

Anita Gail Jones  
P.O. Box 3016  
Novato, CA 94948  
Mobile: 415-720-6102  
[anita@anitagailjones.com](mailto:anita@anitagailjones.com)  
BLOG ~ [www.peachseedmonkey.com](http://www.peachseedmonkey.com)

**Hand-Me-Down Blues**

by

Anita Gail Jones

The room numbers beckoned Clarence with hums and haws and small barks as he walked down the polished hallway. His spotless white sneakers squeaked, keeping beat with the words of the head nurse as he replayed them in his mind; *Remove all glass from the room. Take the patient for a walk – slow walk – around the ward. Carefully.*

He reached Aida's room, knocking softly as #3-7-1 chirped. No answer. Peeped in. The patient was asleep, her face turned toward the door, arms cradling her round belly, pulling tight the thin cotton hospital gown. Clarence eased into the room. He felt lucky that she was asleep so he could stare at her – and that she was an angel. Her face was framed by black, bushy hair spread out on the pillowcase in soft, wavy tufts. In the

dull hospital light there was little contrast between her burnt umber skin and the halo of hair.

Numbers all around the room tried to fetch Clarence; numbers on the I.V. bag, on the face of the big wall clock, the date on the newspaper laying on the small couch. He was so absorbed in Aida's presence that it was easy to ignore the numbers this time.

Clarence looked around the room. Except for the vase holding yellow tulips on the bedside table, there was no glass, only mauve hospital plastic. He glanced back at Aida, smiled and left the room to ask the head nurse what to do with the tulips.

Aida woke with her eyes on foggy yellow tulips that were slow to come into focus. they were now in a hospital plastic vase that wasn't tall enough so they drooping. Leaning against the vase was a small card that read *From Louella*. A phone call and flowers is as good as it gets from next of kin 3,000 miles away.

Aida turned her head toward the scent of a man and the rustling of paper and saw Clarence sitting on the couch looking through an upside down newspaper.

"Who are you?" she asked, squinting her eyes.

Clarence jumped up, crumpling the paper, his eyes childlike wide.

He stood almost at attention and said, "Head Nurse tole me remove all glass take the patient for a walk – slow walk – around the ward. Carefully. You ready?"

Aida pushed the red button to call the nurse. Clarence wanted to say, *No. I won't hurt you*, but he stood quietly waiting, zeroing in on the numbers pressed into a small metal plate on the footboard of the bed. They were small but he could still hear them. Aida watched him, pulling her feet away from the footboard to the center of the bed.

"Yes? May I help you?" asked the crackled intercom voice.

"There is a man in my room. I want him out," Aida said, keeping her eyes on Clarence.

Clarence straightened up and backed away from the bed, his hands behind his back staring at Aida.

She noticed his nametag but mostly she noticed his eyes. *Oh. He does work here.*

She felt a flood of morning sickness and her mouth filled with more saliva than she could swallow. She motioned toward the plastic cup by the sink.

“Give me that cup,” she said, her head tilted to keep the spit in her mouth.

As a child, she was repulsed when her grandmother talked with an a mouthful of snuff spit, shuffling across the wood plank porch to spit off the side into the dirt yard, swept clean with a rake. Clarence handed Aida the cup, she released the mouthful of thick, clear saliva and stuffed the cup with tissue. By then a nurse appeared in the doorway.

“Oh,” the nurse said relieved, “That’s Clarence. He’s your tech. He’s just gonna take you for a little stroll right, Clarence?”

“I’m Clarence,” he said extending his hand to Aida.

“I’m Aida.” Her hand met his in a soul shake that threw her back to 1974 college days. He cupped his other dry, warm palm over hers and she suddenly felt protected in the small embrace, like someone was guarding her back.

As they walked around the ward, Clarence guided her I.V. as Aida held on lightly to his other arm. She used his ear to file her patent list of pregnant complaints. Usually numbers compete heavily with whatever conversation is aimed his way, especially when his mother speaks, but Clarence was locked onto Aida’s voice. After a couple of laps they rested on the small couch at the end of the hallway. Clarence knelt down on one knee, looking at Aida’s feet.

“Pretty swole up. They hurt bad?” he asked.

“No more than usual,” Aida said, touching a bandage on her left wrist.

“We need to elevator ‘em. Le’s go,” Clarence said pushing himself up and reaching for Aida’s arm.

“Lemme rest here for a minute. Then we’ll go. OK?”

“OK,” he said and scooted in next to her.

They sat in silence, forced to touch shoulders on the couch. Clarence held his hands in his lap, listening to the whispers of the floor numbers above the elevator. Aida rubbed her belly, surfing the waves of the cloudiness that had brought her there.

It had been thirteen years since Louella’s mother died. Two years later to the day Aida’s own mother died. Neither of the women had been physically ill. Each simply took to her bed saying *Just leave me alone. That’s all I need.* Both were diagnosed with severe depression but refused treatment and died in their beds in the fetal position. Louella still bristled at the talk that seeped around the small Kentucky town at the time.

*Aine nothing killed them two but the pure-tee blues, women said sitting in beauty parlors. In love with the same man an’ neither one of ‘em hold on to ‘im.*

Talk was afloat in dingy bars among the men, *Yeah, you don’t hear much ‘bout that these days but long back when my mama was comin’ up, you’d hear ‘bout broads fallin’ like flies from nothing but the blues. Lovesick. Them two might as well been joined at the hip.*

*Say it runs in families you know. I feel for them two daughters...half-sisters and cousins at the same time.*

Louella made deathbed promises to their mothers that she and Aida would always take care of each other – since they were all that each other had now.

Aida spat into her cup. She’d just tell Louella the truth about the accident – when she figured out what it was. In many ways they were like twins so if anybody could understand, Louella could. She pictured herself at Louella’s kitchen table drinking raspberry tea and helping each other. Louella wanted them to be true sisters – something their mothers tried desperately to do but failed.

Aida motioned to rise and Clarence jumped up offering his arm as support. The veins branched out across the surface of his chestnut colored arm and hand like determined tree roots. Aida stared into the inverted V between his wiry legs as he braced himself with a wide stance, giving support to her.

The only thing Aida and Louella knew of their father were the rumors. The twin mothers never spoke of the man they shared who betrayed them both after fathering their daughters. Aida often heard her mother speak of the *hole in my bed so deep I'm scared I'll fall in*. Her Aunt Bernie complained about not having *the scent of a man in my life for so long I done forgot what it's like*. The scent of Aida's man was gone before the end of her second month. Louella's man was gone before she knew she was pregnant.

Clarence helped Aida into bed and brought two fresh pillows to prop up her feet. He squirted lotion into his large hands and held them up like a surgeon, his eyes asking permission to touch her. She motioned a *Yes* and he massaged lotion into the tight, ashen skin around her ankles.

Aida felt a lump of the cloudiness leaving her body through the soles of her feet. For the first time she was touched by a man who's clear purpose was to undo her pain. For the first time something more than numbers called out to Clarence. Before the walk she had corralled her hair into a messy puff on top of her head with a floral scarf. Without the mane around her face she was a schoolgirl on picture taking day, her eyebrows and the corners of her eyes lifted by the tightness of her hair, all eyes and a smile.

A doctor with a clipboard came into Aida's room without knocking.

*Ms. Sheppard. Just need to ask you a few questions.* He stood by the bed, ready to take notes.

*Do you recall how you got the laceration on your wrist?*

*It was an accident, Aida answered.*

*You live alone?*

*Yes.*

*Been experiencing feelings of extreme dread or sadness lately?*

*No more than usual, Aida answered. Well I be damned, she thought, This pencil dick thinks I tried to kill myself. Ain't this some shit?*

*Do you know what time it is?* the doctor asked.

Aida looked at the big wall clock and back at the man.

*You mean to tell me you're a doctor and can't tell time?* she said and crossed her arms over her swollen breasts.

The man's face turned red, *That'll be all.* He walked quickly out of the room.

A nurse came in immediately.

*What was that all about?* Aida asked, as the nurse handed her a phone message.

*Oh. He's from Psychiatric, the nurse said handing Aida a pink phone message. Just standard procedure, hon, with a cut to the wrist like you have. I wouldn't worry about it. You feeling OK?*

*If I could stop spitting I'd feel a lot better.*

*Oh yeah...the spits are the pits. You got what they call ptylism. Crushed ice might help I'll bring you a tad and don't you worry the spittin' will end just as soon as baby comes.*

*Must run in families, Aida said, my mother and her twin sister had it, too.*

*I feel very foggy and tired, Aida said.*

*That'd be from the medication they gave you to sleep. Apparently you were in quite a state when you came in last night. All that blood.*

Aida stared at the floor putting pieces together, she never bothered turning on the light for those middle of the night snacks, the light from the refrigerator was enough. She

could go through the routine with her eyes closed by now, twice a night every night since her second month, cling peaches and Saltines, back to bed.

*All I remember, Aida thought, is wrapping a dishtowel around my wrist, grabbing my keys and jumping in the car. I got a fucking private Twilight Zone going here.*

*Try to relax, the nurse said as she removed the soiled bandage from Aida's wrist. Your pulse is a little high. You'll be fine. It just that this kind of cut that makes hospital folks ask questions, know what I mean?*

Aida ran her finger over the cornrows of staples on her wrist. The skin was tender and swollen. She invited the memory of what happened but it stayed away. She read the phone message: *Please call your sister Louella.*

The nurse studied the chart and said, *Well..I see we're taking you off fluids, so you can have chicken for dinner. How's that sound?"*

*Sounds good. I'm starving, Aida said through a blank gaze as she shielded her wrist with her other hand, her chest was rising and falling.*

The nurse fluffed up the pillows under Aida's feet.

*Oh, thanks. I definitely need to elevator 'em.*

*Oho-ho, the nurse said smiling, sounds like somebody met our Clarence.*

*Yeah. Clarence, she said. What's his story?*

*Travels to the beat of a different drum, the nurse said, he's harmless. His mother is Wilhelmina Carwell. She was a nurse here for over 30 years. Kind of an icon around Parker Ryan. He still lives with her. Everybody likes Clarence. As long as you make it clear what you want you can count on him. He's really like a child. A sweet child.*

*Does he, ahh...work tomorrow? Aida asked*

*Oh I think he'd work 24-7 if they'd let 'im. But he's off the next two days, the nurse said.*

*When will I go home? Aida asked.*

*Your chart says for two more days at least. Your doctor wants to be sure the baby's stable before releasing you. Well, dinner's on the way. Buzz me if you need me,* she added, heading toward the door. *By the way. Sweet Clarence can't read a lick...but he knows numbers.*

Aida called Kentucky to check in with Louella and was relieved to get the answering machine.

*Hey Next of Kin. Whatchu up to? Thanks for the tulips. Good choice, yellow ...just like Mama and Auntie Bernie liked. So...hey...hope you and the baby are hangin' in there. Ahh...Oh...and about this hospital thing? Nothin' serious. Just a lil' accident. They wanna keep me a couple of days. I could use the rest so I'll call you when I get home. OK? Talk to you soon. Bye Babe.*

Two days later, just before noon, Aida sat in the wheelchair with her plastic spittoon cupped in both hands, resting on top of her belly. A muscular elderly man in a pink pinstripe shirt and white pants held onto the wheelchair as the elevator stopped on the second floor. Clarence stepped in.

*Y-You goin'?* he asked.

*Yeah, Clarence. I'm goin' home.*

*I'll push,* he said looking at the elderly man.

*Ahh...do you mind?* Aida asked the man.

*Sure. Clarence can take over,* the man said in a loud voice, *And Clarence. Bring the wheelchair back to the fifth floor when you finish. Got that? Number five, Clarence.*

*Got it,* Clarence said as the doors opened and he wheeled Aida out toward the front entrance. They wore the same honeymoon smile.

*I'm so glad we ran into you,* Aida said.

*Me, too.* It was easy to ignore the shouts from row after row of license plate numbers.

As Aida directed Clarence to her car, she dug for pen and paper in her purse. She opened the driver's side door and turned to give Clarence a small piece of paper.

*Clarence, take this. I need to see you again. This is my phone number. Call me.*

*OK? Soon*

Clarence smiled as he listened to the sweet tune the numbers hummed. He crumbled the paper and ate it.

*No! Clarence! Keep that. It's my phone number. I want you to call me.*

*I know, he said, licking his lips. 555-5789. I know.*

*Damn, Aida thought.*

Clarence tucked Aida into the car and ran back toward the hospital doing wheelies with the chair.

Aida climbed the stairs to her second floor apartment and found a big box on the balcony next to the door. It was from Louella. There were two messages on the machine. The first was from Louella: *Aida? You there? Please pick up. I need to know what's going on. Call me. Please. Pause. Don't let me have to come out there.* The other message was from Clarence: *Hello. This is Clarence. I'm calling you Angel. Good bye.*

A warm shiver went up Aida's spine, ending at the nape of her neck. She plopped down in the easy chair next to the phone and rewound Clarence's message. After the third replay she said,

*Girl, you have got it bad. You too old to be acting like this.*

A hunger pain hit. She pushed herself up from the chair and headed for the kitchen, first turning the in-coming message tape over to the fresh side.

*Better save it. For emergencies.*

Aida froze in her steps at the doorway of her closet-sized kitchen. Rubbing her bandaged

wrist and cradling her belly, she wondered how she could've forgotten that this would be waiting for her. On the yellow Formica counter, the open can of cling peaches was still there with the lid flipped up. The freezer door stood open from where she had first thought to apply ice to the wound but remembered that was for sprains. And then there was blood. Her blood. A dried residue clung to the sharp edge of lid; more blood mingled with the peaches and juice in the can. There were drops of various sizes dried into the counter, and the rest mixed in with the water from the defrosting freezer to make a shallow pink river on the floor .

Aida spat a mouthful of saliva into the sink and carefully opened a can and stood at the sink stuffing peaches and Saltines into her juicy mouth as the river seeped into the soles of her flat canvas slip-ons.

She picked up the old can and her wrist throbbed at the sight of the sharp bloodied edge of the lid.

*My Twilight Zone is turning into fucking Psycho. What the hell is the matter with me. It was an accident. Could happen to anybody, in the dark, half asleep. A damn stupid accident.*

An hour later the kitchen was spotless. The blood stained sponges, peach can, canvas slip-ons and rubber gloves were in a plastic bag in the dumpster behind her building.

She took a shower and felt renewed. She sat in the easy chair staring toward the kitchen, trying to push back the flashbacks that burst forth behind her closed eyelids or up against the wall when she opened her eyes. She reached for the remote but remembered that the noise of the TV had ceased being company. It only made her feel lonely in a roomful of strangers who have nothing to say but never shut up. Hers eyes drifted to the box from Louella and she smiled at discovering a task.

Louella's son was now 11 months old, and she had promised to send hand-me-downs. The box was filled with blue everything. Aida buried her face in a stack of the tiny clothes, one piece suits and T-shirts that smelled like they had been sun dried, on a back yard clothes line and folded at the kitchen table while somebody fried fish. Aida sniffed again – mullet fish. She pictured herself at that table with Louella, drinking raspberry tea and helping each other. Louella wanted them to be true sisters – something their mothers could never do.

Aida pushed the box of blue baby clothes to the side and went to the kitchen for pretzels. Thoughts of the peach can pushed against thoughts of Clarence until instantly, everything turned fiery red; like the backs of closed eyelids pointed toward the sun. She shook her head and put her feet up, munching on pretzels and replaying Clarence's message.

*Hello. This is Clarence. I'm calling you Angel. Good-bye.*

*Hello. This is Clarence. I'm calling you Angel. Good-bye.*

At first Aida thought it was sweet – and sexy – that it took a week of talking on the phone twice a day before Clarence agreed to let her to pick him up from work for dinner at her place. When she had to promise to have him home by midnight she thought it was just plain weird.

Clarence ate his fried chicken with a knife and fork, had to have a spoon for eating the mashed potatoes and wouldn't touch the salad. *Taste like paper*, he said which made Aida laugh so hard her side ached and the baby kicked. Aida bought a new tablecloth, napkins and beeswax candles, but the only thing that mattered to Clarence was that the flowers were in a glass vase.

*You home. You alright now*, he said and reached across the table for Aida's left hand. He kissed her bandaged wrist.

*Damn, Clarence. You know way more stuff than folks give you credit for, don't you?*

He smiled and kissed her wrist again. Aida squirmed in her seat.

*Wait here,* she said, disappeared into the bedroom and came back with a gift.

*It's for you. To say thanks for taking care of me in the hospital. Go ahead. Open it.*

Clarence held the stone-washed denim shirt up to his nose, closed his eyes and sniffed it. He flashed his dark eyes at Aida, *Thank you. I never had one like this.*

*You just don't strike me as the button-down kind of guy. I'm glad you like it.*

After dinner Clarence brought a chair and footstool into the tiny kitchen so Aida could talk to him while he cleaned up.

There was nothing special about his ass, she thought, in fact it was too flat for her taste and she knew his legs to be pretty scrawny under the khaki's his mother must've bought for him at Sears. She talked about this and that, studying his hands, the veins popping up through thick suds.

Clarence completely tuned out the small barks and low rumbles from numbers on the bottoms of plates, pans, glasses and the sides of boxes in the kitchen. His angel was singing. Nothing else mattered.

Aida didn't question why she had been chosen to measure the man living inside of Clarence's outside child; the man who was curious like a child but not questioning; the man that itched and was sticky with unused semen.

One Saturday morning Clarence pulled the chair away from his place at the dining room table. Wilhelmina Carwell poured coffee into his mug before sitting down to her place. They bowed their heads for grace.

*Who is Aida?* she asked as Clarence dipped English muffin into the sunny-side up egg.

Clarence knew his mother was talking but he only heard the 2% on the front of the milk carton.

*I'm talking to you. Who is Aida?*

*Nobody*, Clarence said.

*Oh, I think not. When you call out a name in your sleep, that person is definitely 'somebody'.*

Clarence stopped eating, his eyes darting across the tablecloth.

*That's right*, his mother added quickly, *you usually call out numbers when you talk in your sleep, but last night it was Aida! Aida! Angel Angel Angel. Is she a nurse at the hospital? Somebody you met on the bus?"*

Clarence saw his mother's lips moving but only heard the yells of the numbers on the milk carton: Tell her to call you by your name, the numbers called out. She can't even say his name anymore but he was your father. Tell her to leave you alone.

Wilhelmina went on, *Son. You can tell me. You know I just want you to be happy. But you have to be careful, too. It's alright for you to —"*

Clarence pushed away from the table and took his plate into the kitchen. Seconds later Wilhelmina heard a crash.

*What was that?* she snapped, rushing in from the dining room.

Clarence stood over the broken pieces of glass with yellow, red and blue rings around the edges.

*Good Lord. What's the matter with you? You never break things.*

Clarence walked toward the broom closet.

*No. I'll do this*, she said, *at the rate you're going you'll end up cutting yourself and we'll really have a mess. And all because I asked who this Aida is —*

Clarence turned quickly and left the kitchen.

– *where are you going?*” Wilhelmina called after him, dustpan in hand, *You always do this. Don’t run away while I’m talking to you.*

Clarence disappeared down the hallway, pushed by years of memories on this same path - from the kitchen to his room, his mother’s commands, her not wanting to see his father in him, not letting him find out who he is. Wilhelmina had wanted a daughter. She’d say, *If you’d been born a girl things would be so different. You could do so much more with your life. Lord knows I prayed for that for you. But God had another plan. I just have to accept.* For years in his room Clarence wrestled with his mother’s disappointment, thinking, *I can’t be a girl, I am who I am.* He’d look at the old pictures, replay the precious few memories of him and his father, on the Ferris wheel, at the kitchen table, alone together with the pad, pencil and numbers. Doing tricks, learning. *Well, Junior your mother wants me out. It’s her choice. I don’t wanna leave but some things we can’t control. I won’t be around for you but you’re all you need anyway. You’ll do fine if you remember this: Numbers never lie. You can count on them when all else fails.* Clarence still had that pad and pencil; tucked away for fear his mother would burn it. [On the last page his father wrote A-N-G-E-L and below it 1-14-7-5-12. When Clarence was sixteen and had taken the kitchen-to-bedroom path after walking away from an argument with his mother, he studied that page, couldn’t read the words but the numbers spoke in his father’s voice ...*you’re all you need anyway.* To Clarence the numbers revealed that he didn’t have to be a girl, an angel. It was enough that he knew how to find one. He searched from then until now, then until now. Then he met Aida. Now he stood in the threshold of his room easily imagining her there.]

He closed the door, turning to the only comfort he had in his mother’s house – the old photo album on the shelf of his closet. He pulled it down and sat on the bed. From memory, the book fell open to the dog-eared page near the back that held three black and white photos.

Clarence sank his gaze into the faces of his family in the first photo. They are standing in the yard of a freshly painted house with the iron numbers 305 mounted in a vertical line near the door. The dark leaves of two seedling plum trees make plans for adorning the yard. Young Wilhelmina's face is bright; lit by the smile that Clarence still cherishes but hasn't seen her wear in years. Standing next to her is a tall young man, Clarence Carwell, Sr. (C.C. Rider to his friends) wearing sunglasses, a sawed-off pencil behind his left ear, a Banlon shirt and loose, pleated trousers with a narrow cuff. Peeping out of the pocket of the shirt are the curled edges of a note pad. With one hand around her waist, he nuzzles a kiss into Wilhelmina's cheek. The other arm he holds out, away from his trousers, the large hand with tree root veins pinches a cigar between two fingers. And at the knees of his parents, stands Clarence, Jr., wearing his mother's smile and looking up at his father.

Clarence could hear his father's voice on that day: *My sweet Willi. Damn if you don't look just like a angel to me.* Then he planted the kiss as his friend snapped the picture.

Below the family photo is an earlier one of Wilhelmina and C.C. Rider in a bar two years before Clarence, Jr. was born. She wears an off the shoulder black dress, hair up in a French roll with finger curls licking her forehead; he's in an army uniform, his processed hair shines like wet black paint. Each of them is nursing a half-full highball and on the table next to C.C. is the note pad and pencil.

The third photo is of six-year-old Clarence on C.C.'s shoulders in front of the Ferris wheel at the county fair, the best day of Clarence's childhood. He ate popcorn, caramel apples and cotton candy. He threw it all up after the Ferris wheel ride and refilled on cherry soda and a sip from C.C.'s beer. By the end of the day Clarence's belly was round and tight and the note pad was filled with number tricks and drawings. Clarence wanted his father to keep driving the black and white Chevy Bel Air right past Edenbriar

Road, on to somewhere far like Mexico but C.C. parked the car in the driveway and said, *Well, Junior your mother wants me out...*It was the last time Clarence saw his father.

The camera never caught the flow of eager gamblers who frequently interrupted C.C. Rider – wherever he happened to be – to whisper numbers into his sharp ear and hand over cash in hopes of seeing it grow this time. C.C.'s note pads were only for his lessons and games with Clarence, he didn't need it for work. Most folk knew he never forgot a bet or the name attached to it. The pad and pencil gave a sense of security to new clients who doubted his ability to recall numbers photographically. He also liked the image of the numbers runner with the tools of his trade.

The camera could never capture Wilhelmina's disgust with herself for falling in love with a brilliant gambler. *You could be an accountant with your head for numbers. Even a tax lawyer,* she would say to him. *Why you want to throw yourself away on this?* C.C. would take a sip from his highball and sweep Wilhelmina up in a spin, whispering to her: *Angel, you can't worry so much about things beyond our control. Now where's that smile...give it up.* For years she'd smile, melt in his arms and forget her sermon. But by Clarence Jr.'s sixth birthday her smile had faded and the sermon prevailed.

Clarence heard his mother knocking lightly on the door as she peeped into his room. He quickly slid the album under the bed.

*Don't you worry. The Lord is able,* Wilhelmina said, *things will be just fine. Tell you what, you call your friend...Aida...and invite her over. Sure. I'll make a pot of peppermint tea and defrost some of the cinnamon rolls I made. She should like that.*

For a split second Clarence saw Wilhelmina's bright, young face superimposed over the one at the door. He wanted to say, Why did you send him away. He loved both of us. He wanted to stay. Why did you make him go. The words were on the tip of his tongue as usual. He couldn't push them out so he swallowed them once again, and puckered at the taste. Wilhelmina backed out, leaving the door open. Clarence closed it and unbuttoned his shirt. He pushed aside the short row of striped and pastel shirts in his

closet, pulled down the gift from Aida and buried his face in the stone-washed denim. He knew he'd never wear a button-down shirt again.

Aida turned her hatchback down the street lined with ancient trees, and welcomed the chance to see where Clarence lived at last...and to meet his mother. She checked her face in the rear view mirror, plucked a tissue and blotted the plum lipstick. She checked again, this time wetting the corner of the tissue and wiping her lips clean. She made one last deposit into her spittoon, resigned to swallow her way through the next hour or so.

305 Edenbriar Road was a small, light gray house surrounded by a white picket fence. Aida pulled into the driveway behind the shiny old brown Buick. Two mature Japanese plum tree shadowed the front of the house. After ringing the bell, Aida decided she should've worn black, to underplay her protruding belly.

The smell of fresh cinnamon rolls escaped when Wilhelmina Carwell opened the door.

*Hello*, she sang, standing to the side.

*Hello Mrs. Carwell, I'm Aida Sheppard.*

*Well of course you are. Come in, come in.*

Through the aroma of cinnamon rolls, the house smelled as if it had a long memory. Hanging in the air among wall papered rooms were hints of outdated perfumes, hundreds of Sunday dinners, dusting powder from Woolworth and ammonia.

The teapot whistled as Aida turned around with her hand resting on top of her belly. Wilhelmina's gaze froze on Aida's belly as her hand flew up to cover her mouth. She swayed back as if hit by a strong wind. In the background a shadowy Clarence rushed into the kitchen to rescue the teapot.

*Do you mind if I sit down?* Aida asked.

*Oh. Ahh...please do. Have a seat*, Wilhelmina said, rubbing her palms together.

*Excuse us for a moment*, she added, backing into the kitchen.

Clarence left the kitchen as soon as his mother came in.

*Hi*, Aida said.

*Hi Angel*, Clarence said, kissing her forehead.

*I like your shirt*, she said.

I like my shirt, too.

*So. This is where you live?*

*No*, he answered, taking her hand.

Aida glanced over her shoulder for signs of Wilhelmina as Clarence led her down the hallway. He stopped at his room.

*This is where I live...when I'm not with you.*

Aida stepped into Clarence's room, looking around for posters and relics that would tell her more about him. What she saw was a space that could have belonged to a young boy who died before having a chance to fill the room with memories.

*Tea is ready*, Wilhelmina called.

The three of them sat like points on a triangle around the coffee table. Wilhelmina served tea from a china set decorated with wisteria vines. Clarence stared at the floor. Aida studied the coffee table. It had a piece of glass cut to fit under which lived photos and doilies like a permanent collection.

*I understand you were a nurse at Parker Ryan*, Aida said to Wilhelmina.

*Yes. For thirty-three years I was*, the teacup and saucer rattled in Wilhelmina's hand as she passed it to Aida.

*That's a long time*, Aida added.

*Yes. Yes it was. And what line of work are you in, Miss Sheppard?*

*I was sociology major. I have plans to go back for my masters after the baby is born.*

*And when is your baby due?* asked Wilhelmina.

*Couple months. Due on Nov. 21*, Aida said.

*My birthday*, Clarence chimed in. His eyes lit up.

*And how long have you known Aida?* Wilhelmina asked Clarence.

*38 days*, Clarence said, smiling at Aida.

*I see*, Wilhelmina said, sitting back, sipping her tea.

Aida thought ...and the prosecution rests...

Minutes later, Clarence stood in the driveway waving as Aida drove down Edenbriar Road eating a warm cinnamon roll.

The last eight weeks of her pregnancy Aida prepared special dinners for her and Clarence. Sometimes they met for short walks on his lunch break and many nights she enjoyed baths and body rubs under his touch.

One night as she lay on the bed after a bath and massage, Clarence kissed her big toe. Aida peeped over her belly, preparing herself for his trip up her leg and beyond. Moisture built up inside; her lactating breasts tingled and leaked milk. But Clarence didn't go past her ankles that night.

The first few nights of toe and foot kissing, Aida was unable to relax. There was much writhing and wiggling of hips, a fistful of sheet in both hands. By the end of the week she settled into Clarence's touches and nuances.

Week by week Clarence kissed his way north. Aida would close her eyes, sink into the bed and sing,

*The toe bone connected*

*to the...foot bone;*

*the foot bone connected*

*to the...ankle bone*

*the ankle bone...*

Each night, after reaching his goal, he'd make sure Aida had everything she needed by the bed; fresh spittoon, reading material, cling peaches and crackers. Before he left for the bus stop he'd rub her tight belly and say, *It's almost time*. Then he'd kiss her toe and walk out the door using his key to bolt it. As he walked away he ignored the Psst, Psst coming from the 31 on Aida's front door. Yells from the big white 17 on the front of the bus fell on deaf ears.

Clarence would go home or to a bar. If his mother was home he'd go to the bar and play the pinball machine until he was sure she'd given up on waiting for him. If she were at prayer meeting or church he'd go home, make sure the kitchen and bathroom were clean and shut himself in his room before she came home. He gave her no reasons or chances to cross his path.

One night Clarence kissed his way up Aida's thigh to the kinky patch of hairs at the base of her dark, tight baby-mountain. She trembled and moaned, feeling his hot breath on her skin, overtaken by spasms, spilling inside, throughout her lower back, across her upper thighs. She'd long since given up on singing and simply lay there, in full appreciation, spent, open and ready for Clarence.

She waited with great anticipation the next week, hoping he would probe a little deeper into her pubic forest but Clarence trudged ahead, up the mountain along the thick blue-black trail from her crotch to her projectile belly button. He was in that vicinity when her water broke.

Aida's labor nurse held one leg and Clarence the other as the beautiful baby girl burst forth with a scream the day before Clarence's 32nd birthday. She was a tiny replica of her mother, complete with a future halo of thick, black hair. Three days later Aida and Clarence brought little Johanna home to the yellow nursery they decorated together. Aida sang as she laid the tiny bundle in her crib.

The chest of drawers was full of the baby clothes from Louella. Aida sighed as she dressed Johanna in T-shirts trimmed in blue or embroidered with blue footballs and puppy dogs. *Well, once your hair grows in folks will know you're a girl*, she'd say, planting kisses all over Johanna's face. She looked so cute in the blue imported bassinet suits and hand knit sweaters. Aida took pictures saying, *Your Auntie Louella has got to see this*.

Aida would sit in her grandmother's rocker and nurse Johanna with bittersweet joy. Soft new lips tugged at cracked, sore nipples as the baby chugged along like the little engine that could, eyes closed, not missing a beat, consumed by milk. Aida rocked and rocked, talking to the miracle at her breast.

*Little Johanna, she said, it's not suppose to be this way. Your Grandmama is suppose to be here to help me. Teach me how to do this. She forgot to teach me.*

Tears dropped from Aida's cheeks to Johanna's cheeks.

*She died, Johanna, Aida said, letting the tears flow. She died and left me with the wrong instructions. The wrong example. They say it runs in families but we'll have to prove 'em wrong, won't we? Hell...we already off to a good start or we wouldn't be sitting here.*

Aida raised Johanna to her shoulder for a burp but now her body shook from the crying. Clarence came in, placed a box of tissue in Aida's lap and took the baby into the living room.

And Aida wept.

*Oh Mama. I don't know how to do this. Why did you leave me? Look what you left me. Oh Mama. Oh Mama. Were you there that night in the kitchen? Did you see what I did? Tell me. Tell me. I need to know. All you left me was pain. Is that all you had to give? Can I only know what you knew? Can I only do what...you...did...*

An hour later, Clarence woke on the couch with sleeping Johanna lying across his chest. He flipped on the night-light in the nursery and laid Johanna in her crib. Aida lay asleep on the floor in the fetal position. He scooped her up, took her to bed and slept with her the rest of the night, guarding her back.

The next morning Aida woke to the smell of Clarence, looked down and saw his hand lying on her belly. She felt his breath on the nape of her neck. Her breasts were aching with milk, she listened for Johanna's cry. Clarence stirred.

*There's a man in my bed, Aida said, rolling over, I want him to stay.*

Clarence leaned on his elbow and kissed Aida's hand. He had not kissed her anywhere since the night her water broke. He traced the scar on her wrist with his fingers.

*It was an accident, she said.*

He nodded.

*Those folk at the hospital think I tried to kill myself. I know they think that. But it was an accident. I'm sure.*

Clarence brushed her hair away from her face.

*Do you think I tried to kill myself, Clarence?*

*You didn't die, he said.*

*But what if I did try...would that matter to you?*

*You didn't die.*

Aida nodded and smiled.

*Thank you, she said.*

*For what? Clarence asked.*

*Last night. I needed it and you helped me.*

*I'll make breakfast, he said.*

After they had breakfast and Johanna nursed, Clarence held the baby while Aida finished addressing birth announcements. Clarence picked one up, looking at the letters as if they were pictures. The numbers cooed and burbled, bringing a smile to his face.

*Lemme read it to you*, Aida said:

Aida and Clarence  
are proud to announce  
a miracle named  
Johanna Clarena  
born  
November 20, 1997  
8 pounds 8 ounces  
21 inches

Clarence closed his eyes, rubbing Johanna's tiny back.

*Clarena*, he said, *My little Clarena*. Johanna burped.

Later that night, as Johanna slept in her crib, Aida sat on the sofa reading, draped in a red oriental silk robe. Clarence came from a shower wearing a pair of green surgical pants carrying a bottle of massage oil. He kissed Aida on the forehead.

She closed the book, *Oh. So now you're gonna reverse directions and tease me north to south?*

Clarence looked like a foreigner who doesn't understand a word you're saying but enjoys the music of your voice. He moved to the other end of the couch and began massaging her feet.

Aida's eyes followed the lean curves of his torso to the patch of nappy hairs above his navel. There was a rise and fall from the inside of the pants like an urgent knock at the door. He kissed her big toe.

She closed her eyes, spread open the robe and tried to remember how far he'd gotten the last time. He kissed his way up her leg to the loose, stretch-marked skin around her navel. Aida sat up and cradled his head between her hands, slowly pulling his face to meet hers. Their mouths locked together like slippery puzzle pieces.

*I always knew it'd be this good, Aida said coming up for air, what movies have you been watching?*

*I listen to numbers. They never lie, Clarence said pulling her face back to his.*

He traced the rim of her chin and her neck with soft kisses and tiny nibbles.

*What do you mean, Aida asked, what numbers? Talk to me, Clarence. Tell me what you know.*

*I can show you?*

*You can always show me.*

He shifted their bodies on the couch, slipped the robe from her shoulders, leading her to sit on his lap. *My mother prayed for me to be a girl, he said as they rocked back and forth, adjusting to each other's rhythm. My father showed me numbers and tole me I was all I needed. But he left.* Aida was moist and receptive and Clarence slipped in without effort.

*This...is number 371, he said, cupping her hips in his hands and thrusting to reach further inside.*

Aida rocked and rolled along with Clarence and guided his head into the space between her breasts.

*Oh yeah, she said, digging her hands into Clarence's woolly, wet hair, Oh yeah. Papa Clarence was right...you are all you need and all I need, too. Humph. I like number 371. I like it a whole lot.*

A few hours later little Johanna was dressed in a pair of blue fuzzy pajamas with a choo-choo train running across the front, laying in her mother's arms, nursing. Clarence sat on the floor massaging Aida's feet.

Aida pointed to cushions on the floor across the room, *Let's see, that was number 17. Hmmm...fun. And over there was number 31. Enjoyed that, too.*

Clarence scanned the room, smiling.

*Do I live here?* he asked.

*For as long as you want to,* Aida answered.

*We need to take a ride,* Clarence said.

Clarence turned the wheel of the hatchback down Edenbriar Road.

*Is she home?* Aida asked.

*No. At church. All day,* Clarence said.

In Clarence's room Aida laid Johanna in the middle of the single bed, running her hand over the ridges of the faded brown bedspread. The baby boxed the air with her hands and feet, cooing and staring at the dingy light fixture on the ceiling.

In a large old Samsonite, Clarence packed a few things: pants, T-shirts, sweats, underwear, socks, hospital uniforms. He pulled the old photo album from under the bed and placed it on top. He removed his sock drawer from the bureau, turned it upside down on the bed and pried loose two thumbtacks freeing a small, yellowed envelop.

*What is that?* Aida asked.

Clarence lifted the note pad and short pencil from it's hide-away and said, *My father and me.*

He smiled, closed the suitcase and said, *I'm ready.*

Aida and Johanna followed Clarence down the hallway. He stopped at the bathroom, came out with his toothbrush tucked in the pocket of his denim shirt.

As they walked along the kitchen-to-bedroom path the numbers in the house were quiet for the first time since he was six years old. Clarence peeped into the kitchen to make sure it was clean.

*Clarence, Aida said as he buckled Johanna into her car seat, Do you know what it means to have the blues?*

*Yeah, I know, he said.*

*Most folks say they ain't good, she said, I say they're necessary sometimes.*

*You still got 'em? he asked.*

*Nope. She smiled, Not anymore. Had 'em for a long time. Maybe forever. My mother did, too. But not anymore.*

***The End***