

O Promise Me

Blast-furnace heat—the cottage is still the way I remember it. Momma used to say, "It's hotter'n fish grease up in here." Momma never was much for flowery phrases.

The house and yard are in full sun. Daddy used to say, "Shade trees are for rich folk. You want shade, go out back and lay under one of those hedges." Daddy never was much for amenities.

I remember growing up here, year after year, saying to myself, "This is the *last* summer I will ever spend in this God-forsaken oven of a house." I wasn't much for accurate prophecy.

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Momma sat bolt upright in her bed and called me. I padded from my cot in the corner to her four-poster bed. "What do you need, Momma?"

We were alone. Daddy moved out as soon as Momma got sick enough to require constant care. "Your Momma needs a woman to take care of her," he said. "I'll just be in the way."

She clutched my arm. "Promise me, Vanessa!" she said. As she fell back onto her pillow, her voice dropped to an urgent whisper. "You gotta promise me. Don't let him.." And she was gone.

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I head straight down the hall to the kitchen--just like always. Momma used to say, "Girl, much as you eat, totin' all that food around must be what keeps you so skinny." Momma always knew how to make me smile.

The kitchen is a wreck: appliances, plumbing fixtures, even cabinets—all ripped out. Daddy used to say, "Lazy nigras around here cart off anything that's not chained up or locked down." Daddy always had a racial identity problem.

Standing at the denuded sink, I stare through the window into the back yard through a haze of tears. Just like Momma used to do, when I told her that we could just pack our bags and run away. I always had a problem facing reality.

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The evening of the day Momma died, I walked along the shore, through the heavy, humid island air to see about a ticket on the next morning's ferry. The ocean water was warm. The heat was

oppressive. I was 16 and I prayed. "Lord Jesus! What am I going to do now?"

The funeral home had sent a hearse right away to take Momma's body. Reverend Johnson told me, "Vanessa, your Momma was a saint. We'll see she gets put away right. You go get a ticket out of here before your Daddy comes back and tries to stop you." I cursed. "Daddy! May we both rot in hell before you ever touch me again!"

I barely had time to clear out Momma's clothes and pack our things into boxes before my loving Daddy and his new high-yellow child-bride moved into the cottage. I cried. "Momma! I'm so sorry. I did everything I could."

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I look down at the deeply discolored kitchen floorboards. The rust-colored stains hadn't come out, despite repeated scrubbing. Momma used to say, "Honey, blood will tell." She meant that that family ties are strong, but her words were darkly prophetic and true in ways she did not intend.

Living room, kitchen, bedroom, bath, and closet/mini-bedroom—with a little paint, some patching, a few replacement fixtures, maybe I can make this hellhole bring in some money. Daddy used to tell me, "Remember, Vanessa--waste not, want not." His business sense should serve him well in the mainland penitentiary.

I turn from the window and face the kitchen wall opposite the sink. A wedding picture still hangs there; nobody is interested in stealing a dime-store shadow-framed picture of a baby-doll bride gazing lovingly into Daddy's eyes. I always told Momma, "I'm too smart and too mean to ever get married." Daddy's bride had been neither.

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The day after my birthday, I rode the ferry to the mainland and Aunt Coralie's home.

I grieved for Momma. I grieved for my baby-doll stepmother and her truncated childhood. I even grieved for the loving Daddy I never had.

After they put Daddy away, every year on my birthday, I revisited my grief by returning to my childhood island home.

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I stare at the picture. Surely baby-doll deserves better than to be ripped from her own kitchen wall and crushed into demolition rubble. Momma always said, "The Lord watches over fools and babies." Daddy's bride had been both.

So I take the picture from the wall, pull out the photograph and drop the flimsy frame and backing to the floor, where they clatter, bounce, and break into pieces. Daddy always said, "Buy cheap, replace often." For Daddy, that was not a warning; it was a way of life.

As I turn to leave, I step on something small and hard--a tiny gingham-wrapped object nestled inside a note written in a childish scrawl.

"Lord hide this and keep it safe and fix it so Vanessa can get her Momma ring back. He took it right off her dead finger and gave it to me but I cant stand to wear it. Make him not notice that its gone so he wont get mad and hurt me please Jesus name amen."

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The ferry had been halfway to the mainland before I remembered Momma's ring--her only material possession. The heavy, elegant gold band had been in her family for generations.

That ring was the one thing she wanted me to have. Keeping it safe from Daddy was the one promise she wanted me to keep. I had not.

Daddy's child-bride did what I failed to do.

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"Rest in peace, Momma," I whispered.

I slip the ring onto my finger and walk out the cottage front door. No need to lock it. I won't be back.