

# Getting Mother's Body

A NOVEL

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# Billy Beede

“Where my panties at?” I asks him.

Snipes don’t say nothing. He don’t like to talk when he’s in the middle of it.

“I think I lost my panties,” I says but Snipes ain’t hearing. He got his eyes closed, his mouth smiling, his face wet with sweat. In the middle of it, up there on top of me, going in and out. Not on top of me really, more like on top of the side of me cause he didn’t want my baby-belly getting in his way. He didn’t say so, he ain’t said nothing bout the baby yet, but I seen him looking at my belly and I know he’s thinking about it, somewhere in his mind. We’re in the backseat of his Galaxie. A Ford. Bright lemon colored outside, inside the color of new butter. My head taps against the door handle as he goes at it.

“Huh. Huh. Huh,” Snipes goes.

In a minute my head’s gonna hurt. But it don’t hurt yet.

“Where—” I go but he draws his finger down over my lips, hushing them so I don’t finish, then he rubs my titty, moving his hand in a quick circle like he’s polishing it. I try scootching down along the seat, away from the door, but when I scootch, Snipes’ going at it scootches me right back up against the door handle again. I wonder if my baby’s

sitting in me upside down and if Snipes' thing is hitting it on its head like the door handle is hitting me on mines.

"Ow," I go. Cause now my head hurts.

"Owww," Snipes go. Cause he's through.

He lays there for a minute then pulls himself out of me and gets out the car. He closes up his pants while he looks down the road. Zipper then belt. In my head I can see all the little seeds he just sowed in me. All them little Snipeses running up inside me looking for somewheres to plant. But there's a baby up in me already, a Baby Snipes. Baby Snipes knocks down the Little Snipes Seeds as fast as they come up.

"How you doing?" Snipes asks.

"Mmokay."

I turn from my side onto my back, raising up on both elbows. My housedress is all open and the baby makes a hump. Snipes turns to look at me, his gold-colored eyes staying on mines, seeing the hump without really seeing it. He ducks into the front seat, getting his Chesterfields out his shirt pocket, and standing there with his back to me, smoking in just his undershirt.

"Penny for yr thoughts," I go but he don't turn around or say nothing. I sit up, buckling my bra and taking a look around for my panties, first in the front seat then running my hand between the backseat and the seat back, thinking my panties mighta got stuck in between but not finding nothing. Then I do feel a scrap of something and give it a yank. Big red shiny drawers. Not mines. Snipes turns around and sees me holding them.

"My sister's," he says smiling and putting on his shirt. "I let her use my car sometimes."

I stuff the drawers back where I found them, first leaving a little red tail sticking out, then stuffing them back in all the way.

“I didn’t know you had no sister,” I says. “I don’t know nothing about you.”

“Whatchu need to know?” he says.

“What’s her name?”

“Who?”

“Yr sister.”

“Alberta,” he says. Then he turns away showing me the side of his face, shaved clean and right-angled as my elbow. He’s smiling hard, but not at me.

“Clifton, can I ask you something else?”

“I’ll get you some more panties, girl, don’t worry,” he says.

An hour ago, when Snipes came to get me, I was doing Aunt June’s hair. I heard his whistle. He weren’t stopped at the pumps. He was stopped across the road, standing against his car looking cool, waiting for me to come outside but waiting cool, just in case I didn’t show. I seen him and run across the road without even looking to see if cars was coming and he picked me up and swirled me around. Just like Harry Belafonte woulda.

“You ain’t been around in almost a month,” I said, breathless from the swirling.

“I been working, girl,” he said. He got a custom-coffin business. He makes and sells handmade coffins in any shape you want with plush lining inside and everything. While we drove he showed me his sample book with three new photographs, proud, like folks show pictures of they children. A oak Cadillac, a guitar of cherry wood, and a pharaoh-style one too, all big enough to get buried inside, the new ones not painted yet so folks can pick out they own colors.

“People been talking,” I said.

“What they saying?”

“Stuff,” I said. “They saying stuff.” We kissed as we drove

down the road and then I started laughing cause he was tickling me and getting me undressed and showing me his sample book and driving all at the same time. His left hand on the wheel, his right hand between my legs. Then we pulled off the road. Then we did it. Now we done.

“I’ll get you a whole damn carload full of panties, girl,” he says. “Them panties you had on is probably along the side of the road somewhere between here and Lincoln.” He smiles and I smile with him. I remember taking them off. The wind was whipping and musta whipped them out the window while we drove. But that was an hour ago.

Now I look down the road, seeing if I can see them. I see somebody down there walking in the dirt and the shimmer from the heat.

“I don’t wanna go home without no panties,” I says.

“You worry too much,” Snipes says.

All the car doors are open and the wind goes through, drying the sweat off the seats.

“I gotta know something,” I says.

“Whut?”

“The man’s supposed to ask the girl,” I whisper.

He don’t speak.

We been together since March. Now it’s July. I wanna give him a chance to ask me.

“You said I wouldn’t get bigged the first time we did it,” I says.

“Was our first time your first time?” he says.

“You gonna marry me or what?” I says. The words come out too loud.

He don’t speak. He cuts on the radio but it don’t work when the car ain’t running. He gets out, closing the back two doors, leaving mines open and getting back behind the wheel.

“Sure I’m gonna marry you,” he says at last. “You my treasure. You think I don’t wanna marry my treasure?”

“People are talking,” I says.

“They just jealous,” he says and we both laugh. “Billy Beede got herself a good-looking man and they all jealous.”

When we quit laughing we sit there quiet.

“You my treasure, girl,” he says. “You my treasure, capital T, make no mistake.”

“I’m five months gone,” I says. Too loud again.

He wraps his fingers tight around the wheel. I want him to look at me but he don’t.

Someone comes up, stopping a foot or two from the car to stare at us openmouthed. It’s Laz. He got his wool cap down around his ears and his plaid shirt buttoned to the chin.

“You want yr ass kicked?” Snipes asks him.

“Not today,” Laz says.

“You don’t stop looking at me and my woman, I’m a kick yr black ass,” Snipes says.

Laz looks at the ground.

“You don’t get the hell outa here, I’m a kill you,” Snipes says.

“Being dead don’t bother me none,” Laz says. He got a bold voice but he ain’t looking up from the ground.

Snipes jumps out the car and they stand there toe to toe. Everything Snipes got is better than everything Laz got.

“Go the hell home, Laz,” I says and he turns and goes. Snipes throws a rock and Laz runs.

“Goddamn boot-black-wool-hat-wearing-four-eyed nigger probably wanted to see us doing it,” Snipes goes, getting back in the car and laughing and holding my hand. “Peeping and creeping boot-black-winter-hat nigger.”

“Laz is just Laz,” I says.

“His daddy runs the funeral home but Laz ain’t never gonna be running shit,” Snipes says, laughing hard and squeezing my hand to get me to laugh too and I laugh till his squeezing hurts and I make him let go.

“Today’s Wednesday, ain’t it?” Snipes says. He looks down the road, seeing his upcoming appointments in his head. “I’m free towards the end of the week. Let’s get married on Friday.”

“Really?”

“Friday’s the day,” he says, taking out his billfold. He peeks the money part open with his pointer and thumb, then he feathers the bills, counting. His one eyebrow lifts up, surprised.

“That’s what you call significant,” he says.

“Significant?”

“What year is it?”

“ ‘Sixty-three.”

“And here I got sixty-three dollars in my billfold,” he says smiling.

He pinches the bills out, folding them single-handed. He reaches over to me, lifting my housedress away from my brassiere and tucking the sixty-three dollars down between my breasts.

“Get yrself a wedding dress and some shoes and a one-way bus ticket.”

“I’ma go to Jackson’s Formal.”

“Get something pretty. Come up to Texhoma tomorrow. We can do it Friday.”

“You gonna get down on yr knee and ask me?”

“You come up tomorrow and I’ll get down on my knee in front of my sister and her kids and ask you to marry me. Hell, I’ll get down on both knees. Then we can do it Friday.”



“How bout today you meet Aunt June and Uncle Teddy?” I says.

“Today I gotta go to Midland,” he says.

“It’ll only take a minute.”

“I don’t got a minute,” he says. He looks at me. He got lips like pillows. “Have em come to Texhoma Friday. They can watch us get married. I’ll meet em then.”

“When they come up you gotta ask me to marry you on yr knees in front of them too,” I says. “They’d feel left out if they didn’t see it since you’ll be asking me in front of yr sister and her kids and yr mother and dad—”

“My mother and dad won’t be making it,” Snipes says.

“How come?”

“They’s passed,” he says. He starts up the car, turning it around neatly and pulling it into the road, heading back towards Lincoln. On Friday my new name will be Mrs. Clifton Snipes.

“I was ten when Willa Mae passed,” I says.

“Willa Mae who?”

“Willa Mae Beede. My mother,” I says.

Snipes takes his hand off the wheel to scratch his crotch. His foot is light on the gas pedal. There’s a story about my mother. All these months I been seeing Snipes, I didn’t know whether or not he’d heard it. Now I can tell he has.

“They say yr mamma went into the ground with gold in her pockets,” Snipes says.

“You believe that?” I says.

“I’m just telling you what they say.”

“And I say Willa Mae Beede was a liar and a cheat. Getting locked up in jail every time she turned around. Always talking big and never amounting to nothing.”

He takes his foot all the way off the gas to look me full

in the face. We coast along. “She was your mamma, girl,” Snipes says.

“Willa Mae passed and it didn’t bother me none. I was glad to see her go,” I says.

“How come you call her Willa Mae?”

“Willa Mae is her name,” I says.

He turns his eyes back to the road and we pick up speed. We go fast. The hot air swishes through the car with all the windows down. I put my hands on the sides of my head, keeping my hair in some kind of shape.

“Willa Mae’s pockets of gold ain’t nothing to sneeze at,” Snipes says. He sorta yells it over the loud whoosh of the air.

“Shoot, Snipes,” I says. “Willa Mae Beede was the biggest liar in Texas. She didn’t go into the ground with shit.” I feel mad then I laugh. After a minute Snipes laughs too.

“Any jewels she had was fake,” I tell him.

“It makes a good story,” he says.

“A good story’s all it makes.”

He checks his wristwatch. We come up on the road that leads to the Crater and he pulls over.

“I gotta let you out here.”

“Can’t you take me all the way home?”

“I gotta get to Midland.”

Sanderson’s is only a mile away. I can walk.

“Penny for your thoughts,” I says.

“Nothing on my mind but coffins,” he says smiling, looking down the road, hands easy now, two fingers of each balanced on the wheel. “Doctor Wells is dying. I’m a talk him into getting buried in a black doctor’s bag made outa oak.”

“That sounds nice,” I says.

His arm grazes my belly as he reaches over to open my

door for me. I get out then lean through the window so he can give me some sugar. My dress gaps open. He looks quick at his sixty-three dollars.

“We getting married on Friday, Billy Beede!” Snipes hollers, taking off, driving north, waving at me as he goes.

I walk home the other way.