

North of Center

by Mimi Vaquer

Paulette lived on the east side on Paulette Avenue. Mama dropped me off when we wanted to play Barbies. Her neighborhood was a little green lily pad in a swamp of blight and disrepair. A ghetto moat ringed around those three fancy blocks like a first line of defense, but sometimes it felt more like an army closing in. We played on the south side of the street and kept our eyes tethered to her house.

"May I just have water instead?" I asked Mrs. Kahn, handing back the tepid can of kosher Coca-Cola that tasted bad enough to sacrifice my good manners.

One cracked, milky ice cube floated in my water from the tap. "Ya'll come in when you want some crackers," she said as we left her standing with pink-tipped bare feet and ice tinkling in her 3 o'clock gin.

At night we slept in the sheets on the floor with all the pillows pulled from Paulette's bed. We got her small TV down from the shelf and fell asleep to its black and white flicker just inches from our heads. So many noises from the street, noises from the house stealing my sleep, and the feet of her father thudding through the hallway.

We woke to her bedroom door bending with the force of his boot. He drank booze, Paulette said. The word puddled out of her lips and sounded both grown up and baby at the same time. *The cow says moo. The Daddy says booze.* He kicked the door harder, and we kicked the fabric away from our feet. We scampered to the opposite side of the room and listened with groggy ears to him scream about the mess we had left on the patio.

Mrs. Kahn wailed from outside the door, "Just leave em baby please please." Please, she said. *Please.* We pulled the bedroom window up quietly as we heard his steps chasing her down the hall. Paulette stepped deftly to the ground in a worn spot between the bushes and helped me over the sill.

We walked to the west. We crossed the street to get there. The houses were sleeping in shadows that played with the flecks of paint chipping away from the wood. Two cars passed like predators, wolves, bright white eyes for headlights. The Poor Willie's was open down the street, so we sat in its light and leaned our backs against the building.

I didn't say much. Paulette studied the shape of her shoes. A man in a spray-painted truck bought us Cokes, real Cokes, and I pledged to light a candle for him to the Blessed Mother if I ever made it home.

In the morning, we found our Barbies in a box on the sidewalk. A pot of chili had been dumped on top, and cigarette butts stuck to the food.

I didn't tell my mother what had happened. She picked me up and took me down the street for fish sticks at Captain D's. At home, I slept through the afternoon and quietly mourned Paulette and Malibu Barbie when I woke up. I looked out my window at the azaleas lining the side of the house, and I thanked my father silently for the fullness of their size and the violet fervor of the blossoms that caressed the glass. *The cow says moo.* I thought. *The cow says moo.*

