chin. He said: "it's best, then, to leave it off" and he put the ring in a small wooden bowl on a kitchen shelf. I figured he put it there so the folks who come by to see me could see it in the bowl and say to themselves: "Gal's a fool for not wanting to wear something so pretty!"





That's exactly something my sister would say. She says one of these days I'm gonna find that ring missin' from the bowl. "If you don't let Lenny start wearin' the pants around here," she says, "Lenny is gonna give that ring to some other woman." Lenny wouldn't do that, though, not with all that I do for him. Ever hear of cold-cakes? Naw, 'cause I'm the one what put the hot in hotcakes. Ever hear of an iron running up and down a pair of pants without no hand? I do all of that and I don't wear pants while doing it either. Lenny wears the pants, I tell my sister, but it ain't up to me to zip them. My sister said once that I need to just gone on and wear the ring and start acting like a woman. I said to her: "Sister, what you know about being a woman when the only time you pick up a broom is when company's comin'." I said "What you know about being a woman when you can't even get you no baby." I wanted to take that back because she started crying then — almost chokin' and carrying on and when she gets like that, you can't help but to cry right along with her. Lenny, who was outside working in the garden, came in then. He said he could hear us, through the open window, crying. My sister told him what all I said to her and he come patting her head and rub-bin' her back like she was a child. He said, "Gal, you shouldn't say things like that to Glymph." (That's my sister's birth name). That shut my tears right off — looking at my sister all hugged up under Lenny like she was his wife and not me. Later, in the bed, Lenny told me I ought to treat Glymph better.

"She ain't tough like you," he said turning over to turn off the light. I asked him since when he come to know so much about Glymph and he said:

"I watches folks. I pay attention — and your sister's not built like you."

"How am I built?" I said.

"You're more like a man, Gal," he said and he turned on the light and sat up in bed like he had a whole bunch of more stuff on his mind that he wanted to say to me. "Take that ring — " (I knew he was gon' bring up the ring). "Take that ring for example — you won't wear it, but you got womens out there who'd die to

wear a ring like the one I got you." I almost told him to find one of those fool-women and give her the ring, but I just said "uh huh, yeah, uh huh" and he kept on:

"Now, I respect you not wantin' to wear the ring but sometimes, Gal, sometimes you just gotta do things you don't want to do just to please somebody else sometimes."

"Ha!" I said — my eyes rolling every which-a-way. "I don't have to please nobody but myself!" And I told him good night. I don't know what he called himself doing that night — I guess that was him trying to put his foot down (or rather zip his pants). But I got this sense that he had been talking to someone about me-and-him and that he and that someone had been agreein' on something, had been agreein' that I needed a talking-to. On the bus, the next afternoon, on my way to the drug store, I told my good friend the bus driver about it and she said: "Supposin' it was Glymph and Lenny agreein' about you?" She said: "You know, Gal, you better watch those two." She stopped talking then and hummed for a little bit. Later, when but me and one other passenger was on the bus, she said: "Gal, I been meaning to tell you this, but I've been seeing them around town without you — at the dollar store, at the park, at the bakery." She said: "Once, I heard your sister saying to Lenny, 'What Gal know about being a woman — she ain't been a size six since the 70s."

# About Michelle McEwen

Michelle McEwen, poet/storyteller and author of *Delicious Dangerous* (a poetry chapbook published by Didi Menendez for the Mipoesias Chapbook Series in 2010), has had work published in *Poets/Artists, The Caribbean Writer, The Best New Poets 2007* (an anthology), and *Woman's Work* (a short story anthology). In 2009, her poem "Sucker" was nominated for the Pushcart prize. When she isn't busy writing or reading, she's interviewing poets on her blog http://poetrychaingang.blogspot.com.

Two of the stories in *Trouble* were previously published in the following journals:

"Trouble," *StoryscapeJournal.com,* August 2008

"A Swallow of Cola," *MiPOesias,* August 2010