

Clay Women

by Michelle McEwen

I.

Willie Underwood ain't like most men. He has this knack for knowin' just when to split. Like with Merie, one of the girls he was seein' when he startin seein' me, he split from her right when she got into her mind to poison him. He told me he always felt like Merie could kill him and I told him he was just being crazy. But he say he come from a long line of prophetic folk and he knew Merie would kill him if he hung around long enough and the night that he told me he was gon' leave her, he left her and came to stay with me. When we was leaving, he say Merie said from behind the screen door, "I shoulda been poisoned your ass." He split from me just in time, too, right before I started to show. I didn't get a chance to tell him I was carryin' 'cause I didn't know myself 'til I was in my second month. One day, I was working in the garden and I got real thirsty and I came up to the screen door and hollered inside for Willie to get me somethin' to drink. He ain't answer. I hollered again, "Willie!" and again, "Willie!" Folks who heard me say they thought Willie was dead or something the way I was hollering. I never went inside 'cause I knew Willie had gone— out the back door or out the side window. I knew he probably slipped over the fence behind my house into Lou C.'s backyard and he probably bumped into Lou C. 'cause she's always in the backyard; he probably shushed her up with a kiss. When I asked her If she saw Willie that day, she just said naw, but I cuh tell she was lyin' 'cause she was smilin' when she said it. She was just a-smilin', too, when she said, "You got somethin' growin' in you?"

II.

Willie is a bad man. And when I say bad I don't mean bad like he would haul off and kill you. I'm talking about *baaaaaaad* like he cuh have fo' and five and six women and they all know about each other and don't care. Merie was the only one that cared. Would pick up the phone and slam it down— didn't care if it was his mama or sister

or aunt. No woman was allowed to call *her* phone for *him*. "Look here," she told me once when she showed up at my door looking for Willie, "you wastin' your time with Willie. He care the least about you." And she threw her fist up in my face— flinging up one finger at a time with a name attached. "I'm first, then Josie's next, then after that come Sellah, then Nelle, then them sisters Charlene and Danielle." She counted Charlene and Danielle as one. Then she started on the other hand. When she got to her pinkie, she said, "That's you, the littlest finger— dead last. He ain't studyin' you." I woulda slammed-shut the door in her face, but I couldn't take my eyes off it— she had one of them hard but pretty faces city women got. "You hear me," she said laughing in my face, "you dead last."

III.

I gave birth to a baby boy, Willie. I named him after his daddy 'cause he looked so much like him—looked so much like him you'd a-thought I didn't have nothin' to do with it. Willie Smith Underwood, Jr. is every bit of his daddy— down to his smile that ain't really no smile: more like just showing teeth. Willie only asked about his daddy but once and that was when he turned thirteen. He said, blowing out the candle on his birthday cake, "I must get my height from daddy. How tall was he?" "Was?" I said, "You talkin' like the man dead." And I told him about Willie's long legs and long fingers and long neck and how he always had to hunch over to pass through the doors in this house. "But," I said, "height don't make a man."

IV.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss Willie. I don't see why he had to go when I let him do what he wanted. I never confronted women the way Merie did and I damn sure didn't go 'round makin' like I was havin' his baby every other month like Charlene and Danielle did. Danielle was the main one carryin' on like she was pregnant all the time 'cause she knew Charlene was Willie's favorite out of the two. Danielle couldn't stand that. I heard once that Danielle hit Charlene in the mouth with a hammer when Charlene was sleepin'. I never got why she ain't go around hittin' all of Willie's other women in the mouths with a hammer. She act like her sister Charlene was the only

threat. Willie said to me one time that I needed to stand up for myself more. "What you mean?" I said 'cause I was wonderin' why he wanted me to stand up for myself when he had such a problem with Merie being all up his face. "You just sit here listenin' to me go on and on 'bout Merie," he said while I was washing dishes. He said, "Now if it was Merie and I was goin' on and on 'bout you, Merie woulda been broke one of them dishes." I almost broke the dish that was in my hand when he said that, but I don't like breakin' things. "I ain't Merie," I said smiling at the look he woulda had on his face had I turned around and thrown the cast iron skillet at him.

V.

Like I said, I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss Willie. But I don't go out my mind with missin' the way some of these other women do. Josie, I heard, almost drowned in the river when Willie took off for good and found fo' or five or six more women to replace her. Her folks say it was an accident, but Josie is a good swimmer, I know that 'cause my uncle taught her to swim and he say she was made for the water. I never miss Willie like that— enough to let a river be my grave. But sometimes I do miss him hard and I guess these are one of them times since I'm tellin' you about him. My sister say she don't get why I be missin' him so hard sometimes. She say, "Ulyssa, he really wasn't much," and I have to tell her, "Why you think all them women wanted him for?" And to that, my sister always says, "It ain't him, it's y'all." She say Willie go after a certain type of woman— women with too much heart and too little brain and too little backbone. "Before you," she always reminds me, "Willie tried to get wit' me, but he saw from the start that I wasn't no clay-woman." A clay-woman, my sister say, is a woman a man can mold to his liking. But when I say "What about Merie," my sister says, Merie was clay too but she liked to pretend that she wasn't. "Outta all of Willie's women," my sister said once when she caught me standing still in the middle of the supermarket, stuck in some Willie memory, "you were the one most made of clay."

