

Masthead Logo

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Eddie D. Chuculate

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Eddie D. Chuculate

YoYo

A small turtle, its carapace shining black and streaked with yellow, began to emerge from the water and climb its way up the steep clay face. It grabbed Jordan's attention from the other side of the pond. Stretched out on the grass with his German Shepherd's head in his lap, he had almost fallen asleep watching the clouds stream by like silent ships, but the turtle caught his eye. At first he thought it was a snake. As it neared the rim of the bank the turtle—its shell already dry and dull brown—slipped and flipped over and tumbled back down to the water, rightside up. It waited a while, then poked its tiny red-eyed head out and began again, stubbornly going nowhere in the plenty of time. Jordan lobbed a dirt clod at it in a high arc but missed and startled a bullfrog into the water. The splash lingered in the air, then it was silent again. Suddenly, Butch sprang up, vision locked on the vacant house across the field. There was movement—heads trailing in and out of the garage. Jordan gathered his fishing rods, released the orange perch he had caught, and ran back home. Butch followed, trotting.

Inside, Jordan yelled, "Granny! Black folks just moved in that new house over there!"

His grandmother and grandfather joined him at the window, which overlooked the pasture to the sprawling, red-bricked home. Only the A-framed roof and a slick concrete driveway with a basketball goal were visible—the rest was blocked by shrubbery planted by landscapers earlier that month.

"Huh," Chester snorted. "Must be some rich ol' niggers."

"Tst, tst, tst," Maxine scolded him. "That's not nice."

He went back to his chair in the corner, sank into it, and began puffing furiously on his Prince Albert. Soon his head was encircled by a nimbus of acrid smoke.

"You say you need some tobacco?" she said. "I'm fixing to go to the store."

Jordan went out to wait for her beside the pickup. It was understood that whenever the pickup went to the store—about two miles away in Muskogee—Jordan was to be in it. While she shopped, he would prowl the magazine section and look at baseball cards, soaking up the cool air conditioning while he could.

Because he was often bored he played silly tricks. He'd ask Granny if she wanted another beer and when she said yes he'd go into the kitchen where he'd shake it until he could feel the can swell. He laughed and jumped around when it spewed in her face. This time, waiting in the truck, he turned the wipers and the fan on high, mashed in the flashers, and turned the radio volume all the way to the right. When she climbed in and turned the key she was greeted with noise and commotion.

"Mercy me," she said, shaking her head and turning off all the controls. Jordan laughed and clapped his hands.

They drove the twisty 50 yards or so down to the gate: tools, jacks, and cans making racket in the back as they bounced. She stopped at the gate and Jordan got out, undid the chain, swung the gate back, waited for her to pull through, then closed and chained the gate before getting back in. It was something he could do in his sleep, and made a game of to see how fast he could do it.

Down the road they neared the new brick house. The long, paved driveway stretched from the basketball goal to the dirt road and was framed by evergreen bushes. People moved in and out of the house carrying boxes. Jordan reached over and pressed the horn—KY-OOOOO-GA!!—it bellowed. Everyone waved as they went by.

"Inn-hay," Maxine said. She was embarrassed to drive the truck—with its rusty muffler it roared and clattered like a stock car and bounced along roughly on worn out springs—and the buffoon-like horn only added to her misery.

Butch and Jordan were at the pond again the next afternoon. Jordan was sprawled on the ground, resting on an elbow and watching his red bobber float, while Butch lapped at water on the other, shallow side. When Butch came back and lay beside him, he noticed his paws were muddy and was about to say something to him when he saw a black head bobbing up and down, coming toward them across the pasture.

He watched until the figure made it through the tall grass to the cut field and he saw it was a black girl from the new house. She waved and Jordan sat up and waved back as she made the little rise up onto the rim of the pond. Butch began growling, then howled like he'd seen a ghost.

"That dog bite?" she yelled.

"Be quiet Butch," Jordan said. Whimpering, Butch quivered and licked his chops.

“It’s okay,” Jordan yelled and watched as she followed the bank around to them. Jordan patted Butch on the head to calm him. The girl approached cautiously.

“It’s okay. He won’t bite. Go on Butch.” Butch paced off a few yards and lay down, watching. The girl, almost as tall as Jordan, was dressed in a tight yellow tank top and short black shorts. Her hair was braided into short thick points on each side of her head, like stingers. Jordan thought that she looked like a wasp.

“Hi,” she said and offered a handshake. She smiled and seemed friendly enough.

“Oooh,” she said. “You know the shake! You know, you know.” Jordan was proud he’d remembered it from last summer’s baseball team. Then, with the black players, they’d finish a shake by slapping five.

“We just moved off in that house right there,” she said. “I saw you out here so I thought I’d come and check you out. So, hi.”

“Hi,” Jordan said, acting calm. Rarely did he get visitors out in the country except for a cousin who came out a couple of times a summer. His brother and sisters were with their mother, down south, almost in Texas. He was glad to have neighbors now but a *girl*, and a *black* one at that?

“Was it y’all that honked yesterday, with that weird horn?”

Jordan nodded.

“I thought that was you.” She paused, put a hand on her hip, and one under her chin, and looked Jordan up and down. She looked like a rancher deep in thought over the price of a certain lot of calves. “You sure is fine is all I got to say. Where all your girlfriends at?”

Jordan looked away. “I don’t know.” He thought about girls all the time but didn’t like to talk about it. He didn’t want his grandparents to think he had a girlfriend. He thought about Marnie, the cute-faced blonde he played Truth or Dare with during sixth grade at Riverside. He had loved Marnie until Marnie wrote him a note—folded up into an impossibly tiny square—breaking up saying she saw him kissing Kim Martin behind a tree at recess. It was a lie but Jordan started going with Kim Martin anyway, and then he loved Kim Martin, too, until school let out.

“Must ain’t got none, way out here in the middle nowhere,” she said. “Uncle Rodney call this Bum Fuck Egypt.”

Jordan reeled in his line and rebaited with the worms he had dug out of the worm farm Chester built him in the corner of the garden. He stuck the bright gold point into the plump end of the worm and black stuff squirted out.

“Oooh! That be *nasty!* Ain’t nobody ever gonna get me fuckin’ with no funky ass worms!”

Jordan made as if to throw one on her. She yelled and jumped back. When she realized he was only playing, she put both hands on her hips and began swaying sideways, like a cobra sizing its hapless victim.

“Cuz, I knock you out you throw a motherfuckin worm on *me*,” she said, swaying with a mean look.

Jordan chuckled. She was just like the black girls at his school. When he was little they were the only ones who would give him attention. They would circle and trap him and cup their hands around his face and tell him he was so cute. He would hang around their periphery while they played tetherball until they approached him. He had especially loved one named Velvet Lee.

“What grade are you in?” Jordan said after he had thrown his line back.

“I be off in ninth when school start,” she said, looking beyond the pond to the pasture where clumps of cattle grazed, set off like smudges of rust against the brown grass. “I be off at MHS, running track and shit. Ain’t nobody faster’n me. What grade you be off in?”

“Seventh.”

“Aw, man, you just a pup. But you sure is fine. What’s your name?”

He felt embarrassed when she said that. He wondered if she wanted him to be her boyfriend.

“Jordan,” he said.

“My name’s Yolanda but everyone call me YoYo. You can call me YoYo.”

She sat next to him on the bank. Butch came over and sniffed around her and put a paw on her leg, leaving a muddy red smear. Jordan thought she would do or say something about it but she only wiped it off with the hem of her tanktop, her bicep forming at the slight exertion.

“Yawl lives up there in that little white house?” she said. “With the garden in the back?”

Jordan looked over at the house. It looked incredibly small, square as a box with a neatly pointed roof. “Yeah.”

“What you do out here all summer?”

“Live, I guess.”

“We used to live in town,” YoYo said, “but Pops say I get in too much trouble in town. But all my people in town. Ain’t nobody out here.” She looked all around as if she were expecting to see someone or some thing. There was nothing except the pastures, clouds, blue sky, a line of trees, and, beyond that, the three tall red-blinking radio towers of KMUS.

Jordan got a strike and reeled in a small bullhead catfish. Carefully, Jordan unhooked it—he'd been stabbed before by the stout sharp fins on either side of the flat head—and held it up. It croaked breathlessly.

"You hear that!" Yolanda said incredulously, pointing at the fish, which arched and slapped its tail in Jordan's hand. "It's a talking fish!"

Jordan laughed and faked an underhand toss to her.

She screamed and jumped back.

"I will knock a motherfucker out motherfucker throw a talkin' fish on me," she said, glaring at him.

"Just playing," Jordan said, and threw the fish back.

"You better be playing," she said. "You know what's good for your ass."

Jordan stretched and began collecting his stuff. "Well, I've got to go. I've got baseball practice."

"All right then," she said, and offered her hand for The Shake, then quickly took it back. "You been messin' around with worms and fish and shit." She paused. "Maybe I see you tomorrow."

"Okay."

Jordan and Butch watched her jog home, her yellow shirt flashing through the fields.

"Whatcha been doin' hoss?" his grandpa said when he came in the door. "Catch anything?"

"Naw. Just some little ones. Threw 'em back."

Jordan put his rod-and-reel and tacklebox in the closet and brought out his baseball, glove, and wooden bat.

"So, who was your little fishin' buddy?" Grandpa said.

"No one," Jordan said quickly.

"Got you a little black girlfriend, huh?"

He felt ashamed, then mad, then kicked the door open and stomped out on the porch.

He heard Grandpa laughing. "Whee!"

"Here now Chester," his grandma said, "leave him alone."

Jordan refused to come back into the house and waited on them until they came out to take him to practice. He stared off toward YoYo's house, which squatted like a little fortress in the pasture. He wondered what black folks did in their houses all day.

“Gonna hit some homers for us today?” Grandpa said on the way to the truck. It was his way of apologizing.

“Always,” Jordan said, and laughed. It was his way of accepting.

The next day Jordan was lying on his bed under the fan when he heard a rare knocking at the door. He went into the kitchen to see who it was but Granny was already there.

“Is Jordan here?” YoYo was asking her through the screen. Startled, Jordan began to turn around and retreat but Granny said, “Jordan! Come here. You have a visitor.”

“Hey, YoYo,” he said, trying to act surprised.

“What are you doing? I thought I’d come by and say hi.”

“Just reading,” Jordan said, and held up an old baseball book. “What are you doing?”

Granny cut off her reply. “Well ask her in, jebon. Don’t just stand there talking through the screen door.”

Jordan unlocked the door and held it open. This was absolutely not what he wanted. She looked intriguing, new, and fresh now in her red tank top, but he wanted to deal with her alone, not in front of his grandparents. She shook hands formally with Granny.

“My name is Yolanda Ledbetter. I’m very pleased to meet you, ma’am.”

“I’m Maxine Fields and that’s my husband Chester,” Granny said, nodding towards grandpa, who sat in his chair smoking and holding the newspaper wide open before him.

“Howdy,” he said without looking.

“Here, sit down,” Granny said, pulling a chair from the table. “Jordan, make her a glass of Kool-Aid. There’s some in the icebox.”

“I’m just fine, ma’am, thank you very much. That won’t be necessary.”

Jordan stopped on his way to the icebox.

“Oh, go ahead,” Granny said. “Don’t make a mountain out of a mole hill.”

They all sat at the small table. It had a red-and-white checkerboard pattern. Jordan stared at it, moving the salt and pepper shakers around to different squares.

“So, is your family moving from out of town?” Granny said.

“No, ma’am. We’ve been in Muskogee all our lives but my father bought the property just recently.”

“I see,” Granny said.

Jordan heard the paper rustling in the front room. He opened his book and began reading about Pete Rose again.

“Put the book down, Jordan, that’s rude,” Granny said.

Jordan closed it and put it on the table. He drank from his glass. Grandpa glanced at him from behind his cat-eyed reading glasses. Yolanda picked up the book and began flipping through it.

“My father is a dentist and my mother is a teacher,” YoYo said. Jordan would have liked to stare at her more but he didn’t want his grandparents to see him staring at her.

“That’s fantastic,” Granny said. “Well, I want to welcome you all to the neighborhood, as they say, even though it’s not much of a neighborhood.” She laughed and got up and went to the wooden cabinets Chester had made when they moved in, replacing the bare open cupboards.

While Granny rummaged around in the cabinet Yolanda slid the opened book back to Jordan, nonchalantly pointing at something in the margin with a long red-painted fingernail. “DAWN IS A NIGGER,” stared back at him accusingly. It might as well have been painted on the side of a house. He couldn’t have been more embarrassed. He had scrawled those words after he’d had an argument with his sister last year and forgotten all about it. This was fast becoming the worst day of his life.

Maxine put two big Kerr jars of okra and potatoes she had canned earlier in the summer on the table. “Here, give these to your parents,” she said.

“I sure will, ma’am, and I’m speaking for the whole family when I say thank you very much.” YoYo took her empty glass to the sink, dumped the ice, and rinsed the glass. She shook hands again with Granny and made for the door.

“Jordan, don’t you want to come outside with me?”

He thought she’d be mad at him and might even try to beat him up. He glanced at Granny.

“Well go on, Jordan. Get out of the house for a while.”

Jordan got up and moped to the door.

“See you again soon Mrs. Fields,” YoYo said.

With Butch following, Yolanda and Jordan walked silently through the front yard out of the gate and onto the pickup trail which led to the pond. They both stopped mutually.

“I’m sorry about the book,” Jordan said. “You know, for what it said.”

“What’d it say?”

“You know.”

“I know I know but I want you to say it.”

“It said ‘Dawn is a nigger’.”

“There now, okay,” YoYo said. “Apology accepted.” They shook hands. “Now, let’s race.”

Now that the crisis was over Jordan felt jovial, clownish. “*What?* Are you crazy? *You* want to race *me*? I’m the fastest player on my team.”

“So! You ain’t nothin’ but a pup. You ain’t fast. I be like Valerie Hooks and shit.”

“Who’s that?”

“Never mind. Wanna race or not?” she said, then adopted a deep mimicking voice and pumped her fist at him. “We gonna get it on, ‘cause we don’t get along.” She threw playful jabs at him like a boxer.

“Okay then,” Jordan said. “To where?”

“Through that gate right there that goes to that pond.” It was about 50 yards away.

They stood side by side, eyeing the pond. Jordan’s arms hung loosely at his sides and his knees were bent slightly, as if he were leading off a base and preparing to steal. YoYo assumed a sprinter’s stance, bent over, balancing her weight on her fingers and kicking her legs out behind her like a horse. Jordan had never seen such a pose before.

“What are you doing? I thought you wanted to race.”

“Just say one, two, three, go,” she said.

“Okay. One, two, three, go!”

At “go!” YoYo broke, stayed low for a few strides, then slowly straightened. He gave her a small lead for the sport of it, then took off. His plan was to trail her for the first 40 yards or so, then blaze past her. But to his surprise he couldn’t merely trail this girl, he had to run his hardest just to keep up. She ran upright, almost leaning backward it seemed, fists blurring piston-like in front of her. Her eyes were wide like she was startled and her lips formed an “O.” She blew her breath in short, smart huffs. With 20 yards left Jordan became scared he was going to lose and with this burst of adrenalin shot past her through the fence posts at the last instant. Barking, Butch came in a distant third.

They stood bent over at the waist, hands on their thighs, sucking air heavily. Looking up, Jordan saw tight buds of black hair in her arm pits. The little silver dove on her necklace swung gaily and sparkled like it was flying. He grew weary of standing and plopped down on the ground. She did the same.

Sweat had popped out on their foreheads. Jordan watched a bead drop from her chin onto her chest and roll down between her breasts and soak into her shirt. A breeze came and cooled them. Finally, she broke the silence.

“I didn’t know you could run like that,” she panted. “Hardly nobody beats me.”

“You’re the fastest girl I’ve ever seen,” he gasped. “You’re faster than anyone on my team.”

“Good race,” she said, and extended her hand for The Shake. They shook, then YoYo snapped her fingers and said, “You fast, baby. But you got lucky. I don’t like runnin’ in no cow pasture. I runs on a motherfuckin’ *track*.” She was moving her head back and forth like a chicken. “Now let’s go walkin’ around down here and see what all they is to do.”

After they threw rocks at turtles in the pond, Jordan showed her the small canyon where the landowners let people dump trash for \$5.

“My grandpa found a fan here one time and fixed it,” Jordan said.

YoYo bent down over a pile of rubbish and withdrew a magazine gingerly, holding it by her fingertips in front of her.

“Ooooooh. Look at this nasty magazine. People be dumpin’ some *nasty* books off in this motherfucker!” She held a picture up to Jordan. “This ol’ bitch be havin’ some big-ass titties.”

Jordan looked away. He’d spent entire afternoons in the canyon looking for *Playboys* but how could he look at them with YoYo around? He’d be back for it later.

“Ol’ white bitch,” YoYo said, and flung the magazine back.

“I know a place we can go,” Jordan said. “Come on.”

She followed him up a cow trail which led out of the canyon and into a grove of young trees. The trees had grown together closely and provided good, heavy shade. They ducked and entered. Inside, Jordan had a place cleared where they sat down across from each other, leaning back on the small trunks.

“This your clubhouse or something?”

“No, I just come here when it gets too hot,” he said.

They sat quietly and listened to the wind rattle the leaves around. Above, the branches and leaves made dizzying symmetrical patterns against the sky. A dog barked faraway. Butch, sprawled on the ground, pricked one ear but kept his eyes closed.

“You folks is Indians ain’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“My grandma be havin’ some Creek off in her but Pops said I ain’t got no Indian off in me,” YoYo said. She held her arm out in front of her. “See, if I had some Indian off in me I’d be light like you.”

Her arm was darker than his but not exactly black, Jordan thought. *Blackern’ a charcoal grill*, he’d heard Grandpa describe his friend Mr. Jones.

“Uncle Rodney say Indians got some dog off in them ‘cause they eat dogs but I don’t believe his crazy ass.” She paused. “You folks don’t eat no dog, do you?”

Jordan looked at Butch. There was a fly crawling on his black-and-brown coat. They said he was German Shepherd because he looked more German Shepherd than anything. He had simply shown up at their gate. *Out of the clear blue sky*, Granny’d said.

Jordan didn’t answer. YoYo rubbed Jordan’s leg with the tip of her Converse and looked down at the small points of her breasts.

“What you think of these,” she said, cupping them underneath and lifting them up. “They ain’t big like that white bitch but they there. Wanna see ‘em?”

“No,” Jordan said quickly, and stood. “Let’s go fishin’.”

“Aw, cuz, I don’t wanna do no motherfuckin’ fishin’. That’s all they is to do out here is go fishin’. I wish I was back in town.” She looked south, towards town.

“I know,” she said. “Let’s dance.” She gave a little jump in the air and began grinding her butt in rhythmic circles. She sang throatily, “*I got somethin’ that’ll sure ‘nuff do you good. Tell me somethin’ good, tell me that you love me, baby. . . .*”

Jordan could do nothing but simply stare.

“Come on, cuz, dance,” she implored, and floated over to him and tried to rub her butt against his. Jordan leaped away. “Come on, boy, shake that booty!”

Jordan ducked and ran out of the cluster of the trees into the open. Butch was up in an instant and then YoYo came out, laughing and whooping, and she chased them until they reached the pond.

“Aw, shit! I gots to go home. My folks is home,” she said, as they all looked toward the brick house.

Before Jordan could say anything she took off jogging. "Bye, cutey," she said over her shoulder.

That night his grandparents sat across from each other like chess pieces at the kitchen table, drinking Brown Derby beer in a bottle. When they were drinking Jordan liked to pop in, drop a controversial bomb, then return later to see what road the argument was on. Once, he'd offered that Aunt Brenda's husband Harry had said Chester's garden was scrawny. They took it meekly at first but an hour and a few beers later they were haggling over just how sorry lazy-ass Harry was. Tonight, Jordan dropped in and said that YoYo said Indians eat dogs.

"Don't listen to that nonsense," Granny said. "Did you catch any fish today?"

"*Whaaat!*" Grandpa said disbelievingly, drawing it out, like he hadn't heard right.

"Oh, Lord, here we go," Granny said, shook her head, and took a drink.

"Those sumbitches'll eat anything," Chester said. "Carp, gar, nigger quail, rotten possum."

Chester seemed inflamed, holding his bottle in the air and pointing his finger around. Now, Jordan was sorry he'd said anything.

"Hush up, Chester!" Granny said, trying to dismiss the conversation with a flick of her hand. "Talk about something else. I am not going to sit here and listen to this!"

Chester ground to a halt, mumbled something about possums, and drank, shaking his head. He had a faraway look in his eyes.

"I tell you one thing, an Indian will outwork a lazy ol' nigger anyday!"

"Chester!"

"Humph."

Jordan left the room, brushing back the thin white sheet they hung in the doorway when they were going to stay up late and drink. He lay on the bed with the fan blowing directly on him and tried to sleep. As he lay awake, he could see through the sheet the silhouetted figures of his grandparents moving about the kitchen. He dozed off once, then woke and crept over to the doorway and pulled the sheet back silently. Chester was standing and pointing a finger at Granny. "Now, Mac," he said, "I didn't raise that boy to be a niggerlover." Jordan went back to bed and heard them talk normal, argue loudly, talk normal, argue loudly until the rhythm, as usual, put him to sleep.

On Saturday, Jordan said he really didn't feel like going riding around with them. Felt a little sick, he said, when really, he wanted to watch Cincinnati play Los Angeles. Usually, if he didn't have a game, he'd go with them out on the dirt roads, riding in the back of the pickup with Butch, and he and his sister or cousin would yell "Bottle!" if they saw a returnable pop bottle lying in a ditch or half-stuck in a mudhole. Chester would stop the pickup and the kids would bail out and race to claim the bottle. Usually, it was also a good time for Granny to take a leak.

Around one o'clock Jordan went into the front room to turn on the NBC Game of the Week with Tony Kubek and Joe Garagiola. Typically, the channel wasn't coming in so he had to go out and wrestle with the antenna which was strapped to the side of the house. He twisted mightily to point the rickety thing in another direction and had to repeat the process when he went back inside and found the reception had worsened.

On this second effort he saw YoYo's black head bobbing in the tallgrass pasture next to the brick house. Just as she was about to reach the pasture line where he would be instantly visible to her, he darted inside and slammed the door. He crouched below the window and peeked over the ledge. She was already coming into their front yard. Must have run, he thought. Before he could get his thoughts together she was banging on the door.

"Jordan! It's me YoYo. Open up the door."

He was hidden in his bedroom but heard plainly.

"Jordan! I know you're in there!" She banged hard again. "Open up the damn door." She stood on the porch, peering through the window.

Crouching, Jordan snuck up under the window and when she knocked again he jumped up suddenly and pressed his face against the glass, flattening his lips and nose.

YoYo screamed and leaped off the porch and was about to take off running when Jordan opened the door. YoYo saw him, stopped, took a few seconds to catch her breath, then lit into him.

"Motherfucker be playin' games. Always playin' motherfuckin' games!"

Jordan sat on the porch and she came over next to him. She ran her hand through his hair and even though it pleased him, he blocked her arm.

"I knew you was off in there," she said. "I saw yo' grandfolks go by and I waved at them and they stopped."

"So."

“So they said it was okay for you to come over to my house. Your grandmammy, she said for us to have fun, so we gonna have us some motherfuckin’ fun.” She stood. “Come on.”

“Naa.”

“Naa? What you mean, *naa*?”

“I’m going to watch baseball.”

“All you thinks about is baseball and fishin’. Come on, you can watch it over to my house. We gots a big ol’ TV and air conditioning. My folks went shopping in Tulsa and won’t be back ‘til tonight.” She assumed a pleading tone. “Please, baby, please.” She ran her fingers through his hair again and Jordan, torn between his game and companionship, got up.

“What’s *that*,” YoYo said, pointing, after Jordan returned from turning off the TV and all the fans and collecting his records and portable record player.

“It’s my record player. You said you wanted to listen to records.”

“I gotta record player, cuz. Leave all that here.”

When Jordan came back with his two favorite records—“Short People” and “Convoy”—YoYo said she wanted to run to her house.

“Not a race, just jog,” she said.

When they reached the fence line running along the dirt road Jordan stepped on the bottom strand of barbed-wire and pulled up on the middle strand to let her through. She did the same for him. The wire was spotted with tufts of black and blonde cattle hair, caught when cows stuck their heads through the fence to eat on the other, greener, side.

On the road they began jogging easily but when her house came into view YoYo took off sprinting. Instinctively, Jordan took off after her. She was moving fast, her soles spitting little rocks and pebbles and puffs of chalky red dust. She wore the same wide-eyed, O-mouthed expression. She made a sudden turn onto her driveway and Jordan slipped and dropped his records. He stopped to pick them up and when he caught up with her she was already jumping up and down underneath the basketball goal.

“I’m Valerie Hooks! I’m the champ!” she shouted, arms above her head. She walked up to Jordan and said, so close to his face that he saw gold fillings at the back of her mouth, “I tole ya, I tole ya! You cain’t hang with the champ!” Again she threw playful rapid jabs and hooks at him.

Abruptly, she cut the routine and told him to come on in the house. She led the way through a small door which Jordan thought would lead into the

house but instead led into a spacious garage. A creamy white Corvette, crouched like a predator underneath a speed bag, glowed in the dim light.

“When I gets my license this year you be seein’ me off in that motherfucker,” YoYo said. “Pops, he say he ain’t gonna let me drive it. He say he gonna buy me some funky-ass new Honda. I cain’t be stylin’ in no square-ass Honda!”

Jordan followed her into the house. Just like at Safeway, the cool air washed over him when he stepped in. They went into a bright kitchen and YoYo poured two glasses of Kool-Aid for them.

“Come on, sugar pie,” she said, and led Jordan down a myriad of oak-paneled hallways until they were at her room.

“Kick off your shoes,” she said. “I don’t want no cow shit on my carpet.”

Jordan took off his shoes and felt the spongy thick cushion sink beneath his feet. He had never felt anything like it. She had a large dresser and mirror along one wall, covered with medals, trophies, and brightly-colored ribbons. Along another wall, underneath the window, was the biggest stereo system Jordan had ever seen. All around were big color action posters of sports stars. On the ceiling looking down on them was the afroed Dr. J, holding a red-white-and-blue basketball high over his head with one hand, soaring towards the basket.

YoYo put a big stack of 45s on the cartridge above the turntable and swung the metal arm into position. The bottom record dropped down, the turntable began to spin, and the arm with the needle slowly swung over and settled down gently. There were scratching noises then a heavy thumping bass as red and green lights jumped along the face of the receiver.

“You act like you ain’t never seen a stereo before,” YoYo shouted. “You ain’t gots a stereo?”

“I’ve got one,” he lied.

She took their glasses and set them on her dresser, removed a magazine from it, and stretched out on her bed, moving over to make room. She slapped at the pillow beside her. “Lay down right here. I show you who Valerie Hooks be.”

Jordan stretched out and she began turning the pages.

“There! See?” She turned the magazine around and pointed to a large picture of a sprinter. Hooks was frozen in mid-stride, a knee to her chest, fists clenched. Her eyes were wide and her lips made a perfect small circle.

“That looks like you when you run,” Jordan said.

“I be off in a motherfuckin’ magazine one day, too,” she said.

They lay on their backs looking at Dr. J and listening to the sweet, churning soul: *Lord, let your Holy Ghost come on down, Lord, let your Holy Ghost come down on me. . . .*

YoYo began tossing a little orange Nerf basketball in the air. She was quiet for a while.

“My mother, she wants me to be a teacher. My father, he wants me to be a dentist,” Yolanda said. “Me, I don’t want to be either. I just want to run track. Look.” She held her palm up to Jordan’s face. It was dotted with tiny black marks.

“What’s that?” Jordan said.

“Cinders. From the track. They’re stuck in there forever. I got tripped on a relay and they stuck in my hand. I look at it every day. They could dig them out but I don’t want them out. My mother told me I can’t run track forever, but I’m going to try.”

Outside, beyond Yolanda’s hand, the sun, a watery reddish ball, cut a slow curving trail across the window as YoYo began to hum along low, soft, with the record. It reminded him of the women singing Creek songs at Hillabee church, and soon he was asleep.

Yolanda had her cool hand underneath his shirt and was rubbing his stomach when he awoke, startled. Choked in darkness, he didn’t know where he was for an instant. He began to say something when Yolanda put a finger to his lips.

“Shhhhhh,” she whispered.

The song on the player answered, “Shhhhhh.”

He couldn’t see anything in the room; it was very dark. He felt her hand along his thighs, down, then up, each leg. She tugged at the top button on his Levi’s, then he felt them all release smoothly in succession. She pulled his jeans down to his ankles and reached under his shorts. He jerked away violently.

“What’s the matter?” she said.

“Nothing.” He was turned away from her, face on the pillow.

“Is it because I’m black? Is it because I’m a *nigger*?” she said, emphasizing the last word.

He lay silently and heard the “KY-OOOOO-GA” horn, faintly, in the distance. He thought he’d never been in a darker room. He felt Yolanda

moving and getting off the bed. He reached for her and caught her around the waist. “No,” he said. She had taken off her shirt—her skin was smooth, fantastic, and colorless.

She took him in her strong, cold fist. He started up abruptly at the sensation.

“Shhhhhh.”

He eased back down. She struggled at his shorts, tugging them. He lifted himself and they came down quickly. She began to move around and soon he felt her mouth on him. He gasped, and found himself feeling the hair on her head. He had always wanted to do that. It was spongy, moist.

Suddenly she grabbed his arms and pinned them next to his head at the wrists and straddled him. The tightness, the warmth, shocked him. She was on top of him, rocking, smacking on bubblegum. After a while, her breaths came in loud, clipped, bursts. The tingling he felt on his scalp and on the bottoms of his feet met in the center of his spine and shot out of him as she finished with a loud groan and rested her head on his chest. Left with the sweet Baby Oil smell of her hair, he floated home under the silver spray of stars, on the current of the crickets’ mad orchestra.

The next afternoon Jordan went with Granny to Safeway.

“So did you and Yolanda have fun yesterday?” she asked as they passed the Ledbetter’s.

“No,” he blurted. “I mean, yeah, we shot baskets. Listened to records.”

“Hmmm.”

He was unusually quiet, no joking around or horn honking. Maxine, noticing his behavior, asked no further questions.

Back home Jordan lay on his bed and tried to read the *Muskogee Phoenix* sports. His cousin Joe was coming over and they would all probably go riding around. He didn’t feel like doing that today, maybe never again. He got up and moped around different rooms, biting his nails. A quick look out the window toward the brick house. No one. He felt hollow, like a stranger in his own universe. He felt his grandparents were staring at him.

When Jordan came outside with the fishing rod Butch pranced around in circles then jumped up on him, paws on Jordan’s chest. Then he jumped down and took off at a dead run, stopped, looked back, barked, took off again.

Jordan walked slowly through the front yard and out of the gate. Ahead, Butch was already nearing the pond. Jordan took his time, kicking at clumps of brush. At the pond, he flopped down lazily and threw in a lure and reeled it in slowly. He yawned.

Suddenly he saw a basketball in the air at the Ledbetter house. YoYo! He got up, leaving his fishing rod. Walking up to the highest part of the bank he could see her black head bobbing and the orange ball floating and bouncing. He felt his heart beat fast. He remembered he loved her. He jogged, then began to sprint, to Yolanda's house. He ran through the tall grass, ran scared and hard as if someone, a girl even, might beat him.