

GODMOTHER TEA

By Selena Anderson | September 3, 2019

“Duppy Treez” (2013), by Ebony G. Patterson. Mixed media on paper. 78 ½ x 63 inches. From the Vascovitz Family Collection, Seattle. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicag

Just like my mama. She rolled up with a gift: a life-size mirror edged by baroque curling leaves, with slender gold feet that somehow supported both its shimmering weight and mine. My mother has a knack for messy presents. Day passes to the gym, Merry Maids coupons, flat irons with built-in conditioner. This, however, was especially rude. A mirror would only reflect me, plus all my sulky auras, plus the cultivated environment that had drawn me this way.

My mother had refused help as she dragged the mirror into my apartment herself, claiming it had the power of making the place look bigger. But I didn’t want anything of mine to look bigger. The center of my apartment was empty, as spotless as a bald spot, and I liked that. That was my choice. I’d gotten used to that. But now my mother’s charity of inherited furniture crowded the room. There was a Chesterfield sofa, end tables with bloated glass lamps, a dining table with a fleet of cane-back chairs, and a roll-top desk that wore a pair of pink soft-grip dumbbells like a tiara. None of this stuff was mine, but at the same time, it was all I had.

I know a lot of people just starting out don’t have anything, so I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but to my eye the mirror only doubled what I had never really wanted to begin with. Now there was hardly any space to move around. I could never tell my mother this—especially as she was positioning it between the windows and cleaning the glass with newspaper in quick, squealing arcs—so I’m telling you, it was all beginning to be a bit much.

But since the mirror was standing there, I’d sometimes creep up late at night to wordlessly articulate a complaint I’d been having with myself. The objects of my apartment looked on as I stood balletically, searching my figure for bad news. My reflection belonged to too many other people—mainly the people who used to own all this stuff. Through me, my ancestors gave eyes to

my jacked-up third position. I'd switch to tree pose, clutching a glass of rosé to my chest like a good-luck charm. My dead relatives studied me in loving disapproval. I'd smile back until it became impossible to recognize myself.

Even my people who are still living don't let me suffer the way I want to. A lot of them, much older and less bothered than myself, express pride in the way I'm turning out. My mother's friends talk about me like I was a dish that was difficult to get just right, but the special ingredients of an elite social circle, good home training, and private education have turned me into a well-spoken young woman full of potential.

After my mother had given me the mirror, we walked down the street to a cafeteria in my neighborhood. At the table I tried explaining to her what it feels like every time a member of her generation pays me a compliment. "It never feels good," I said, "when a compliment is self-reflective."

"But that's what a compliment is, Joy," she said. "A compliment is a reflection of what I see in you that I wish I had."

My mother was still giving me eyes, trying, like everybody else in the room, to dissolve sugar in iced tea. She was still stuck on "self-reflective" and what it meant for me to use a word like that in her presence. Usually my mother comes right out and says so if she thinks I'm sounding too white, but when she senses my mood has joined us, pulling up a chair like an unexpected guest, she acts totally unlike herself and holds back. It doesn't make sense that a simple act of decency like this would make matters worse, but even these days, a fact is still a fact.

It was April and I liked to be alone. But whenever I sensed that my apartment was beginning to get hold of me, I'd walk around the neighborhood to enjoy the good weather. I live down south in a city whose economy probably should not have outlasted the twentieth century, although

folks around here celebrate this accident as proof of their regional superiority. The highways we've built are among the greatest curiosities of the world. The haze from nuclear power plants lends the skyline a romantic look, like a vintage postcard. The air is so thick with the stench of gasoline and donuts that a deep breath can make you shed one hysterical tear. I could say hello to passing strangers, but only on defense. I could try and meditate, but I was already self-conscious about being out of touch with my community. In real time, the best solution was to walk back inside.

I'd pass by the mirror and see fragments of other women. The way I bent my wrists or licked the inside of my mouth favored ones I hadn't thought of and who could never have anticipated me. A blink of the eye revealed some dormant part of my personality, some no-longer-complete person who clutched her pearls at my audacity, the blasé way I naturally stood squandering my opportunities. Another quick glance revealed the godmother. For a long time she had been waiting on me to acknowledge her, but before we could lock eyes she was gone.

The godmother is like an ancestor who never really left. Someone who's here even when they're not. The godmother is what happens when somebody asks your name and you suddenly can't remember. When it's gorgeous outside and you work up the nerve to be part of something but not enough nerve to brush your hair, that's the godmother. Maybe you stay up too late and are tempted to give yourself completely to unrequited obsessions. That's the godmother's doing, too. When life speeds through its continuum without pushing you forward, she starts to look your way. You have to be careful with this familiar face. She'll have you batting your eyes and practicing your smile.

One evening, I was alone in my apartment impersonating a vibe. I was fixing a dinner of cachapas and instant coffee when I noticed the godmother wanted to have a chitchat. She conveyed this request by cutting off the power a few times. Because of her, I had to walk across the courtyard and behind the building to the fuse box to turn it back on. After a while I got tired of that and pulled out one of the cane chairs.

I thought it was kind of me. "So kind," said the godmother. "You ought to try kindness twice a day, seven days a week."

“But I barely have the energy to cook for myself,” I said, and I immediately felt used because now I’d tossed the words into the air where you could really breathe them. The godmother glanced around at the things of my apartment and when her eyes finally settled on me, they leveled a little as she decided yes, I belonged here, too.

“Can you give me a synopsis of what’s going on?” she said.

It was too humiliating to talk about. A few interrelated developments kept bludgeoning my life in a way that was turning me into a vagabond. Recently my best friend Nicole had revealed in the classiest way possible that she was about to exit our fifteen-year friendship—by not saying anything. I reacted by latching on to my André Simpson, the man who had neglected to propose marriage when I’d felt the time was right. I was hanging around, trying to convince André—where I had failed with Nicole—that we still had things to talk about. These were the only people I’d chosen, if you know what I mean, and the prospect of losing them caused a brittle, shivering thing to come to life and crawl out of me. Also—and this was embarrassingly typical of me—my driver’s license was so badly expired that now it was actually becoming difficult to prove that I was myself.

“Ain’t nothing going on but the weather,” I said.

The godmother shook her head at my attempt to sound real. “I see you gone be a lot more work than I expected,” she said.

She leaned asymmetrically in her chair, keeping time in a pair of gold slippers. She wore a housecoat tessellated with hummingbirds sipping from impatiens. Her pocketbook of leggy cigarettes dangled at the edge of the table, just within reach. The godmother was a slinky woman, still pretty in a violent sort of way. Her face was narrow and angled, her skull crested back in a tall forehead, her waved-up hair glistened with mineral oil and water.

She stood and walked around rubbing her elbow as though physically injured by my tastes. My struggling plants. My assembly of crockpots. My cheap rosé stacked on the counter like an anemic blood bank. “Now, did you mean for your apartment to be so ugly?”

“Oh, no. That’s the style.”

The godmother scratched the length of her neck. “What style is that?”

Eying my cachapas, she asked if the cook was stressed out. Prior to her interruption, I’d been doing ambitious things with a box of cornbread mix. I pushed the plate her way, and she inspected the contents, careful not to touch anything.

“It’s something wrong with people who cook food they can’t even pronounce,” she said.

I explained that I liked to dabble in world cuisines. Regular food gave me broke thoughts.

“You only want something new,” she said, “because you’re tired of living.”

I couldn’t tell if she was talking about me or about people like me, and I was afraid to ask for clarification. I mean, I was afraid to hear the answer. I knew the answer.

The godmother made herself at home in my kitchen, whipping up a replacement dish of cornbread casserole that filled the apartment with a golden smell. “You’re tired of living,” she said, drawing a cigarette from her pocketbook, “because something has tricked you into believing that life is long.”

“Absurd.” I scoffed like a lifelong scoffer. “My beliefs don’t trick me.”

“That would make you very different from other people.” She sat cross-legged on the counter, breathing minty smoke. She could make rings, hearts, and moving boxes like it was no big deal. “You got to get ready to suffer because you’re different.”

“Well, my difference ain’t paying off,” I said. “Not monetarily. Not spiritually.”

I’d always wanted to become an artist, but no galleries would respond to the nudes I’d sent them. I spent most of my days begging on behalf of a museum

I kind of believed in, where I also had a side hustle teaching rich kids how to draw a circle. All my money went to rent and dead people's clothes.

“So, lower those expectations if you got to be happy. You don't have to change your heart,” said the godmother, “just your heart's desire.” Her remark burned. I hadn't known that changing what I wanted in this world was even an option.

The godmother glided around my kitchen with an air of tough elegance that the best schools never could teach me. She fixed fried pork chops and collard greens, and then stood back, judging mildly as I ate. The extravagance made me laugh with shame. I can't even tell you how delicious everything was. If I could, you'd just cry and cry.

All week I'd been begging to be included, so on Friday night, Nicole invited me to a dinner party she was obligated to go to anyway. It was one of those gatherings where nobody knew each other but told jokes and flirted like they believed they had done the right thing by agreeing to spend the time together. You had to walk up an oaky boulevard and enter a gate code to even get inside the neighborhood. Both sides of the street were lined by mansions in a variety of neocolonial and European styles, and every tree glowed in its own floodlight. Like always, Nicole led the way until we reached one particular mansion like all the other mansions except for the fact that it was perfect. The front door was simple and Shaker with chipping shellac and seemed like an apology for the house's decadence. Once inside, we separated almost immediately.

We were on the verge of losing touch forever, but before she became the seasonal homie, Nicole had been my best friend. When we were kids, she had been my partner in ballet and spades, and in junior high she gave me an in-depth understanding of the dozens, probably because she cared more about my self-esteem than I did. But what made us last was that when we were

together, it felt like we were speaking a special language. Looking back, I think that maybe I had just learned to speak her way. I hung on to every turn of phrase and rhythm, because there was so much hope in them, the way her words sailed out and up with such poise and without fear. My mama didn't even sound like that. Then Nicole and I got to the point in our friendship where we didn't have to talk at all. We kept up these long silences like talking out loud was an unevolved thing, like we'd arrived at this new place of understanding and feeling.

Actually, the new place for Nicole was that she got a real job and a fiancé. I got furniture. Once every new moon, I'd catch some uplifting article about a local dance troupe visiting the National Mall and I'd remember to miss her. When I begged for it, we'd present ourselves as the same girls from before. I felt like the strain of trying to be our old selves showed only just a little, but Nicole disagreed.

In the entryway, under a blown-glass chandelier that looked like a bunch of squashes tumored together, some fool was playing Spice Girls on the violin. The host went around shushing people, trying to shame them into ironic appreciation, and if I hadn't found the dessert tray, I could've cried bitter tears. When it was over, I went to the table to complain to Nicole, but she hadn't noticed it was a dumb performance. She eyed my dress and introduced me to everyone, admitting to each of them that I was a lifelong friend. A man at the head of the table kept doing annoying things like holding up a plate of chickpeas smothered in yogurt and giving a detailed explanation of the dish, and people were listening like he had a punch line on hand or something. The people seated around him were good-looking and miserable. I drank champagne until I felt close to everyone.

I attempted to coerce Nicole into interpreting a dream for me. In it I invite a woman into my apartment who scolds, laughs, and cooks for me so that I can get better or just die—I can never tell which and that's why I needed Nicole to clarify.

“You dream of the same things,” she said, like I was the only one, like it was a bad thing.

“Maybe the same problems,” I said. Then I described a scenario where versions of my former self judged me through the bedroom mirror. Of course, I didn’t mention the godmother. I didn’t want her rude ass popping up when I’d barely got invited myself.

“You on the computer too much,” said Nicole. Someone passed her a plate of intricately painted chocolates that she rationed with me only. We were supposed to take one and pass them down.

“Only because I’m heartbroken,” I said, “and failing. I’m not sure if we can take it anymore.” I was speaking vaguely about everything, so when Nicole said she knew what I meant, firecrackers went off in my face and hands.

“I was just thinking about that the other day,” said Nicole. “I was wondering if I had the heart to do this work again. Like, could my heart break one more time? Then I came across the website of a woman who fostered medically fragile babies. Apparently, when a newborn is terminal, the parents can give up their rights if they know they won’t be able to handle the medical bills. These newborns have nobody, so this woman would bring them home. Every now and then one would get better and be adopted, but most of them died in her living room. After about the tenth dead baby, her little son asked when they were getting another one. The mom told him it was too hard on her, she just couldn’t take it. And her son replied, ‘So, we aren’t going to help any more babies because you can’t take it?’”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” I said. I looked Nicole up and down. “That story reminded you of me?”

“It reminded me of a lot of things,” she said. She turned a cocoa-dusted truffle between her fingers as though contemplating my future. “When you think of quitting on yourself,” she said, “just remember the mom and the babies.” But I was stuck on the little son who couldn’t get enough of baby-death, who had also put their sad life in perspective. Without him the mother never would have noticed.

People kept coming through the door until a party was in full swing, but I wasn’t about to give up my seat to dance to some techno. Nicole left me to talk to her other friends, and a blond woman sat down roughly in the vacant

chair. I thought it was rude to sit down like that and tried to scold her with looks, but she was on the phone, talking in a shaky monologue, saying, “If someone storms in here and shoots up this party, I bet you’d be so happy. More than happy!”

I popped the last piece of chocolate into my mouth, watching. Across the room, Nicole was explaining a complicated point with her hands. When she caught me looking, she seemed annoyed, and I knew that if someone stormed in to shoot up the party as the blond person had prophesized, Nicole’s feelings toward me wouldn’t change.

“It may be over between us,” the blond person said, “but I just have to say, right now, you are nullifying my entire life.”

I turned away. I didn’t like to hear somebody’s life get nullified. People have the right to withhold their attention. I’ve done it. And when André did it to me, I’d believed I was special. My heartache was delicious. It turned me into an outcast. I would cling to him until he said something devastating like, *Take it easy*.

This Igbo dude in a velvet blazer kept edging in, so I obliged him. He was so cocoa-battered up in embroidered slippers, smelling like a group gift for the Messiah, that I fell in love for at least fifteen seconds. Chudi said he was a doctor and filled my glass with cough syrup and ginger ale, which isn’t even the recipe. We engaged in some almost dangerous banter that made my head swim—but his bootsy syrup could’ve given the same effect.

I continued talking to this man in code until too much time had gone by. I could tell he wasn’t that attracted to me, but I was feeling too good to think about it. I made it obvious that I’d lost interest, too—I was happy that it had worked out this way—but this hurt his feelings somehow. And he became typical, avenging his feelings by calling me names and saying I wanted to be a white girl.

“You just a mumu, anyway,” Chudi said, leaning close enough to lick my ear. “I’m so tired of bitches like you. You just want to do everything that Hula-Hooping white girl does, but you can’t.”

I lied. I said, “I can Hula-Hoop.” I didn’t know what he was talking about until I looked in the living room where, sure enough, that same blonde had attracted a crowd by dancing as though she was trying to keep an invisible Hula-Hoop in swift rotation.

I didn’t appreciate the way these folks partied. They liked to give you what you needed for the time being and then rob you because it made them feel intelligent or something. I looked around for my friend. Nicole stood between a man and a woman both dressed in black. Since Nicole was wearing black too, they looked like they had come to this party together. The man and the woman nodded with their mouths open, like Nicole was saying fascinating things. She was becoming one of them, and I was becoming the wrong version of myself.

“Intelligent robbery,” I said. Inexplicably, I laughed hard at my misfortune.

Some people, like myself, who weren’t supposed to be at the party had noticed the large amounts of wine left out in the open. Little by little, people started stealing the wine, swiping two and three bottles each. When I said I was ready to leave, Nicole didn’t seem surprised and she did not agree to leave with me. I started to beg. Then one of her new friends scrambled over to guilt people into returning the wine. The new friend was the one who’d invited Nicole in the first place, and I could tell by the way Nicole tolerated her earnest appeals that she was going to leave when the new friend said so.

Cool, I thought, I’ll go home without my seasonal friend. But I will never, ever, ever feel bad about stealing luxury goods from rich people.

In the mirror my ancestors wagged their fingers as I pulled a wine bottle out of my big purse. At 2 A.M., I called the man I’d been meaning to repossess and since he didn’t seem upset to hear from me, I told him, “I’m getting drunk as fuck because of you.”

“You been doing that,” André said.

A shaky laugh that could’ve belonged to any number of my ancestors rattled out of me. I laughed to hide the suspicion that I was doing something horrible to myself, that gesture by gesture I was making myself disappear. Maybe that’s why I told André one of my secret resolutions, which was to pawn everything I owned.

I waited for somebody else to chime in, but it seemed he had excused himself to the other room. I’d never met Porsche, his new girl, though on occasion she would address me indirectly, pitching her ghetto proverbs just within earshot. Whenever I succeeded in getting André on the line, I could hear her husky contralto in the background saying something like, “All shut eyes ain’t sleep.” And, “You don’t apologize to a roach once you spray it.” It takes skill to get to that level, years if you study really hard.

But despite Porsche’s gifts and what a new body like hers can do for a man’s self-esteem, André went to the other room for me, to let me annoy him into daylight. It was all the reassurance I needed to act a fool.

I didn’t get the chance to beg him to come back to me, but I told some lies like I always do when I sense somebody doesn’t like me. I lied like I was genuinely happy at the simple accident of being alive. I talked until I felt like I was living in someone else’s idea. André got quiet, probably struggling to remember why at one point in time he had wanted me bad. Then I pretended things were getting serious with the African dude who’d called me a mumu.

“Joy,” André said, doing something magical to my name. I felt a surge of hope that things would turn around. “Do you really believe in the things you say?” he said. He said I needed to take it easy. He said again that he probably would have stayed with me had he not met Porsche. “And in the first place,” he said, “you’re the one who declined me.” That was how his simple ass put it: “declined.” I wish I’d thought to say it first.

I twisted my hair and put on a bathrobe. I started to call Nicole but we didn’t speak the same language anymore, and I didn’t want to field her questions about the stolen wine. I fell back onto the groaning iron bed my mama and them had dragged over from Mississippi. I told myself that begging my

people of the impossible and staying up too late with my bad attitudes had earned me conversations like the ones I kept having with the godmother.

“So you mean to tell me that you don’t have anything to do with it?” Her voice was almost familiar.

I turned to the mirror and something inside started to crumble, grain by grain. This robe was supposed to make me look like a rich wizard, but you can never trust the colors you see on the computer. I just looked like my dead aunties. “I’m tired,” I said. “I’m tired of everything.”

“Refusing to learn can do that to a person,” she said. She was manning the stove, striking a match, lighting a pilot. “How it violates the soul! Your only soul.”

But I couldn’t stop being myself! My people kept giving me the special look that lets you know you’ve reached the end of something. It made me feel at ease to see it, but then I’d panic because I didn’t know what in the world was going to happen to me. So I’d end up begging things of people I’d already worn out.

The godmother looked on with her mouth set in a judgy bunch. A timer went off and she pulled a roasting pan of macaroni and cheese casserole from the oven, throwing lights everywhere. That was one of her powers: she only cooked the type of food you had to wait in suffering for. She set the pan on the counter and dug her hand into the steaming macaroni and cheese, eating like a monster.

“You’re not even listening to me,” I said. “Are you?”

“What you expect?” The godmother laughed so hard, I could see the craters in her wisdom teeth. “You ain’t saying nothing.”

Saturday afternoon I drove my granny's car to André's house. The plan was to perpetrate like I was just passing through the hood or something, but he was already outside mowing the lawn as I came creeping by.

This shouldn't matter, but it must be said: André Simpson is an extraordinarily handsome individual. He's lanky, with a long neck and wavy Caesar, and he sometimes looks like a sweet, mute butler who with more opportunities could have been the principal dancer. André always got me thinking of possibilities. Sometimes I had to remind myself that he was just a mechanical engineer, shy until he'd learned he was beautiful and wanted, a stubborn child who after all this time refused to speak properly. You couldn't creep up on a dude like that, but I was moved to try.

I tricked his ass into feeding me. We rode in his car to a dirty chicken restaurant, the kind of place where they don't even put out tables and chairs because nobody wants you to stay. We ate in the car, talking elliptically about old rappers and how irrational it was to try to live off the grid and the fact that I had declined him first and now there was Porsche to whom he felt a physical obligation, so there was no point in talking about possibilities anyway. Then we were silent.

I told André that his silence was a way of strong-arming us back into our respective gender roles, and he shrugged, saying he didn't make the laws of nature. "Sound like you mad at God," he said. He looked into my eyes so directly, almost musically, and I just knew that he was never going to say anything of romantic import to me ever again. And I realized that I had nothing new to say to him either.

So, naturally, I started begging. "Please say something. But know that whatever you say, I'm going to hold on to it forever."

"Don't you do that," said André. "Not for no nigger." He glanced in the rearview, almost hopeful for carjackers.

But what I had wanted to say was that he was nullifying my entire life. I wanted to tell André that if some fool rolled through and shot up the parking lot, murdering me only, I hoped he would be haunted for the rest of his stupid-ass life. But I was embarrassed that the rants of a Hula-Hooping crazy summarized the true feelings of my heart. The goal was to attract him again.

André drove me back to his hovel. Bypassing my granny's car, I led him to his own front door. I think we both knew that without some disembodied sex, the whole encounter would be a waste.

Porsche sat cross-legged on the sectional playing a basketball game on the console. Her hair was pinned to her scalp in a dozen black rosettes, and she was wearing one of André's dress shirts the way you were supposed to if you had the audacity to wear a man's shirt. André glanced at us both. He went to the kitchen and came back with a water bottle. I tried to shoot him a telepathic gaze but my face was only begging, telling what he already knew.

Porsche interjected, telling someone on the headset, or me, "You can keep your mouth when I cut your head off." She said, "You want to slap me? Let me reach my face out so you can do it." As she looked up at me, her face was like a once-in-a-lifetime full moon. But after one glance, she was too dazzled by my pain to look back again. I kept staring at her in André's shirt, trying to remember that I was a woman too.

Usually I'm pretty sheepish around beautiful low-income women, but my recent situation had empowered me. I gave the shirt the nod and said, "Is that André's?"

He was already out the door, saying that he was going to walk me to my car, although it had belonged to my granny. Porsche looked down at the controller and laughed like she knew secrets about me. She adjusted her headset and, addressing somebody else, said, "Y'all need a glass-cleaner?"

I noticed that André was doing his best to make it quick. I tried taking off my shoes, but he wouldn't let me. I tried pulling up the front of his shirt, but this wasn't the place for that either. He moved smoothly, barely touching me, and something about the whole thing fit in with my idea of a cat burglar, if you know what I mean. He had tangled his face into a look-what-you-made-me-do expression directed at me only. I kissed him before he could move his face out the way.

Afterward he had some extra look in his eyes, but not so much that he saw past what he'd already concluded about me. Nothing told him that, enhanced by all this burgundy leather and all that I was going through, I was someone he could get stuck on again, possibly. I can admit that I was waiting for him to say the things dudes say to give you hope. But all of a sudden, André couldn't look at me.

The feelings almost got me, but then I realized that were she in a similar position, the godmother would find a way to come out on top. I needed to get like her. I needed solutions. Then one came to me. I told André, "I need that shirt." I needed him to pluck his own shirt off Porsche's sweetly dipped back.

He started to smile but once I'd conjured up my best godmother face, he crawled out the door, rushing back inside. I had set him up to free-style a lie for someone who'd maybe had a hard childhood. Porsche could be saved in other ways. The wait that followed made the car's interior more luxurious than ever before. Then two boys walked up the street passing a forty back and forth, and I watched them the way white people have watched me. Guilt rippled through me on low heat.

André returned, presenting the shirt like a token of his expired affections, and I smiled hard, becoming myself again. I wouldn't wish that smile on anybody. Nobody living, nobody with hopes of coming to life should ever have to smile like I did.

Back in my apartment, something told me to downplay my happiness.

I sat at the table recounting the worst parts for the godmother's entertainment. In my kitchen she was lording over pots of steaming beauty, shaking her head without end. But as she was sprinkling sparkling hoops of season-all salt or pouring sizzling bacon grease into a jar, I suddenly felt defeated and ended up just telling the truth. "Our relationship wasn't even that great," I told her. "But back then, I felt like I was inevitable. At the same time, I remembered how he used to look at me, like what I had wasn't much but he was willing to work with it."

"That's probably exactly what he was thinking," said the godmother. "If he was thinking anything coherent at all."

"You know what," I said. "I'm getting tired of you and your marinades." It was my own fault. You can't be self-deprecating with everyone. "Anyway. It was nice," I said, but that wasn't accurate either. Already it was hard to remember that moment where André and I had looked at each other and realized anything could happen, now that everything had.

"You trying to sound dumb?" said the godmother. "This is what happens when you call a false love, love. The man just doesn't see things your way. Never did, never will."

"I wish you'd jump in the air and stay put," I said. "You're like a diss track I can't turn off."

"What you need me to say?" The godmother screwed up her face, and the skin of her forehead stood up in cursive. "You misread the whole thing? He was doing his very best to make love to you, girl. He missed you so much it was scary, and now he regrets everything. You changed his life. You put a move on his heart, an impress on his soul. Matter fact, you're the one. He wants *you* back."

I considered reminding the godmother, like André did me, that I had declined him first, but it wouldn't sound right coming out of my mouth.

"I know it's hard. He done broke down all your walls of vulnerability," she said, "but you can't rebuild with someone you had nothing with in the first place. And you ought to know marriage is out of the question."

I knew that. Everybody knows not to do marriage if you want to keep the feeling going. "I want him to apologize," I said. "For not choosing me."

"Nobody does that," said the godmother. "Not even when they're saying the words."

She whipped up a Jell-O salad with grapes and peaches swimming inside and a frosting sprinkled with pecans. She warmed up Vienna sausages in the microwave and served them still popping on a salad plate. The taste of everything brought me to tears.

"But I want him to say the words," I said.

"Then you're a fool," said the godmother. She was watching the tears in my eyes, seeing if I would let them fall.

I made the obvious sartorial decision and wore André's shirt the next day, fantasizing that on the other side of town there was a gorgeous, half-naked woman realizing just what she'd lost. To complete the look, I experimented with some fuchsia lipstick my mother would've despised and I drew my eyebrows up and away from my nose, which I'd been noticing was the new style. This was the image of myself that I wanted to keep in perpetuity.

I held my expired license close to my heart as I drove my granny's car to the DMV. En route, the city seemed to have changed its opinions about me. I could speed up traffic with the nod of my head. I could weave through lanes.

There wasn't a person alive whose angry gaze could get their hooks in. I was a different Joy altogether and it was an incredible feeling, to be who I hoped to be. My soul was filled with laughter that made me shake. I thought I was free.

But when I arrived, the building was locked. The DMV was closed on Sunday, coinciding with the holiday that I hadn't realized was happening. On the door, I saw my reflection and how I really looked in André's shirt on Easter Sunday, an excited, ruby-eyed bunny cartwheeling across on my chest. This pleased bunny seemed to be dancing all over me, over everything I'd accomplished.

I called my mother but I remembered that she never knew what to say or how to say it, and on the first ring, I hung up the phone. When I saw that she was calling me back, I was too ashamed for us both to answer. So I called Nicole but she declined me. Then, for an instant, I thought I'd made a little progress in my journey simply because all that internalized sexism kept me from immediately calling André. But in seconds I decided to be a free woman and I called him too.

"Joy?" he was saying like I was someone else. "Is that you? Are you there?"

Stepping off the curb, I was almost struck down by a black car. The car was swerving away just as I started to feel what was happening. I saw myself reflected in the fender, looking as though someone had run a heavy hand across my face and smeared it around. The car raced up the street, zipping the city back in order.

Somehow, I'd kept the phone to my ear the whole time. André was scolding me in his grown man's voice.

"You're childish," he said. "Playing on the phone like that. It's Sunday."

I handled my brush with eternity by putting on Robert Earl Davis Jr.'s greatest hits and drawing myself a bubble bath. Maybe you already know this, but after too many loops, your favorite song starts to turn on you. The potency of the bass line begins to fade and like that, you're fresh out of new sounds. When the water went cold, I started to cry.

“Quit that crying,” said the godmother. “This is not a crying situation.” She walked into the bathroom and sat on the toilet to watch me. She was helping herself to a bowl of leftover eggplant with meat sauce and contemplating me in the bathtub, what it all meant. “Don’t you ever feel sad for your bathtub?” she said. “For having to hold your little body when nobody else will?” She gave me one of her ugly laughs. People who’ve been through too much always laugh like that.

I tried turning away. “I’m sure it doesn’t mind.”

Taking another bite, the godmother looked me up and down. “You so sad,” she said, “seem like your home girl could at least give you a hug. Or your man. You did make him your man again?”

More or less, I thought. “No.”

The godmother shook her head mercilessly. “In my opinion—and this is just my opinion—you gave up way too easily with both. Didn’t you know you gave up? Can’t you tell when you’re doing that? You give up in subtle ways. For example, the way you did your makeup today and the way you try to cook fancy dinners for yourself. None of that’s for the real you. You can’t even be real when nobody else is around. Even the way you beg is a form of surrender. And the funky part is that you gave up way before you started doing all that begging.”

The beat was doing something tragic, and I sank deeper, looking at my toes. “I don’t understand why you’re telling me all this,” I said.

Something fell softly on the bridge of my nose. When I recognized it as a bit of saucy eggplant, another one hit my eyelid and slid slowly down my face and into the tub. The godmother was throwing my leftovers and saying depressing things about the nature of love, things that I believed, which is what angered me the most. The spirit moved me to jump out the tub and attack the godmother as she defended herself with a ceramic bowl, getting licks in too. I watched myself struggle with her until I realized I was still in the bathtub, still envisioning another something I would never do.

I told the godmother, “I don’t deserve this type of confrontation.”

“Deserve,” the godmother said in a voice that carried. “You still stuck on what you deserve.” She shook her head at me and left.

I drained the tub, threw on my robe, and followed her into the kitchen. In the background Robert Earl Davis Jr.’s chopped up, joyous pain pressed into my shoulders. The feeling showed in the mirror, and as I passed by, fragments of my ancestors looked out with mild concern.

They gathered as the godmother prepared my tea. She tilted the kettle to my favorite cup, and it was like the weight of my most telling, desperate fantasies was pouring from her knotted fingers. She brought the steaming cup to me, saying, “Drink.”

Behind us my ancestors waited for me to make a bad decision. “I am sort of thirsty.”

The godmother’s eyes did something rude. “Baby,” she drawled, “you are the thirstiest.”

I staggered back. “This is not commiserating,” I said too loudly. “This is an abyss of despair.”

The godmother propped her free hand on her hip and curved her neck so that her ear was almost touching her shoulder. “Has anyone ever told you that you talk like a white girl?” she said.

That may be, but in her case, she talked like someone who had lived too long and had figured everything out, and all the gunk she carried around had probably made its way into her flickted tea, so it couldn’t taste that good anyway. At the same time, I knew I was telling myself lies. Most likely her tea was delicious. The godmother pushed the cup on me again, smiling like she could read my bankrupt thoughts. This above everything else gave me a start. For as long I can remember, I’d wanted to be just like that, just as terrible, but not anymore. I had never changed my mind about a person before so you can understand why this realization was confusing.

I was so confused that I started to pray. I prayed that my past loves would feel distant to the point of disappearing. I prayed that I could accept living a life without happiness, that I would make friends who shared this view, that I

would not drink too much or become too bitter. I wanted so badly to be in harmony with the city I called home and with my time on this earth and for this to show in my face and the way I talked. And if none of this was meant to be, I prayed that I wouldn't want it in the first place, that I would be turned into a different girl completely.

That's when things turned around for me. I couldn't say exactly when it happened, but the godmother was gone. She had returned to wherever she belonged, and with her falling back into place, I could become myself again. But I worried that instead of going back, I'd just become yet another version of myself. Nobody was there to explain to me my options. I kept thinking someone was going to tell me what I was supposed to do next.

I picked out a dress that I used to love because it was orange and had only cost me seven dollars. I pulled the dress over my head, brushed my hair, and stepped into a pair of sandals. I looked into the mirror and waited for that specific presence to tell me that the hemline was too short and that she could see right through the material. But nobody was coming.

Then I walked across the street to the convenience store for a Dr Pepper. Once the cashier had rung me up, I realized that I'd forgotten my wallet. He gave me a look, as though he'd missed some sign that I was a crack addict. Then he decided that it doesn't make much difference if you give a crack addict a Dr Pepper every now and again. Begrudgingly, he let me have it.

I went outside to the parking lot and the world felt motionless under my feet. I looked back at my apartment building where people were coming and going like nothing had ever happened to them. I was doing the same thing and had been, I realized, for a long time. I guess you could say that's how I got over.

Selena Anderson

Selena Anderson's stories have recently appeared in *Georgia Review*, *Fence*, *Bomb*, and *Callaloo*. She is currently working on a novel.