

Her Own Age

by Michelle McEwen

When mama was pregnant with me, this man, 'bout 70, came up to her in the supermarket and told her, "I wish my wife looked like you when she was carryin" and before you knew it, mama (with me in her belly) had moved in with the old man. He had a country house, she said, but it was near the city. She said the house was about as old as he was and she loved it— from the wood-framed windows to the heavy wood doors to the screen ones, too, to the garden on the side of the house to the splinters she got from the floors. He kept real maple syrup in the house, too, she said. Wanted to stay there forever, but by the time it came time for me to be born mama said the old man turned mean— started getting jealous and suspicious. He'd almost break his neck rushing, trying to get to the phone before she could. "Where are you going now?" he'd say every time he heard the screen door open. He could be sleep, but when he heard that door, mama says, he'd wake up and run to the door trying to block her from going out. This one time he blocked the door, mama shoved him and he fell down the front steps— "Nothing broke but his heart," mama says. And a few weeks after that that's when the old man kicked her out (with me in her belly).

The next week, at her Aunt Dexi's house, I came. Mama pushed once, mama pushed twice and there I was. She named me Dexi because her Aunt Dexi was so good to us then, but she called me (and still calls me) Willie after the old man because she loved him.

"Willie," she often says to me, "I wish you woulda known the old man— jealous as he wanted to be, but he sure did baby me. Took real good care of me." And then she smiles like Willie is in the room.

She's been talking about him lately because Willie died last week at the age of 86. Mama found out about it in the paper. She cried for a day or so after finding out and told everyone she knew about her time with Willie. After she heard the news of his passing, she invited some folks (all of them women) over and talked on and on about

him: "He used to call me Sugah," she said, "no R, just sugah." And the women leaned in close, listening— half of them wishing (I could see it in their eyes) that they had a man that cared enough to call them Sugah.

Then after talking about Willie, she'd start in on my father and how he wasn't worth a flip. Took off the day she told him the news of me. He packed up all his stuff while she was at work, she says, and she hasn't seen him since. The folks she had over just listened and nodded and said "mm hmm" and cried a little bit when mama would start crying. Well, Miss Lily didn't cry. She frowned most of the time while mama talked. When Miss Lily was leaving, I heard her say to Miss June: "I don't understand why she was messin with that old man in the first place. She was barely 25 and living with a man almost dead." Miss Lily called herself whispering, but I heard her. Miss June just smiled and said nothing. She knew I had heard Miss Lily so she didn't want to get caught agreeing because she knew as soon as they were gone, I'd run and tell mama what was said. Mama didn't care, though, when I told her about Miss Lily. She just said, "Ol' Closed-legs-Lily wouldn't understand" and she started cutting the obituary out of the paper like she was cutting coupons. I don't know how many papers she had with Willie's obituary in it, but I know it was more than five.

But there is something I heard Miss Lily say that I didn't tell mama. I started out to tell her, but then I decided not to. One time, in the grocery store, a few days after mama had had those women over, I overheard Miss Lily and Miss June (Miss June is always with her) talking in the fruit & vegetable aisle. Miss Lily said:

"First, it's the old man— next it's gonna be that young fool."

"What are you talking about, Miss Lily," Miss June said, looking around. She couldn't see me, so she wasn't worried this time about keeping quiet now.

"That young boy at the drugstore— one that runs the register," Miss Lily said. "He's barely out of his twenties good and I see Mary (that's my mama's name) giving him the eye." Miss Lily put her nose up to a peach and threw it back, then said:

"And he's been givin her the eye right back. I even saw him let her get away without paying for a bottle of nail polish remover. I started to say something, but I said to myself 'Lily this isn't your business.'" I had to laugh at that because everything is Miss Lily's business. I think they mighta heard me laughing, but that didn't stop them; the ladies went right on talking about mama and how she don't ever mess with anybody her own age. Miss Lily said, "Even Dexi's father wasn't close to Mary's age. He was a kid when Mary got hold of him." June just nodded and mm-hmm'd like she was humming a tune. Sometimes I got the feeling Miss June wanted to say something, but Miss Lily was doing most of the talking. Though Miss June *did* finally get a word in. And when she did, she said to Miss Lily:

"Now I don't really care for the things Mary does, but it ain't *our* business." Miss June frowned, disappointed with the peaches too. "But to tell you the truth Lily, I don't think age really matters none." Miss June said this almost in a whisper, but Miss Lily (of closed legs, but open ears) caught it and she roared with laughter— she had to hang on to her shopping cart to keep from falling over from her heavy *haas* and *hees*.

"June," Miss Lily said, "the heat must be getting to you." And she kept on laughing up and down the aisles.

