

Plum-Woman

by Michelle McEwen

Mama's got a name made for trouble. That's what the meat-man down at the store said. "Vyla," he said, "now that's a troublemaker's name." (He said troublemaker as if it was the same as a shoemaker). When he had finished up slicing mama's ham he said, "How many hearts you done broke, Vyla?" Mama didn't answer; she just said thank you for the ham, told me to come on, and walked off. I could have answered for her, though. Could have said "three" and named them, too— daddy, Jasper, and Clementine.

Now daddy had it coming. He let mama run all over him. When we had but one car in the garage, he always let mama have it to go wherever she needed to go. He'd take the bus or walk. "Vyla," he'd say, "I got that car for you." Knowing full well he bought the car for himself 'cause I was with him when he bought it. He had told the car-man to give him somethin' in red. "I love red," he told him and they went up and down the lot looking for the red that suited him— not wine-red, not blood-red, but cherry-red. He knew it when he saw it and that's the car he bought. He drove that car but twice— once off the lot and once to take my mama to the hospital when she had this fever that wouldn't go down. Fool, that's what the people in the neighborhood called him— behind his back and to his face. Didn't he know, they said, what all Vyla was doing around town in that car? Didn't he know, they said, she had another fellow in the passenger seat most times? And sometimes they had even seen that fellow behind the wheel— driving daddy's cherry-red car like it was his. But daddy would just say how town talk was just that— talk. But it wasn't just talk. Once, when I was standing outside the candy store with a boyfriend of mine, I saw mama fly by in daddy's car. Then a few minutes later, she flew by again with Jasper in the car. Jasper was the fellow the people in the neighborhood tried to tell daddy about. My boyfriend said, "Ain't that your mama?" And all I did was nod. My boyfriend said, "But that ain't your daddy in the car with her— that's Jasper

McGhee!" And he went on tellin' me how Jasper was the football coach for the high school two towns over and how Jasper was gonna turn that team around. "So!" I said and something in my stomach made me spit out the gum I was chewing. "So," my boyfriend said "if your mama's messing around with Coach Jasper, your father don't stand no kind of a chance!"

And he was right because when my daddy found out about Jasper, it was too late— mama was already round-&-radiant with Jasper's child. Daddy had tried to put his foot down— had said, "Vyla, I'm sick of this foolishness." And he buried the car keys in the backyard as if the car was the real problem. But mama just smiled and said, "You act like Jasper don't own a car." My father was through with her after that. He dug up the keys out the back yard and left. Before he left, he kissed me and told me to look after mama 'cause "she needs lookin' after." But I didn't have to look after her on my own; Jasper moved in shortly after daddy left and he and mama were always off at the doctor's office 'cause mama was always complainin' about being so sick. "I can't do nothing but lay up," she'd say and point the finger at Jasper. She got sick of Jasper *real* quick, so he was with us but only for a little while. Mama got to the point where she couldn't even stand the sight of his face. "Look at him," she said to me once while Jasper was out in yard mowing the lawn, "don't he gotta face like bruised fruit?" And she laughed. I wouldn't have laughed like I did if it wasn't the truth. She put Jasper out shortly after that and that boy who used to be my boyfriend said Coach Jasper wasn't the same after my mama had got hold to him. No sooner had Jasper gone, mama's roundness and radiance had gone too. "What I want with another *you*," she told me while we ate breakfast and that was that. A few weeks later, I told mama how I missed her belly. Her eyes got *real* big and I almost thought she'd hit me, but she didn't; she just hugged me and started crying— real tears, too! And mama hardly cried. She said that she had missed her belly, too. But that didn't last long 'cause in no time, she was wiping her eyes and laughing, saying, "Supposin' the baby had been a boy, huh?" And

there were no more tears. She said, "And what I want with a boy taking after Jasper Mcgee with that bruised fruit skin of his!" I didn't laugh this time; mama did and she kept on laughing, too, until her dinner got cold. But she was sad about the baby, I could tell—every day, she'd be on the phone with her friend Clementine talking low and gloomy-like. Once I overheard her on the kitchen phone talking to Clementine. She said, "Clem, you know, I have these dreams about what I done..." And in no time, Clementine would be sitting at our kitchen table rubbin' mama's back and listening. Sometimes, she'd come over to fix up mama's hair.

"You can't be sitting around the house like this, Vyla," Clementine said to my mama one night.

"Why not," mama said and Clementine would go on and on about how mama never used to let herself look like this— this unkempt, this slouched over.

"Ever since I've known you," Clementine said, "you'd put on lipstick just to sit around the house— this ain't you!" And she fixed mama up and dragged her out the house.

"You gon' be alright here by yourself," Clementine said to me and I nodded and said "Yes ma'am" like I was told to call her. Clementine didn't look like a ma'am, though. She was a slim girl with slim fingers and slim, long, feet. She wasn't bad looking, but she never had a man. Mama said it was because "Clem is real picky, you know?"

Well, when they got back the next morning (goin' on somethin' like six in the morning), mama was all better. They came in the house loud as morning roosters— waking me up. So I joined them in the kitchen. You should have seen mama showing me the moves she and Clementine did on the dance floor— they were hand and hand and leaning all over each other.

"So y'all went dancing," I said, having nothing else to say.

"Mmm hmm," mama said, "and can't nobody dance like Clem!" At first I thought she had said *him* and I was going to say, "him who?" But she said Clem. I made a face and said:

"Mama, what y'all doin' dancin' together? I bet y'all looked funny."

"Naw," Clementine said, "we didn't look funny. We were the best dancers out there."

"Mmm hmm," mama said and she grabbed Clementine by the waist and started dancing to the tune Clementine was humming. They were drunk, too, so I left them in the kitchen dancing while I, up for good, went to bathe. All throughout the day, though, Clementine and mama couldn't stay away from each other and Clementine would be all up under mama like she was her man—tucking mama's hair behind her ear and whispering in it. She started staying over nights. Sometimes, they'd go out dancing. Sometimes, they'd stay in and watch a late night movie in the living room. Then it got so Clementine was never leaving. She'd be here for breakfast, go to work, and come back for dinner and stay. We ain't have but two bedrooms and Clementine wasn't sleeping on the sofa downstairs. I don't know what mama thought I thought, but I know woman-woman love when I see it. I just kept my mouth shut the whole time Clementine was with us. I made like I was too young to know what was goin' on. I thought, this one day, Mama might sit me down and tell me what-all was goin' on between her and Clementine. This one day, we were on the front porch while Clementine was at work, and mama sang a little ditty about her Clem being as sweet as Clementines (the fruit).

"You made that up?" I said

"Mmm hmm," mama said, smiling. "I didn't even know I was singin' out loud."

"You must be happy, then," I said.

"Sorta," mama said and closed her eyes. I left her on the porch—that ditty stuck in my head. Something about that ditty got under my skin, made me miss daddy and even miss Jasper. My old boyfriend stopped by one day and said, "Your mama messin' with Clementine?" And I told him no. I said, "I don't know what you're talkin' about." He didn't believe me, though. He just laughed and said that folks were talking and that Jasper McGhee was going crazy over the idea of being replaced by Clementine. "He don't feel too good about that," my old boyfriend said, looking back at me, as he

walked down the street. I knew folks were talking about mama and Clementine— the same way they talked about Jasper drivin' daddy's car. But this was different; they had laughed a little at Jasper behind the wheel of daddy's cherry-red car. They weren't laughing now. They talked about mama and Clementine in the grocery store with frowns on their faces. Even the meat-man joined in on the talk, saying to this one woman: "I hear Clem got Vyla wearing a ring." And that was no lie. Mama *was* wearing a ring— nothing fancy, just this gold band on her ring finger. Clementine brought it home one day and mama just put it on. Just like that. But I knew that ring would be the end of things. Mama don't like being owned and, to me, that ring was Clementine trying to own mama. She said that's what Jasper was trying to do when he slipped that baby in her. "He was trying to *own* me," she had said. And so I told the meat-man, when my number had been called and it was my time to place my order, I said, "Nothing's goin' on between mama and Clementine." And he laughed this laugh that told me he thought I was just a young'un who didn't know woman-woman love when I saw it. But I only said what I said because I knew soon what was goin' on between mama and Clementine would be over. 'Cause I knew mama would get sick of Clementine the way, say, plum-people, who, trying somethin' new, get sick of peaches after a while. And mama is a plum-woman— that is to say, if plum were men. And I was right because no sooner had that ring gone on, it came off. She wore it for about a month and then one morning she told Clementine she had dropped the ring down the sink. Clementine got down on her hands and knees and unscrewed the pipe and searched for the ring. She hollered for me to "get in here and help me look for this ring!" I said "Yes ma'am" and helped her.

"Ain't no ring here," she said and I knew then mama had probably tossed that ring in the trash somewhere. "You see a ring anywhere?"

"No ma'am," I said with the biggest smile on my face. They fought long and hard the rest of the day— Clementine accusing mama of lying about the ring and mama hollering that she *did* drop the ring down the sink.

"How can a ring just up and disappear, huh?" Clementine said and when she left the house, she was shaking with anger; her face wet with tears.

Mama's cousin Lew came to stay with us after that and he brought his gun. He didn't like what mama had said about how angry Clementine was when she had left and he felt like Clementine might could do somethin'. He told me to stay away from Clementine if I saw her in the street. Clementine didn't bother us, though, but cousin Lew stayed just the same. I don't know if Lew was really mama's cousin or just somebody she called cousin, but he stayed with us and kept his gun on one of the pantry shelves. He called that gun "Clem" 'cause he said it was only to be used on Clementine. Something in his eyes told me he'd use it on her even if Clementine had just come over to pick up something she had forgot— like that bra she left hanging on the door knob on mama's closet. And it's a good thing Clementine never did show up for that bra; I don't think Lew cared too much for what went on between Clementine and mama. I think, maybe, someone sent him up here to watch mama 'cause I heard mama and Lew talking one morning in the kitchen. Mama had said, "You don't have to worry about me, Lew, I like my lovers thick-necked and wide-backed." Lew laughed at this and as soon as mama was gone out the kitchen, Lew got on the kitchen phone and told somebody on the other line about how he had knocked that nonsense right out of mama.

