

Jackpot

by Michelle McEwen

Mama says she hit the jackpot with Mr. Lou 'cause when she met him he had a home and a car and a job and a jar full of money (for emergencies he said). Mama made him put that money in the bank, though. When mama met Mr. Lou, she had me too. I was going on four and Mr. Lou never had a girl-child to raise so he loved me first time he saw me mama says. Mr. Lou calls me babydoll even though I'm ten now. Before he goes to work in the early morning, he whispers see you later babydoll into my room. I hear it most times 'cause most times I'm awake at that hour, too, just lying in bed waiting for mama to say get up and get ready for school. Mama makes Mr. Lou lunch to take to work and he says all the guys at work are jealous of what mama feeds him. Sweet potato pie along with two sandwiches in his lunchbox one day almost caused a fight down at his job. One of the fellows, Tim, had nothing to eat and he was gonna pay Mr. Lou for the slice of pie and even though Mr. Lou knew there was more pie at home, he wouldn't sell it to Tim. "Tim called me the N word of course," Mr Lou had said. "They always tend to when they get mad. Even after all this time." Mama thought Mr. Lou should have sold it, but she didn't tell him that. She just shook her head and rubbed his back.

Mr. Lou likes to work and mama hates working. Lucky for mama, he doesn't like for his women to work. He can sit up all night talking to mama and still get up real early and leave for work with a smile. "My daddy was like that," mama told me once. "Your daddy, though, can't stand work. Just like me." Mama doesn't talk about my daddy too much except when she's putting him down. Mr. Lou your daddy she likes to say over and over as if those words are magic and gonna make me Mr. Lou's flesh and blood. He's a good man, but he's not my daddy— I say this to myself and to my cousins but never to my mama. One time my oldest cousin, Vetta (she's in her twenties), told my mama she don't care how much Mr. Lou worked and saved and spent on me and mama. He too ugly for me cousin Vetta had

said and mama just shrugged. Mama didn't yell or haul off and hit Vetta the way she would've done before Mr. Lou came into our lives. I knew she had wanted to, though, 'cause mama hates the word ugly. "Nobody ugly," mama likes to tell me. "Everybody got something to them that somebody like. Not just they face." And Mr. Lou has working blood. That is the something of his that mama likes and I like it too 'cause my uniforms at school be the cleanest and the sharpest and the braids in my hair always fresh. When kids at school say Mr. Lou is ugly, I tell them: "If that's so, why your mama always looking at him in the grocery store?" I know it's not Mr. Lou they are looking at, though; it be our cart filled to the top with meat and sweets and fruit and juice.

