

There was no such thing as domestic violence when Patience killed her husband in self-defense. Husbands and wives fought all the time. It was like a religion and they were faithful to it. Death was intermittent but beating, hitting, kicking, cutting, choking, and cussing was commonplace. The fighting seemed normal and was an expected exchange in intimate relationships. Girls learned that if a boy threatened to kill them or throw them in a ditch, that meant he loved them.

Fighting was just “one of those things” and you learned to live with it. In Sweetwater, people rarely intervened or interfered with public fights. Men often beat their wives out in the open, on front porches, at family gatherings, and even in church vestibules. Some men beat their wives the way they beat their children, with a belt or switch, full force of open hand, and for her own good. They felt it was their right and responsibility as men to discipline their wives and believed that the Bible supported their beliefs. It was the one scripture all the men in Sweetwater knew by heart, that wives are supposed to submit to their husbands. When a preacher slapped his wife in the pulpit, people silently wondered what she had done to inspire such anger in a man of God.

There was nothing romantic about how they loved, no sweet around their hearts or softness in their voices. They didn't know how to love and not fight because both feelings came from the same impulse. It was not unusual for women to hit back or pick fights to make sure she was still worth fighting over.

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Bread covered her head under the sheet, blanket, and bedspread. This is how she slept—in a tiny ball, with her head folded into her chest, her arms wrapped

around her knees, and her feet balled up. Every time she moved she would bump into one of her sisters, Bebe on the left, Peaches on the right. They slept on both sides of her in the double bed, closing in on her like secrets and lies.

She used to touch them on purpose to make sure that somebody was there with her but was lately growing tired of the shared and closed in way they lived. "Be still got-dammit!" This is Bebe, the oldest daughter, who thinks she is grown.

Bebe liked to cuss, liked to be the boss, liked to act like she was the mama when Twiggy wasn't home. Bread knew that Bebe would love to whoop her before she fell asleep and didn't want to give her the satisfaction.

The night before Bebe beat both Bread and Peaches for pissing in the bed. Bebe woke up in a damp yellow circle and immediately blamed her sisters. When they both denied it, she whooped them with two switches stitched together, calling them a "damn lie." It was not until morning that they realized that while they all smelled like piss, it was Bebe who had the pissy draws.

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Sleep was sweet but temporary. Bread's eyes opened fast and she was facing Peaches, already awake, her hazel eyes full of water. Out of all of the children, Peaches looked the most like their father. Her eyes, giant circles of white with light brown centers, looked just like Cake's when he wasn't drunk. Most days, though, his eyes were bloodshot red and his pupils were so dilated that you couldn't tell what color they were. On days when he was sober and rested he had the most beautiful caramel-colored eyes Bread had ever seen. Bread assumed that it was his white people's eyes that made her mother love him and always take him back. She secretly wished for eyes like Cake's but her eyes were oval and black. Bread often wished she looked more like Twiggy, more like Cake, more like Peaches. She didn't know who she looked like.

Bebe was already up and listening at the door. It sounded like the sky was falling, like the roof was caving in, like the world was coming to an end, but it was just Twiggy and Cake fighting—again. The weekday peace was over.

Bread and Peaches rolled out of bed and followed Bebe into the boys' room and then outside. They stood barefooted in their t-shirts and underwear, throwing rocks in the dark on top of the house. The house was barely taller as Cake so it didn't take much effort to hit the roof with the debris they threw. The tattered shingles on the tin roof popped as rocks and glass hit against it like hard rain. Throwing rocks was their act of rebellion, turning on the structure that should have protected them. Longing for safety and quiet, they stood defenseless trying to destroy the discourse in the house by going outside of it and picking up symbols of their anger. They threw rocks until the bang against the roof sounded like, "Stop! Stop. Stop. STOP!"

It didn't scare Bread when her parents fought because she was used to it. It was a routine. She was relieved that both Peaches and Little were old enough to not cry anymore. They, too, got used to the fighting, which came every weekend like Sunday. After a long time passed and the exhaustion of interrupted sleep crept back onto their bodies, Junior barged in the house to break up the fight. He knew that it was best to wait until the noise died down. By now Twiggy and Cake were both tired and almost sober. They were looking for a reason to be reasonable, but neither would be the one to give in. Bread peeped in the cracked door and realized that while there were empty liquor bottles on the floor, broken glasses on the table, a lit cigarette still burning in the ashtray, and swollen fists and messy clothes, the room was no different from the aftermath of their lovemaking, which would inevitably follow.

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Twiggy woke up sore and sober. She had Bengay in the kitchen drawer and a corner of gin in the bottle by her bed so she knew it wouldn't take her long to remedy both wrongs. Cake was asleep beside her, his arm strewn across her chest so she couldn't turn around or get up. With both hands she pushed his heavy arm off her body and sat up in the bed. Cake didn't budge. Sleep cradled him in its arms like a loose woman. She watched him lie there on his stomach, snoring loud enough to wake her children, but she knew they would sleep as much of the day away as she let them. They were up half the night throwing those damn rocks on top of the house like they didn't have good sense. She couldn't remember when they started throwing rocks and she never bothered to ask them why they did it.

She didn't know if she wanted to slap Cake's face or kiss it, so she decided to leave him alone. She knew Cake ran the streets, all men did, but she hated the thought of him throwing it in her face. She had warned him that the next time she heard tell of him being over to that fat, ugly ass Neesee's house that would be his ass. Twiggy always kept her word.

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Neesee was a big, burly, dark-skinned woman with beady eyes and a round face. She wore blue cat glasses with fake diamonds in the corners and her hair was a blend of perpetual tight curls that needed to be brushed out. The moles on her face resembled polka dots, some big, some small, and she had thick lips that she was always rubbing together like she was blending in lipstick. Her two front teeth were knocked out in a fight with one of her boyfriends, so she didn't smile with her mouth open, but that didn't keep her from smiling. She was far from what you would call an attractive woman, but she had a way with men who already had commitments.

Neesee lived in the trailer park, and even though she didn't have any children of her own she kept other people's children to make a living. Before Neesee took a liking to Cake, Twiggy had dropped her kids off at Neesee's house while she

worked. When Bebe came back and said that Neesee had them calling her Mama, Twiggy went back to Neesee's house, called her outside, and cussed her out in front of her children to make her an example. She slapped Neesee's face so hard and so fast that she forgot why her hand was stinging when she walked back to her car. On the way home Twiggy warned her children that she would kill them dead if she ever heard tell of them calling some other woman Mama.

Twiggy would never admit to being jealous of another woman. When she caught Cake with other women, or heard about him being up under somebody else she would step out to be with another man. Damned if she would sit at home like a fool tending to youngins while Cake was out sniffing every tail in the neighborhood. They had married young and both still had some wildness in them. They fell out a lot and fought, but they also liked things in each other they couldn't find in somebody else. She figured that stepping out didn't mean nothing if you end up back together. She knew they would stay together or kill each other trying. She didn't want to kill him though, she just wanted to make him suffer.

She started pouring lye in his food and spiking his liquor with rat poison. She knew that there were three things he couldn't live without: food, liquor, and sex. She figured she would fix him something to eat, let him keep his own stash of liquor in the house, and lay down with him every pay day like always, and he would never suspect her revenge.

"Twig, this liquor taste funny!" Cake had said the week before, his red eyes protruding out of their sockets. It had begun to happen gradually, probably a side effect of the small portions of poison. "Taste it." He held out the jelly-jar-turned-house-glass and Twiggy turned away.

"I don't want no damn liquor, Cake," she said eyeballing the brew.

"But it taste funny. Here drink some and see."

"I said I didn't want no damn liquor. If it taste funny, why the hell you drinking it?" Twiggy took the bottle from Cake's hand and poured it down the drain. "Probably just a bad batch."

Cake nodded in agreement and laid his head in his hands. He swallowed what was left in his glass before passing out.

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The night before, Twiggy had caught Cake at the liquor house smiling in Neesee's face like teeth and good looks had gone out of style.

Tate Thomas had turned the tool shack behind his house into a liquor house. The house was the size of small room, but on pay day it could hold as many black fools as had money. Every corner served a purpose. The corner by the door with the best light is where you took your money and cup to get a shot or a glass of home brew. The second corner had a side table for playing cards. The other two corners were for socializing. Lopsided tables were spread around the room holding ashtrays and abandoned cups. It wasn't easy for Twiggy to find Cake in the

dimly lit room. It was his shitty grin that she recognized and Neesee squealing like a pig, rubbing on his arm like it couldn't keep warm any other way. Before she knew it she hit Neesee upside her head.

Twiggy had Mae June drop her off outside the liquor house because she figured she would drag Cake's drunk ass out after she had a few drinks. She left the kids at home and told them to mind Bebe until she got back. She had put on the dog and walked in like a bandit. Her hair was fixed up in the slick curls it made when she put water and Vaseline together. She had slid her money in her wallet and stuck it in her back pocket like she always did when she went out because she didn't carry a pocketbook and always wore pants. The imprint of the wallet in one pocket and her cigarettes in the other offered the illusion of a curve below her back, where a booty would have been if she had one.

She didn't understand what Cake saw in Neesee. If he was going to step out on her, there were better women around for him to do it with. Decent, better-looking women with some money in their pockets and some teeth in their mouths. When she realized who he was with, her vision got so red she thought she was looking through blood-stained eyes. Before she knew it, she had punched Neesee in the back of the head, while Neesee's face leaned toward Cake like she was sneaking a kiss. Neesee was too drunk to recover before Twiggy grabbed a butter knife from the bar and held it to her throat.

"Twiggy, what the hell?" Cake's words were slurred and spread apart, like he wasn't sure if he was dreaming or seeing things. He stood between the two women.

"You willing to get cut for this bitch?" Twiggy asked, not knowing who she wanted to stab first, her husband or his heifer.

"Put the knife down," was all Cake could say. He had already drunk half of his paycheck in liquor, but Twiggy's anger had a way of sobering him up.

Twiggy wished she had a razor blade instead of a butter knife, but at the right angle she could still use the dull edge to cut through skin and possibly to the bone. She had done it before with chicken, using her strength to cut through the edges, leaving the flesh jagged and raw.

Everybody in the liquor house was paying attention to Twiggy. Tate Thomas rushed over to offer his voice of reason. Tate never got drunk with customers because if he did people would slip out without paying and he could always count on a fight breaking out, and it was bad for business. "Twiggy, now y'all gon' have to get out of here with all this now."

"Come on here, Twiggy, fore you get yourself locked up!" Cake was standing in front of Neesee, shielding her from the knife Twiggy was waving in her hand like a flag. He was partly protecting Neesee, but mostly protecting his wife because he did not want to have to bail her out of jail. He started taking steps and pushing Twiggy toward the door, everyone making room for them but not taking their eyes off the scene unfolding before their eyes.

“Bitch, if you don’t stay away from my husband Ima kill you dead as hell,” Twiggy yelled, as she threw the knife across the room, just missing Neesee’s arm. “Mark my damn words.”

Cake struggled to get Twiggy in the truck and listened carefully as she cursed him out, threatened to kill him, and warned him as he drove down the road that he had better get all of his shit and get the hell out of the house if he knew what was best for him. She was tired of his shit. Sick and tired. There were plenty of men who would love to take care of her and her children. If he wanted to be with that fat, ugly ass Neesee so be it. He could pack his shit right now. And she wasn’t playing this time. He’d better not let her get to her gun. Drunk bastard. She wanted him gone. And he better not wake up her children.

When they got home the lights were on but the kids were in their rooms. They knew better than to be in the front room, which became their parents’ bedroom at night, when Cake and Twiggy got home. Cake followed Twiggy in the house and she started pulling his clothes out of the closet and throwing them in a pile. She rested long enough to light a cigarette and wonder where her gun was.

Cake was mostly sober now, jonesing for another drink. He didn’t feel like getting into it with Twiggy. He was tired, just got off work, had some money in his pocket, and just wanted to enjoy a few drinks before he came home. He couldn’t help it if Neesee had a thing for him. She wasn’t the best-looking thing in the world, but she was soft to hold and told him what all she would do if he was hers, and it was good to hear. He didn’t love her, he just laid with her sometimes, when he wanted to feel something different. He didn’t feel like fussing with Twiggy, but he wasn’t going to just sit there while she hit him tonight. If he wasn’t too drunk he would mostly just grab her, wait for her to calm down, throw things around the room and try to break something she loved or needed, like a souvenir shot glass her sister had brought her from New York or her favorite clay ashtray. He knew Twiggy had a temper like her father and once she was mad, nothing could calm her down but time. The fight lasted until the sky was so black the moon looked white. They were both glad when Junior came in and begged them to leave each other alone.

“Mind your own damn business,” Twiggy had said, satisfied that Cake was miserable, bleeding and sorry, “and get in the bed. You ain’t sleeping all day and all night tomorrow.”

Moon Looks White

by Mary E. Weems

*'Till you take your readin' glasses
off, your teeth out
kiss ancestor spirits
'till you hold your breath
wake up close as sky
run your hand across her face
craters, hollow cheeks
places to rest
and pray.*