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A Corner of This World

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A Corner of This World

⌘ Sara Tomkinson

Few cars speed down Hemlock Street on an early summer afternoon. Birdsong laces the rain-moistened air and the elderly Negro lady next door sings to herself as she digs weeds from her tiny front yard using a tool resembling ones advertised on Sunday afternoon paid programming. The blue Ford pickup truck across the street has been unusually silent from its numerous daily trips to a yet-undiscovered somewhere. I sit on my front porch, on the golden-avocado-green couch, and watch the world go by.

Mine is a small tan house with brown trim and an open front porch. In truth, the house is mine only for a few weeks while I take a summer course at the college. The porch is lined with tall cedar arborvitae bushes, so I cannot watch my neighbors in the brick apartments across the street. I can see a few other houses though, their elderly inhabitants puttering their ways through the daylight hours. The lady next door is still singing, so in the interest of being neighborly, I get up from my couch and wander next door.

Henrietta Valentine—Hattie to most—grew up in this area. Clearly in her 70s, she has friends on this street that she has known all her life. She tells me that our houses were once owned by the son of an ex-slave; he also owned several other houses on the street and one over on North Street. She is a large black lady with most of her weight distributed around her middle. Her hands look accustomed to work, and her yellowed teeth jut out; some of them are missing. She wears brown plastic glasses with tinted lenses so I cannot see much more than the whites of her eyes. She never looks me in the eye. Her light brown polyester pants have lost their elastic, and they are safety pinned to the ash colored T-shirt beneath a stained white sweatshirt. Blue and white sneakers with laces only in the bottom holes peak out from beneath her

pants.

As we talk, I realize that Hattie reminisces randomly from years of memories. There is no common thread of chronology or subject except that each story is a part of her life. And so I listen to each episode of memory and try to form a picture of this woman and her life. Hattie warms up with a few stories of Ma Printy, the woman after whom the college named Printy dorm. Ma lived in this area, and it seems she and Hattie were friends or at least the type of acquaintances that very small towns produce: closer than passers-by, though not necessarily true friends. Hattie tells me Ma raised four boys on her own and “raised them strong.” She laughs as she recalls Ma’s heavy foot on long trips, like the ones she made to New York. She once rode a bike simply because her dorm girls didn’t believe she could do it.

I learn that Hattie is an only child. She never married. While at college for a few years, she discovered that her parents had spoiled her, and she couldn’t stand other people wearing her clothes, going through her underwear, and unfolding it. (This is how she knew she could never marry.) Hattie’s mother was orphaned at a young age: her mother died when she was 4, and her father on August 22, her 14th birthday. Hattie has hated her full name since early elementary school when the boys crooned, “Sweet Henrietta Valentine...kiss my behind...” She has gone by Hattie ever since.

She is afraid of the sound of the jets that fly over so often, as they are even as I write this. I wonder if she hears them too, and is afraid. She tells me she is a night owl, sometimes staying up until 5 in the morning, and she runs high phone bills talking to friends. I can understand why. Suddenly she comments that Dr. Jacobs (who works for the college) rented out to a family with a baby, and he wasn’t supposed to do that.

Hattie never sat on the bare ground: she hates bugs. Her mother made her a big quilt to sit on so she didn’t have to sit on the grass. It was this habit that told her friends that something was wrong when they saw her sitting in the wet grass one day. The neighbor that lived across the street from Hattie telephoned Lois, who lives at the other end of the street and said she was sure something was wrong—Hattie was sitting

on the ground. Lois has known Hattie all her life and said she never sits on the ground without her quilt.. (The jets are flying over again, high above the gray storm clouds.) Hattie says that maybe the wet grass was why she was dreaming of dampness that day. She saw her body sitting there, but she was separate from it. ...And then she was in the arms of God...of Jesus. She was a child and she said the skin on the backs of Jesus' hands was "puffed up to here." She gestured about a quarter of an inch above her hand. "It was all festuh'd... It was wood they nailed 'im to, and it was wood they put through 'is hands, and it was all festuh'd... And I just stroked it and stroked it like this, and He never complained a bit. I just stroked it 'cause it was all festuh'd. And then there came this bright light—not like the sun bright, and not like some flo'rescent light—a beautiful, peaceful, warm light. When I woke up—I was on the fourth floor—I says, 'I'm hungry.' This real light skinned black lady says, 'What?' 'I said I'm hungry.'" The lady brought her cold mashed potatoes and gravy. "That gravy looked like a tree. My mother always said, 'Put the food on the plate pretty.'" I am surprised she remembers that. "The mashed potatoes looked like a cloud. I was a little scared of her...but I said, 'Thank you.' 'What did you say?' 'I said thank you.' She looked at me and said, 'Four years I 've been working here, and you're the first that's ever said thank you. You'll get a hot breakfast tomorrow,' and I did! "

I am getting used to Hattie's habitual topic changes and random details. I am also learning that when the engine of her memory starts to roll, I ought not to get in the way. For many of her stories I must fill in the details in my own mind and leave the rest to imagination. I still do not know what happened to Hattie that day. I only know that she went to the hospital for it, hence "the fourth floor" and the "real light skinned black lady."

Hattie tells me that the empty lot across the street used to have a house with a porch, but it was torn down. The man next door to her had a bike, but the seat was so high he couldn't get on it without a boost. He used to walk his bike across the street to the porch of that house, climb up on the porch, then get on the bike. "I just cracked up every time I saw

it,” Hattie laughs. “I told him they were going to tear that house down, but he didn’t believe me. I said, ‘What are you going to do when they tear it down?’ He said, ‘If they tear it down, I’ll get rid of my bike.’” And he did.

Throughout our conversation Hattie speaks of forgiveness, of prayer, of loving others, of having faith, of the incredible idea that one could not believe. She says she would not touch a nun’s rosary beads during her stay in the hospital. Her simple statement: “I believe.” I have been taught to be wary of this unqualified statement, and though I sense that she refers to belief in God and Jesus’ redeeming work on the cross, I cannot help but wonder why she doesn’t say so.

It begins to rain, and Hattie tells me, “Girl, you better get inside.” I tell her to let me know if I can help her with anything; she said the same goes for me. She says she’ll go inside for “a spot of tea.” A lady of manners, it would seem. She goes inside and I return to my porch to listen as the storm rolls in. It appears that her hedge needs trimming...perhaps I will offer.

As I sit again on the golden avocado couch, I see that the blue Ford pickup is gone for the second curious trip since I have been out talking to Hattie, and I think I should have asked Henrietta Valentine about that. Perhaps another day, but for now, I will continue to watch. As the lightning and the thunder perform their violent ballet to the music of the falling rain, I know that the view from my porch is not a beautiful one, but it is undoubtedly a fascinating one, and it is mine.