MODERN CLASSICS

Toni Cade Bambara

The Salt Eaters



PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

The Salt Eaters

Author, teacher, activist and filmmaker Toni Cade Bambara was born in Harlem, New York in 1939. After graduating from Queens College in 1959, she studied acting and mime in Florence and Paris, received an MA in 1964 from City College of New York, and went on to lecture in English at CUNY, Livingston College, and other universities. Bambara's involvement in the Black liberation and women's movements led her to edit and publish one of the first major anthologies of Black women's writing, *The Black Woman*, in 1970; the following year she published a collection of folktales, *Tales and Stories for Black Folks*, which celebrated what she dubbed 'Our Great Kitchen Tradition'. In 1972, Bambara published her debut collection of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love*, and then, in 1980, her first novel, *The Salt Eaters*, which won the American Book Award and the Langston Hughes Society Award. Upon her death in 1995, *The New York Times* praised Bambara as 'a major contributor to the emerging genre of contemporary black women's literature'. Her legacy was recognized with a posthumous induction into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame in 2013.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

TONI CADE BAMBARA

The Salt Eaters



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN CLASSICS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in 1980
First published in Penguin Classics 2021
001

Text copyright © Toni Cade Bambara, 1980

The moral right of the author has been asserted

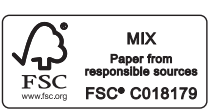
Set in 10.5/13pt Dante MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–52138–0

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

Dear Khufu –

The manuscript, assembled finally in the second and third years of the Last Quarter and edited under Leo's double moons, was initially typed by Loretta Hardge and is dedicated to my first friend, teacher, map maker, landscape aide

Mama
Helen Brent Henderson Cade Brehon

who in 1948, having come upon me daydreaming in the middle of the kitchen floor, mopped around me.

Bless the workers and beam on me if you please.

Thank you,
Toni CB
August 27, 1979

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

The Salt Eaters

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

1

'Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?'

Velma Henry turned stiffly on the stool, the gown ties tight across her back, the knots hard. So taut for so long, she could not swivel. Neck, back, hip joints dry, stiff. Face frozen. She could not glower, suck her teeth, roll her eyes, do any of the Velma-things by way of answering Minnie Ransom, who sat before her humming lazily up and down the scales, making a big to-do of draping her silky shawl, handling it as though it were a cape she'd swirl any minute over Velma's head in a wipe-out veronica, or as though it were a bath towel she was drying her back with in the privacy of her bathroom.

Minnie Ransom herself, the fabled healer of the district, her bright-red flouncy dress drawn in at the waist with two different strips of kenti cloth, up to her elbows in a minor fortune of gold, brass and silver bangles, the silken fringe of the shawl shimmying at her armpits. Her head, wrapped in some juicy hot-pink gelee, was tucked way back into her neck, eyes peering down her nose at Velma as though old-timey spectacles perched there were slipping down.

Velma blinked. Was ole Minnie trying to hypnotize her, mesmerize her? Minnie Ransom, the legendary spinster of Claybourne, Georgia, spinning out a song, drawing *her* of all people up. Velma the swift; Velma the elusive; Velma who had never mastered the kicks, punches and defense blocks, but who had down cold the art of being not there when the blow came. Velma caught, caught up, in the weave of the song Minnie was humming, of the shawl, of the threads, of the silvery tendrils that extended from the healer's neck and hands and

Copyrighted Material

disappeared into the sheen of the sunlight. The glistening bangles, the metallic threads, the dancing fringe, the humming like bees. And was the ole swamphag actually sitting there dressed for days, legs crossed, one foot swinging gently against the table where she'd stacked the tapes and records? Sitting there flashing her bridgework and asking some stupid damn question like that, blind to Velma's exasperation, her pain, her humiliation?

Velma could see herself: hair matted and dusty, bandages unraveled and curled at the foot of the stool like a sleeping snake, the hospital gown huge in front, but tied up too tight in back, the breeze from the window billowing out the rough white muslin and widening the opening in the back. She could not focus enough to remember whether she had panties on or not. And Minnie Ransom perched on her stool actually waiting on an answer, drawling out her humming-song, unconcerned that any minute she might strike the very note that could shatter Velma's bones.

'I like to caution folks, that's all,' said Minnie, interrupting her own humming to sigh and say it, the song somehow buzzing right on. 'No sense us wasting each other's time, sweetheart.' The song running its own course up under the words, up under Velma's hospital gown, notes pressing against her skin and Velma steeling herself against intrusion. 'A lot of weight when you're well. Now, you just hold that thought.'

Velma didn't know how she was to do that. She could barely manage to hold on to herself, hold on to the stingy stool, be there all of a piece and resist the buzzing bee tune coming at her. Now her whole purpose was surface, to go smooth, be sealed and inviolate.

She tried to withdraw as she'd been doing for weeks and weeks. Withdraw the self to a safe place where husband, lover, teacher, workers, no one could follow, probe. Withdraw herself and prop up a borderguard to negotiate with would-be intruders. She'd been a borderguard all her childhood, so she knew something about it. She was the one sent to the front door to stand off the landlord, the insurance man, the greengrocer, the fishpeddler, to insure Mama Mae one more bit of peace. And at her godmother's, it was Smitty who sent her to the front door to misdirect the posse. No, no one of

Copyrighted Material

that name lived here. No, this was not where the note from the principal should be delivered.

She wasn't sure how to move away from Minnie Ransom and from the music, where to throw up the barrier and place the borderguard. She wasn't sure whether she'd been hearing music anyway. Was certain, though, that she didn't know what she was supposed to say or do on that stool. Wasn't even sure whether it was time to breathe in or breathe out. Everything was off, out of whack, the relentless logic she'd lived by sprung. And here she was in Minnie Ransom's hands in the Southwest Community Infirmary. Anything could happen. She could roll off the stool like a ball of wax and melt right through the floor, or sail out of the window, stool and all, and become some new kind of UFO. Anything could happen. And hadn't Ole Minnie been nattering away about just that before the session had begun, before she had wiped down the stools and set them out just so? 'In the last quarter, sweetheart, anything can happen. And will,' she'd said. Last quarter? Of the moon, of the century, of some damn basketball game? Velma had been, still was, too messed around to figure it out.

'You just hold that thought,' Minnie was saying again, leaning forward, the balls of three fingers pressed suddenly, warm and fragrant, against Velma's forehead, the left hand catching her in the back of her head, cupping gently the two stony portions of the temporal bone. And Velma was inhaling in gasps, and exhaling shudderingly. She felt aglow, her eyebrows drawing in toward the touch as if to ward off the invading fingers that were threatening to penetrate her skull. And then the hands went away quickly, and Velma felt she was losing her eyes.

'Hold on now,' she heard. It was said the way Mama Mae would say it, leaving her bent in the sink while she went to get a washcloth to wipe the shampoo from her eyes. Velma held on to herself. Her pocketbook on the rungs below, the backless stool in the middle of the room, the hospital gown bunched up now in the back – there was nothing but herself and some dim belief in the reliability of stools to hold on to. But then the old crone had had a few choice words to say about that too, earlier, rearing back on her heels and

Copyrighted Material

pressing her knees against the stereo while Velma perched uneasily on the edge of her stool trying to listen, trying to wait patiently for the woman to sit down and get on with it, trying to follow her drift, scrambling to piece together key bits of high school physics, freshman philo, and lessons M'Dear Sophie and Mama Mae had tried to impart. The reliability of stools? Solids, liquids, gases, the dance of atoms, the bounce and race of molecules, ethers, electrical charges. The eyes and habits of illusion. Retinal images, bogus images, traveling to the brain. The pupils trying to tell the truth to the inner eye. The eye of the heart. The eye of the head. The eye of the mind. All seeing differently.

Velma gazed out over the old woman's head and through the window, feeling totally out of it, her eyes cutting easily through panes and panes and panes of glass and other substances, it seemed, until she slammed into the bark of the tree in the Infirmary yard and recoiled, was back on the stool, breathing in and out in almost a regular rhythm, wondering if it was worth it, submitting herself to this ordeal.

It would have been more restful to have simply slept it off; said no when the nurse had wakened her, no she didn't want to see Miz Minnie; no she didn't want to be bothered right now, but could someone call her husband, her sister, her godmother, somebody, anybody to come sign her out in the morning? But what a rough shock it would have been for the family to see her like that. Obie, Palma, M'Dear Sophie or her son Lil James. Rougher still to be seen. She wasn't meant for these scenes, wasn't meant to be sitting up there in the Southwest Community Infirmary with her ass out, in the middle of the day, and strangers cluttering up the treatment room, ogling her in her misery. She wasn't meant for any of it. But then M'Dear Sophie always said, 'Find meaning where you're put, Vee.' So she exhaled deeply and tried to relax and stick it out and pay attention.

Rumor was these sessions never lasted more than ten or fifteen minutes anyway. It wouldn't kill her to go along with the thing. Wouldn't kill her. She almost laughed. She might have died. *I might have died*. It was an incredible thought now. She sat there holding on to *that* thought, waiting for Minnie Ransom to quit playing to the gallery and get on with it. Sat there, every cell flooded with the light

Copyrighted Material

of that idea, with the rhythm of her own breathing, with the sensation of having not died at all at any time, not on the attic stairs, not at the kitchen drawer, not in the ambulance, not on the operating table, not in that other place where the mud mothers were painting the walls of the cave and calling to her, not in the sheets she thrashed out in strangling her legs, her rib cage, fighting off the woman with snakes in her hair, the crowds that moved in and out of each other around the bed trying to tell her about the difference between snakes and serpents, the difference between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning into salt, succumbing to the serpent.

'Folks come in here,' Minnie Ransom was saying, 'moaning and carrying on and *say* they wanna be well. Don't know what in heaven and hell they want.' She had uncrossed her legs, had spread her legs out and was resting on the heels of her T-strap, beige suedes, the black soles up and visible. And she was leaning forward toward Velma, poking yards of dress down between her knees. She looked like a farmer in a Halston, a snuff dipper in a Givenchy.

'Just this morning, fore they rolled you in with your veins open and your face bloated, this great big overgrown woman came in here tearing at her clothes, clawing at her hair, wailing to beat the band, asking for some pills. Wanted a pill cause she was in pain, felt bad, wanted to feel good. You ready?'

Velma studied the woman's posture, the rope veins in the back of her hands, the purple shadows in the folds of her dress spilling over the stool edge, draping down toward the floor. Velma tried not to get lost in the reds and purples. She understood she was being invited to play straight man in a routine she hadn't rehearsed.

'So I say, "Sweetheart, what's the matter?" And she says "My mama died and I feel so bad, I can't go on" and dah dah dah. Her mama died, she's *supposed* to feel bad. Expect to feel good when ya mama's gone! Climbed right into my lap,' she was nudging Velma to check out the skimp of her lap. 'Two hundred pounds of grief and heft if she was one-fifty. Bless her heart, just a babe of the times. Wants to be smiling and feeling good all the time. Smooth sailing as they lower the mama into the ground. Then there's you. What's your story?'

Velma clutched the sides of the stool and wondered what she was

Copyrighted Material

supposed to say at this point. What she wanted to do was go away, be somewhere, anywhere, else. But where was there to go? Far as most folks knew, she was at work or out of town.

'As I said, folks come in here moaning and carrying on and *say* they want to be healed. But like the wisdom warns, "Doan letcha mouf gitcha in what ya backbone caint stand." ' This the old woman said loud enough for the others to hear.

The Infirmary staff, lounging in the rear of the treatment room, leaned away from the walls to grunt approval, though many privately thought this was one helluva way to conduct a healing. Others, who had witnessed the miracle of Minnie Ransom's laying on the hands over the years, were worried. It wasn't like her to be talking on and on, taking so long a time to get started. But then the whole day's program that Doc Serge had arranged for the visitors had been slapdash and sloppy.

The visiting interns, nurses and technicians stood by in crisp white jackets and listened, some in disbelief, others with amusement. Others scratched around in their starchy pockets skeptical, most shifted from foot to foot embarrassed just to be there. And it looked as though the session would run overtime at the rate things were going. There'd never be enough time to get through the day's itinerary. And the bus wasn't going to wait. The driver had made that quite plain. He would be pulling in at 3:08 from his regular run, taking a dinner break, then pulling out sharply with the charter bus at 5:30. That too had been printed up on the itinerary, but the Infirmary hosts did not seem to be alert to the demands of time.

The staff, asprawl behind the visitors on chairs, carts, table corners, swinging their legs and doing manicures with the edges of matchbooks, seemed to be content to watch the show for hours. But less than fifteen minutes ago they'd actually been on the front steps making bets, actually making cash bets with patients and various passers-by, that the healing session would take no more than five or ten minutes. And here it was already going on 3:00 with what could hardly be called an auspicious beginning. The administrator, Dr Serge, had strolled out, various and sundry folk had come strolling in. The healer had sat there for the longest time playing with her bottom

Copyrighted Material

lip, jangling her bracelets, fiddling with the straps of the patient's gown. And now she was goofing around, deliberately, it seemed, exasperating the patient. There seemed to be, many of the visitors concluded, a blatant lack of discipline at the Southwest Community Infirmary that made suspect the reputation it enjoyed in radical medical circles.

'Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well.'

'That's the truth,' muttered one of the 'old-timers,' as all old folks around the Infirmary were called. 'Don't I know the truth of that?' the little woman continued, pushing up the sleeves of her bulky sweater as if home, as if readying up to haul her mother-in-law from wheelchair to toilet, or grab up the mop or tackle the laundry. She would have had more to say about the burdens of the healthy had she not been silenced by an elbow in her side pocket and noticed folks were cutting their eyes at her. Cora Rider hunched her shoulders sharply and tucked her head deep into the turtleneck by way of begging pardon from those around her, many of whom still held their clinic cards and appointment slips in their hands as if passing through the room merely, with no intention of staying for the whole of it.

'Thank you, Spirit' drifted toward her. She searched the faces of the circle of twelve that ringed the two women in the center of the room, wondering whether God was being thanked for giving Miz Minnie the gift or for shutting Cora up. The twelve, or The Master's Mind as some folks called them, stood with heads bowed and hands clasped. Yellow seemed to predominate, yellow and white. Shirts, dresses, smocks, slacks – yellow and white were as much an announcement that a healing session had been scheduled as the notice on the board. The bobbing roses, pink and yellow chiffon flowerettes on Mrs Sophie Heywood's hat, seemed to suggest that she was the one who'd praised God. Though the gent humming in long meter, his striped tie looking suspiciously like a remnant from a lemonade-stand awning, could just as well have been the one, Cora Rider thought. Though what Mr Daniels had to be so grateful for all the time was a mystery to her, what with an alcoholic wife, a fast and loose bunch of daughters, and a bedraggled shoeshine parlor.

Copyrighted Material

Cora Rider shrugged and bowed her head in prayer, or at least in imitation of the circle folks, who seemed, as usual, lost in thought until several members looked up, suddenly aware that one of their number was inching away from the group. Cora looked up too, and like the old-timers and staffers who noticed, was astounded. For surely Sophie Heywood of all people, godmother of Velma Henry, co-convener of The Master's Mind, could not actually be leaving.

Sophie Heywood had been in attendance at every other major event in Velma Henry's life. No one could say for sure if Sophie had been there when Velma had tried to do herself in, that part of the girl's story hadn't been put together yet. But she'd been there at the beginning with her baby-catching hands. There again urging 'pretty please' on Velma's behalf while Mama Mae, the blood mother, plaited peach switches to tear up some behind. Calling herself running away to China to seek her fortune like some character she'd read about in a book, young Velma had dug a hole in the landfill, then tunneled her way through a drainpipe that led to the highway connector past the marshes before her sister Palma could catch up with her and bring her back.

All those years Sophie had been turning a warm eye on the child's triumphs, a glass eye on everything else, which was a lot, to hear the old folks tell it, as the girl, breaking her bonds and casting away the cord, was steady making her bed hard. For those old-timers, though, that walked the chalk, why a woman such as Sophie Heywood, chapter president of the Women's Auxiliary of the Sleeping Car Porters for two decades running, would even cross the street for the likes of Velma Henry was a mystery anyway. But there it was, so must it be – the godmother ever ready to turn the lamp down low on the godchild's indiscretions.

The prayer group moved closer to repair the circle, searching Sophie's face for a clue to the break and the odd leavetaking. But the woman's eyes were as still as water in the baptismal pit, reminding them that she had been there too the day the congregation had stood by waiting for a moving of the water, had shouted when Velma had come through religion, had cheered when she walked across the stage of Douglass High to get her diploma, had stood up at her first

Copyrighted Material

wedding, hasty as you please and in a night club too, and worn white to the railroad station as the rites of good riddance had been performed. And when Velma had swapped that out-of-town-who's-his-people-anyway husband for a good home boy whose goodness could maybe lay her wildness down and urge her through college, there was Sophie in her best threads following the child down the aisle, her needle still working in the hem of the gown.

And here she was now, Sophie Heywood, not only walking away from her godchild, but removing Scorpio from the Mind. Heads turned round as she reached the door and stood there gazing up, they thought, at the ceiling, drawing other heads up too to study the ceiling's luster, the gleam of the fluorescent rods. And study they did, for Sophie was forever reading signs before they were even so.

'Every event is preceded by a sign,' she always instructed her students, or anyone else in her orbit who'd listen. 'We're all clairvoyant if we'd only know it.' The lesson was not lost on Cora Rider, whose bed, kitchen table and porch swing were forever cluttered with *Three Wise Men, Red Devil, Lucky Seven, Black Cat, Three Witches, Aunt Dinah's Dream Book*, and other incense-fragrant softback books that sometimes resulted in a hit. Now, though, like some others, Cora studied the pockmarks in the plaster, the dance of light overhead, searching not so much for a number to box as for a clue to Sophie Heywood's exit.

Buster and Nadeen, the couple from the Teenage Parent Clinic, studied the ceiling too, recalling the counsel of Mrs Heywood. Close enough to hear each other's breathing, his arm around her, palm resting on the side of her bulging belly, he reviewed the way 'sign reading' had been applied by the political theorists at the Academy of the 7 Arts, while she, palms resting on the rise of her stomach, remained attentive to the movement beneath her hands.

What anyone made of the shadows on the ceiling or of the fissures in the plaster overhead was not well telegraphed around the room, though many were visibly intent on decoding the flickering touch of mind on mind and looking about for someone to head Sophie Heywood off at the pass. What did bounce around the circle of eleven was the opinion that Sophie should return and restore the group intact. But what jumped the circle to pass through bone,

Copyrighted Material

white jackets, wood chairs and air for Sophie to contemplate, did not bounce back. The only answer was the high-pitched wail of birds overhead like whistling knives in the sky.

Sophie opened the door without a backward glance at the group or at the godchild huddled on the stool so mournful and forlorn. The child Sophie grieved for took another form altogether. So stepping over the threshold into the hall she was stepping over that sack of work tools by his bedroom door again, a heavy gray canvas sack spilling out before enemy eyes – screwdriver, syringe, clockworks, dynamite. She looked out into the hall of the Southwest Community Infirmary, fresh white paint dizzying her, temples buzzing, eyes stinging. Smitty.

Smitty climbing the leg of the statue. The other students running down the street waving banners made from sheets. Mrs Taylor watching from the window, leaning on pillows she'd made from rally banners. Smitty on the arm of the war hero chanting 'Hell, no, we won't go.' Sirens scattering the marchers. TV cameras and trucks shoving through the crowd. Mrs Taylor screaming in the window. A boy face down in the street, his book bag flattened. The police rushing the statue like a tank. The package up under Smitty's arm. The other flung across the hind of the first brass horse. The blow that caught him in the shins.

Sophie face down in the jailhouse bed springs. Portland Edgers, her neighbor, handed a billy club. The sheriff threatening.

Mrs Taylor moaning in the window. The boy gagging on his own blood face down in the street, the cameras on him. Smitty with a bull horn. A Black TV announcer misnumbering the crowd, mixmatching the facts, lost to the community. Smitty. The blow that caught him in the groin.

The blow that caught her in the kidney. Someone howling in the next cell. A delegation from the church out front talking reasonably. Sophie face down on the jailhouse bed springs, the rusty metal cutting biscuits out of her cheeks.

Smitty kicking at the clubs, the hands. Smitty jammed between the second brass horse and the flagpole. The package balanced in the crook of the bayonet. The blow that caught him from behind.

Copyrighted Material

Portland Edgers turning on the sheriff and wrestled down on her back and beaten. Sophie mashed into the springs. Portland Edgers screaming into her neck.

Smitty pulled down against the cement pedestal, slammed against the horses' hooves, dragged on his stomach to the van. A boot in his neck. Child. Four knees in his back. Son. The package ripped from his grip. The policeman racing on his own path and none other's. The man, the statue going up Pegasus. Manes, hooves, hinds, the brass head of some dead soldier and a limb of one once-live officer airborne over city hall. A flagpole buckling at the knees.

And a tall building tottering trembling falling down inside her face down in the jailhouse bed springs teeth splintering and soul groaning. Smitty. Edgers. Reverend Michaels in the corridor being reasonable.

Sophie Heywood closed the door of the treatment room. And there was something in the click of it that made many of the old-timers, veterans of the incessant war – Garveyites, Southern Tenant Associates, trade unionists, Party members, Pan-Africanists – remembering night riders and day traitors and the cocking of guns, shudder.

'Are you sure, sweetheart? I'm just asking is all,' Minnie Ransom was saying, playfully pulling at her lower lip till three different shades of purple showed. 'Take away the miseries and you take away some folks' reason for living. Their conversation piece anyway.'

'I been there,' Cora Rider testified, wagging both hands by the wrists overhead. 'I know exactly what the good woman means,' she assured all around her.

'We all been there, one way or t'other,' the old gent with the lemonade tie said, hummed, chanted and was echoed by his twin from the other side of the circle, singing in common meter just like it was church.

Minnie Ransom's hands went out at last, and the visitors, noting the way several people around them checked their watches, concluded that this was either the official beginning of the healing or the end, it was hard to tell.

'I can feel, sweetheart, that you're not quite ready to dump the

Copyrighted Material

shit,' Minnie Ransom said, her next few words drowned out by the gasps, the rib nudges against starchy jackets, and shuffling of feet. '. . . got to give it all up, the pain, the hurt, the anger and make room for lovely things to rush in and fill you full. Nature abhors a so-called vacuum, don't you know?' She waited till she got a nod out of Velma. 'But you want to stomp around a little more in the mud puddle, I see, like a little kid fore you come into the warm and be done with mud. Nothing wrong with that,' she said pleasantly, moving her hands back to her own lap, not that they had made contact with Velma, but stopped some two or three inches away from the patient and moved around as if trying to memorize the contours for a full-length portrait to be done later without the model.

Several old-timers at this point craned their necks round to check with the veteran staff in the rear. It was all very strange, this behavior of Miz Minnie. Maybe she was finally into her dotage. 'A hundred, if she's a day,' murmured Cora.

'I can wait,' Minnie said, as though it were a matter of handing Jake Daniels her shoes and sitting in the booth in stocking feet to flip through a magazine while her lifts were replaced. She crossed her legs again, leaned forward onto the high knee, dropped her chin into that palm, then slapped her other arm and a length of silk around her waist and closed her eyes. She could've been modeling new fashions for the golden age set or waiting for a bus.

'Looking more like a monkey every day,' Cora thought she was thinking to herself till someone jostled her elbow from behind and scorched the back of her neck with a frown.

'Far out,' one of the visitors was heard to mumble. 'Far fucking out. So whadda we supposed to do, stand here for this comedy?'

'Shush.'

'Look, lady,' tapping on his watch, 'We –'

'I said to shush, so shush.'

The visitor turned red when the giggles from the rear and side drifted his way. And the woman who had shushed him, a retired schoolteacher from the back district, shifted her position so that she no longer faced the two women but was standing kitty-corner, her arms folded across her chest, keeping one eye on her former student

Copyrighted Material

in the gown with her behind out and the other on the redbone who seemed to have more to say but not if she had anything to do with it.

Velma Henry clutched the stool. She felt faint, too faint to ask for a decent chair to sit in. She felt like she was in the back room of some precinct, or in the interrogation room of terrorist kidnappers, or in the walnut-paneled office of Transchemical being asked about an error. She cut that short. She hadn't the strength. She felt her eyes rolling away. Once before she'd had that feeling. The preacher in hip boots spreading his white satin wings as she stepped toward him and was plunged under and everything went white.

She closed her eyes and they rolled back into her head, rolled back to the edge of the table in her kitchen, to the edge of the sheen – to cling there like globules of furniture oil, cling there over the drop, then hiding into the wood, cringing into the grain as the woman who was her moved from sink to stove to countertop turning things on, turning the radio up. Opening drawers, opening things up. Her life line lying for an instant in the cradle of the scissors' X, the radio's song going on and on and no stop-notes as she leaned into the oven. The melody thickening as she was sucked into the carbon walls of the cave, then the song blending with the song of the gas.

'Release, sweetheart. Give it all up. Forgive everyone everything. Free them. Free self.'

Velma tried to pry her eyelids up to see if the woman was actually speaking. She was certain Mrs Ransom had not spoken, just as she was sure she'd heard what she heard. She tried to summon her eyes back, to cut the connection. She was seeing more than she wished to remember in that kitchen. But there she was in a telepathic visit with her former self, who seemed to be still there in the kitchen reenacting the scene like time counted for nothing. She tried to move from that place to this, to see this yellow room, this stool, this white tile, this window where the path to the woods began, this Ransom woman who was calling her back. But the journey back from the kitchen was like the journey in the woods to gather. And gathering is a particular thing where the eyes are concerned, M'Dear Sophie taught. You see nothing but what you're looking for. After sassafras, you see only the

Copyrighted Material

reddish-brown barkish things of the woods. Or after searching out eucalyptus, the eyes stay tuned within a given range of blue-green-gray and cancel out the rest of the world. And never mind that it's late, that the basket is full, that you got what you came for, that you are ready to catch the bus back to town, are leisurely walking now on the lookout for flowers or berries or a little holding stone to keep you company. The gathering's demands stay with you, lock you in to particular sights. The eyes will not let you let it go.

All Velma could summon now before her eyes were the things of her kitchen, those things she'd sought while hunting for the end. Leaves, grasses, buds dry but alive and still in jars stuffed with cork, alive but inert on the shelf of oak, alive but arrested over the stove next to the matchbox she'd reached toward out of habit, forgetting she did not want the fire, she only wanted the gas. Leaning against the stove then as the performer leaned now, looking at the glass jars thinking who-knew-what then, her mind taken over, thinking, now, that in the jars was no air, therefore no sound, for sound waves weren't all that self-sufficient, needed a material medium to transmit. But light waves need nothing to carry pictures in, to travel in, can go anywhere in the universe with their independent pictures. So there'd be things to see in the jars, were she in there sealed and unavailable to sounds, voices, cries. So she would be light. Would go back to her beginnings in the stars and be star light, over and done with, but the flame traveling wherever it pleased. And the pictures would follow her, haunt her. Be vivid and sharp in a vacuum. To haunt her. Pictures, sounds and bounce were everywhere, no matter what you did or where you went. Sound broke glass. Light could cut through even steel. There was no escaping the calling, the caves, the mud mothers, the others. No escape.

She'd been in a stupor, her gaze gliding greasily over the jars on the shelf till she fastened onto the egg timer, a little hourglass affair. To be that sealed – sound, taste, air, nothing seeping in. To be that unavailable at last, sealed in and the noise of the world, the garbage, locked out. To pour herself grain by grain into the top globe and sift silently down to a heap in the bottom one. That was the sight she'd been on the hunt for. To lie coiled on the floor of the thing and then

Copyrighted Material

to bunch up with all her strength and push off from the bottom and squeeze through the waistline of the thing and tip time over for one last sandstorm and then be still, finally be still. Her grandmother would be pleased, her godmother Sophie too. 'Girl, be still,' they'd been telling her for years, meaning different things.

And she'd be still in the globes, in the glass jars, sealed from time and life. All that was so indelible on her retina that the treatment room and all its clutter and mutterings were canceled out. Her kitchen, that woman moving about in obsessive repetition, the things on the shelf, the search, the demand would not let her eyes, let her, come back to the healer's hands that were on her now.

'A grown woman won't mess around in mud puddles too long before she releases. It's warmer inside,' she thought she was hearing. 'Release, sweetheart. Let it go. Let the healing power flow.'

She had had on a velour blouse, brown, crocheted. She felt good in it, moving about the booth in it, the cush, the plush soft against her breasts. The kind of blouse that years ago she would have worn to put James Lee Henry, called Obie now, under her spell. She moved about in the booth, the leather sticky under her knees, but the velour comforting against her skin. He no longer thought she was a prize to win. But the blouse was surely doing something to him, she was certain. But certain too that she was, even sitting right there, just a quaint memory for him, like a lucky marble or a coin caught from the Mardi Gras parade. She didn't want to think too much on that. She was losing the thread of her story. She had been telling him about those Chinese pajamas and the silver buckets but had lost her way.

But it wasn't the blouse feeling good or the memories of their courting days that was distracting her. James Lee had begun moving the dishes aside, disrupting her meal. Her salad bowl no longer up under her right wrist where she could get at it between chunks of steak and mouthfuls of potatoes but shoved up against the wall next to the napkin rack. Her sweet potato pie totally out of reach. And now he moved her teacup toward the hot sauce bottle. He was interrupting her story, breaking right in just as she was about to get to the

Copyrighted Material

good part, to tell her to put her fork down and listen. She was seriously considering jabbing his hand with the fork as he reached to grasp her hands, his tie falling into her plate, covering the last two pieces cut from near the bone that she'd been saving to relish after she finished talking.

'Baby, I wish you were as courageous emotionally as you are . . .'

She missed hearing it somehow. Close as his face was to hers, plainly as he was speaking, attentive as she tried to be, she just couldn't hear what the hell he was saying. She couldn't blame it on the waiters. Usually rattling trays and slinging silverware into the washer, most of them were at the busboy table drinking ice tea and murmuring low. No diners were laughing or talking loud, only a few men sat about alone reading the Sunday papers and sipping coffee. The winos who usually parked by the coatrack to bug the diners lining up for the cashier were outside, sitting on the curb. It was quiet. But she still couldn't quite seem to make out what he was jabbering about all up in her face.

'Let me help you, Velma. Whatever it is we . . . wherever we're at now . . . I can help you break that habit . . . learn to let go of past pain . . . like you got me to stop smoking. We could . . .'

She heard some of it. He was making an appeal, a reconciliation of some sort, conditions, limits, an agenda, help. Something about emotional caring or daring or sharing. James Lee could be tiresome in these moods. She pulled her hand away and reached for her bag. If things were going to get heavy, she needed a cigarette. But he caught her hands again. Rising up out of the booth and damn near coming across the table, he pulled her hands away from her lighter and held them, then resumed his seat and went right on talking, talking.

'Dammit, James. Obie. Let go. I haven't finished my –'

'Let me finish. What I want to say . . .' He paused and wagged his head like it was a sorrowful thing he had to tell her. She snorted. There was a shred of spinach clinging between his front teeth like a fang, which made it all ridiculous. 'Do you have any idea, Velma, how you look when you launch into one of your anecdotes? It's got to be costing you something to hang on to old pains. Just look at

Copyrighted Material