

Sarah Nell

by Melissa McEwen

She walks to the corner of Lenox and South Main, takes a right and then she waits. She is going to meet another one. I follow her because lately she hasn't been bringing them home. I want to see what this one looks like. All the others were big and filled doorways. All were dark-skinned. Oh, except for one. People call him Tang (short for Tangerine) because his skin is the color of orange. I don't know why people just didn't call him Orange. I guess it didn't sound right. He was the first after my father left.

The sun makes the plum tone of her skin look lighter. She looks more like the Sarah Nell from the black and white photos instead of Mama. Today, Sarah is made up of braids going back that barely reach her neck, big hoop earrings too big for her round face, red-framed glasses too big for her face, too. Men whistle at her as they pass on their way to work or on their way to see their mistresses. I like to think that I can read minds, and perhaps the men whistle and honk and stare hard because they like the way the wind pushes her skirt between her legs. She looks at her watch. I am sure she is thinking about the men that did not stay or thinking about trying not to think about those men that did not stay.

There are two, though, that stayed for more than just a little while: Marvin and Oscar. Marvin was married and that's all I have to say about that. Oscar wasn't and it seemed as though he wasn't planning on getting married either. What a petty man he was. I guess it's because he has been dealing with small things all of his life. All of his women were small, so was his mother and so was his pay. That relationship was built not in order. She went up to him first. She called him first. She turned him on and turned him out first -- (I know because I heard them and she tried so hard to be quiet).

However, he wanted out first. I think he got tired of acting grown and so he ran along. He wanted to chase the girls in the clubs downtown, but Mama was giving him what the downtown girls weren't giving him, and still he didn't stay. Mama is clingy. She clung to him like how she clings to her purse. When he wasn't around her or in her eyesight, she wondered where he was. And when he was around her, she was always following him and touching him. He would read a magazine and she'd be on the arm of the sofa pointing out the girls that she knew he would like.

She talks to herself -- and most people do -- but she does it all of the time. *You got some nerve doing me like that* she said to the mirror once, perhaps pretending that her reflection was one of those men that did not stay. I was peeping through the cracked bedroom door. *Why don't men stay?* she sang to her mirrored self. I was peeping through the cracked door and her fingers tugged hard her un-braided hair. She sung to her mirrored self for most of the day. This incident happened after Marvin, but before Oscar. She was seeing this singer who calls himself Maggie, but his birth name is Yusef. He is known around the neighborhoods as Magnet, Maggie for short. I remember he had thin wrists like a woman (but he hit like a man). That one, too, got away from her even though she wanted him to stay. He said she was too passive for him and so he ran off. When he comes around sometimes, my Mama spreads her legs easy for him. I pray in the morning and at night that some man's love for her someday will be more than spread legs and *Oh, baby!*

She looks so little, now, standing and waiting. Look at the way her fingers fumble with her purse strap. I know her hands are sweaty from the tight grip she has on her purse. She looks at her watch, again. I wonder if she is used to this by now. I wonder if she is fed up; but since there is nothing else to do, she keeps on. I wonder if she is used to the waiting, the never being sure if he will come (maybe his wife caught on, maybe he's too tired). She seems to

not be in any hurry for change because she continues with the same routine. Maybe she hates being lonely. But I'm there in the house with her. She can talk to me. I want to go up to her and tell her what I've learned from book and magazines about relationships, about men and women. What her problem is, is this: she is too clingy. She's happy when a man is around, she can't stop smiling, but when he leaves the house to go about his business, she is frustrated and anxious, sitting by the window (like a house cat) as though she can see what he's up to. I want to walk over to her and tell her this, but she'd say: *Mind your own business. I'm a grown woman!* and I'd say: *I'm grown, too.* And she'd look at me with that if-you-don't-get-the-hell-out-of-my-face-I'm-going-to-slap-the-living-daylights-out-of-you look and I'd know not to say another word to avoid making a scene. I'd just stand there and look at her hard. She'd roll her eyes and pretend I wasn't there. This is always the case when she is fed up with me or when she is in her own world thinking about men, thinking about the things she does with men. I like her better when she is barking orders, when she says, "Get me the broom!" or "Come sweep this floor!"

I know that she has love for me and that she likes being around me but a daughter can't touch a mama the way that a man can.

