

Big Strong Love

by Michelle McEwen

Aunt Clivvie says Uncle Ed's love was touchable. Big. Strong. "It was like a third person in the room with us," she says whenever she talks about Uncle Ed's love. The way she talks about it, you'd think it had a heart, some lungs, and a brain. That's why she don't want nobody else. When Uncle Ed died (his car landed in a ditch— "The car survived, but Ed didn't." That's how Aunt Clivvie tells it), Aunt Clivvie climbed in to the bed with me and told me not to ever love no man unless he's like my Uncle Ed. I just nodded when she told me this, but I didn't get then and still don't get now what she saw in Uncle Ed— except he was big and wide with muscle and could hurt you good if you made him mad enough. Aunt Clivvie says with Uncle Ed around, you didn't need a gun in the house. "His fists was enough," she says whenever she is watching the six o'clock news and something comes on about these young boys today shootin' each other up. That musta been what she saw in him, his fists, because Uncle Ed was not a good-looking man. You shoulda seen him: eyes almost crossed, hair almost gone— teeth mostly gone, too. And he had looked like that when she first met him. "What on earth you want with *that* man," my mama (Aunt Clivvie's sister) asked her when she had brought Ed home, but Aunt Clivvie just rolled her eyes and told us that Ed was gonna be staying with us and that if we (mama and me) didn't like it, we could leave. Mama had no other place to go, so we stayed and Ed moved in and became my uncle even though him and Aunt Clivvie never married. Aunt Clivvie, after a whole month of me calling him Ed or sir, said:

"You might as well gon' on and call him Uncle."

"Why," I said— forgetting that Aunt Clivvie hates why and how come.

"Cause that's what he is to you," Aunt Clivvie said— leaning in close to me. She was whispering, but hollering too.

"But y'all ain't married," I said and she smacked the plum I was eatin' out of my hand. She woulda slapped me, too, if my mama hadn't walked in to the kitchen. But I don't get what the big fuss was over calling him Uncle. He didn't seem to mind me calling him Ed or sir. The first time I called him Uncle Ed, he gave me this look like he was in the wrong house. My mama used to say, every day before leaving for work, "You can call him uncle for now, but when I get my money saved up enough to move out of here you won't be callin' him uncle." And in the evenings when she'd get in from work, she'd say, "That man ain't nunna your uncle— Clivvie's and my brothers, those are your uncles." And she'd sometimes say it loud enough for Aunt Clivvie to hear. Had mama saved up money enough to move before Uncle Ed landed in that ditch, I don't think I coulda stopped calling him Uncle. I had grown used to it and to him. Aunt Clivvie thinks I had a crush on him. Just yesterday, out on the porch, she asked me:

"You liked your Uncle Ed didn't you?"

"Yeah," I said and I looked around to see if mama was around. Had she been around, she would have nipped this conversation in the bud. But mama wasn't around. She was in the basement washing clothes and humming.

"I don't mean liking him like a child likes a favorite uncle, I mean you *really* liked him," Aunt Clivvie said— expecting me to know what she was talking about. I did.

"No, auntie, I didn't like Uncle Ed like that," I said and I was for real. Uncle Ed wasn't good- looking enough for me. I almost told her that.

"Well, you did. You just don't know it yet," Aunt Clivvie said. Then she went on about how some women don't know they in love with a man until that man done shackled up with another woman. "But," she said, "most men ain't worth woman's love nohow." And she smiled this smile big as the watermelon wedge she was supposed to be eatin' but wasn't eatin' because she couldn't stop talking about Uncle Ed. "Ed, though," she said, "he was worth it." Then she went on about how this was the sorta stuff, love stuff, her and Ed talked

about on the porch over watermelons. She said Uncle Ed knew love like how them gangsters on the corner know hate.

"His fists were something else, but he wasn't a fightin' man if he could help it," she said and she handed me her watermelon to eat and I ate it while she talked on and on about Uncle Ed and how he never looked no other woman's way— "His eyes just weren't made that way," she said. "Some men," she said, "they got those roaming eyes whether they want them to roam or not." Mama had come up from the basement by then with a load of clothes to hang on the line. She just walked right by us right to the clothes line. She wasn't studyin' us and we weren't studyin' her. Aunt Clivvie wasn't even studyin' me I don't think because when I looked at her, her eyes were closed and she was almost singing while she talked. She said:

"Me and Ed almost had us a baby— a *real deal* baby." And she laughed because she can laugh about it now. But her laugh, it is always one-part jolly and one-part crazy. She said, "We weren't meant to have us a baby." And she told me things I already knew— about how, when she lost the baby, she couldn't eat for weeks and how Uncle Ed scolded. "I don't want no skinny woman," he had told her and she ate and ate and ate until he said, "Now, Cliv, I don't want a fat woman either." She always laughs hard when she re-tells this part. And yesterday, when she told me again, she laughed and laughed. She said:

"Can you picture me sittin' still, patting a baby's back waitin' for it to burp?"

"No, auntie," I said, "I can't see that."

"Besides your Uncle Ed took up all my time," Aunt Clivvie said and she went on and on about Uncle Ed's love and how she swore if you snapped a picture of it (Uncle Ed's love) something for sure would show up in the photograph— something seeable. Big. Strong.

