

Celeste Rita Baker

RESPONDING IN KIND

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“Dat girl ain’t got no sense atall! I don’t care how upset she is, she got no business leaving me beggin’ at no graveyard! Took me damn car. My car! I should bust she one good cuff upside she head. She too hardened. Wouldn’t listen to me. Never listened to me. Well, who don’t hear must feel. The only thing she use she ears for is to hold up them oversize earrings. I tried to warn her. I knew that damn boy was no damn good, that one that started this whole mess, don’t care who his people is. She listen to me? No, I tell you! She start smellin’ her pee, think she grown and now here we is buryin’ a baby. Ain’t that bad enough? Bad enough, I tell you. Me ain’ never bury one a me own babies and here one a my babies buryin’ a child. That’s bad enough. But is that enough?! Enough for one damn day? No, she gotta go and steal me damn car!”

“Mommy, I wouldn’t call it stealing, exactly.”

“No. You wouldn’t, would you?” Lorraine cut her eye at her only son, Gerald. He looked so much like her memories of his father, with his face so narrow and dark that his features seemed concentrated, that it often confused her sense of time.

“Just be cool, Mommy. Nobody’s having a good day.”

She thought about throwing the dish of macaroni and cheese at him, but didn’t. Only because it was Mrs. Milligan’s dish. The one she bought from the stumpy guy who came by selling stuff out of the trunk of his car. She remembered Mrs. Milligan inspecting the two quart baking dish as if it were fine crystal. And then deciding to buy it because it was made in Taiwan and her son had been there during his travels with the

army, which was the only practical way he could think of for escaping the Virgin Islands and his mother.

The kitchen door swung open and banged against the refrigerator. “Mommy! People comin! Wha to do wid dem?”

“What you think you s’posed to do with them? Pitch them over the railing? Shit!”

Ameka, unscathed, looked to Gerald.

“Put them to sit down in the living room. If they brought any food, you bring it in here. And ask them if they want something to drink. Anything else, Mommy?”

Lorraine ignored them both as she shoved a chair against the fridge and climbed up to get the bottles of liquor she kept in the upper cabinets.

Ameka skated back down the length of the hallway in new patent leather shoes.

“And where that other sorry ass was, anyhow? If he’da been there she wouldn’ta even think to drive she ownself home from no damn funeral in the first place!” She backed off the chair with her last bottle of Johnnie Walker Red held by the neck.

“What you bringing him up for? He ain’t been on the scene since she told him she was pregnant. You want me to get some glasses or you gon’ use paper cups?”

“You just reach Rhonda’s tray down here and I’ll do the rest.” She paused, then added loudly, hoping he heard a command instead of a plea, “I want you to go get your sister.”

Gerald brought down the brass tray one of his girlfriends had stolen the night of their Mexican restaurant dinner date and given to his mother for Christmas. He thought about bringing down the other tray too, the one from McDonald’s but decided against it.

“Mommy, why you don’t let Derri rest, no?”

“Look boy, just shut up and go do wha Ah tol you! Ah don’ need you to be second guessing me today, you hear?! You don’t know shit! Go get her I said!”

“No.” Gerald cracked the ice trays on the chipped, spotlessly clean, yellow laminated countertop.

“None a you worth a hill a beans. Alla you just a big pain in my barna, all ‘cept Pookie, she the only one a you got the lease little bit a sense. Gatha up dem glasses and

put dem on the tray, no? What you standing round for? There's reasons there's so much work for a family to do after a buryin', you know."

"No, Mommy, leave her alone."

"And see if she got me bottle of Cruzan Gold in there with she. De liddle tief."

Gerald balanced the tray of glasses in one hand and the bowl of ice in the other. He kicked open the kitchen door, hoping Ameka wasn't on the other side with a platter full of chicken or something. "I ain't going, Mommy."

Lorraine sighed. It had been a long time since she'd been able to tell Gerald what to do.

She passed Ameka in the hall carrying a pan of potato stuffing with Pookie behind her struggling with a pot of rice and beans.

"Who all there?" she asked, regretting for the zillionth time that she'd have to go through the living room to get to the bedrooms.

"A bunch a people. Miss Potter and Miss Soto and dat funny lookin' lady wha' always smell so stink, and Leon and Ray—"

But Lorraine was already there. She put on a grief-stricken dazed expression and weaved through the crowd unstopped.

"Now Derecia, I know how you feel," Lorraine began as soon as she closed the door behind her, the room that housed the crib, the crib the baby barely slept in, so up in arms was he, "but you gotta get up."

Derecia lay on her back on the twin bed closest to the door. The bottle of rum dangled from one hand while Jakiel's crib sheet was pressed into service as part blanket and part tissue by the other.

"How you gon' know how I feel?" Derecia tried to root herself deeper into the cushiness of the soft mattress.

At least she can still talk, thought Lorraine.

"Because everybody knows pain. Everybody knows sorrow. That's why all these people here today. Trying to....trying to... say they're sorry too. Trying to share the load of grief with you. Come on, get up and show some respect for the consideration they're showing you."

“Dat’s bullshit, Mommy. Dey here for the party. For the food and some a dis rum. Buh, dat’s whey dey lose out.” Derecia tipped the bottle to her lips, like an experienced drunk, Lorraine thought, “becharse...because Ah ain’t sharing. And Ah ain’t goin’ out dere neida.”

“You gotta get up. I need you to help me. Derri, there’s food to set out and glasses to fill, and yes, I tell you, condolences to accept. They can’t give you your son back, but you gon’ have to take what they can give. Get up, baby.”

“Well, if day can’ gea me wha Ah wan’, wha Ah mus do wid dem? Ah don’ need look dere ugly faces jus to hear dem say wha dey s’pose to say, is all poppyshow, anyhow.”

She shifted her gaze to the ceiling. “No, I ain’ goin’ out dey. Ah wish everybody jus’ drop dead. Jus’ drop dead...lak...like Jakiel. Jus’ wake up dead.”

Lorraine looked at her eighteen year old daughter, the most confused of her four children. Half the tears she’d cried in the last five days had been for Derecia. Derecia, with her smile as powerful as high noon thundershowers and her far flung ambitions, now forgotten. Derecia, who was so smart in so many ways, and so astonishingly dumb in others. The girl really didn’t seem to know what had happened to her life during the past year and a half. And she didn’t have a clue as to how to go on either, how to piece together the semblance of a functional woman from the shattered leftovers of a child.

“You get up and go out in the living room right now, ‘fore I give you wha’ Polly gea’ de drum!” Lorraine found herself yanking open the closet door, almost as if her body moved instinctively, “Ah ain’ axin’ you! Ah tellin’ you! Do it now, else Ah whip you ass and den you *still* goin’ out.”

She wrestled a wide red plastic belt off a hanger as Derecia watched, ready to spring to the other side of the bed, not sure how far her mother would really go.

Lorraine started showering the air with blows as soon as she had a good grip on the belt. The third swing caught Derecia on the toes. She curled up and rolled over, the open bottle of rum going with her, sloshing onto her clothes and soaking the bed.

“Get up, you fool! Look what you doin! You gon’ have de place stinkin’ like de drunk you tryna play! Stop dis silliness and act like you got good sense!”

Derecia jumped up on the middle of the bed. Her black crepe dress hiked up around firm hips and still soft belly. She waved the bottle widely in front of her and jumped from bed to bed.

“Stop! Mommy, stop! Ah warnin’ you! Somebody gon’ gea hurt! Stop!”

“You?! You warnin’ me?! Well, wha’ kinda day dis is, no? Ah gon’ tear your butt up, and de more mess you make in dis room, de worse it gon’ be!”

The door opened and faces of all ages and degrees of concern appeared. Mrs. Milligan’s lilac bulk took up most of the doorway, but she was framed by Gerald, whose flared nostrils and bitten lips signaled that he was ready to mash Mrs. Milligan through the plasterboard wall if he had to, and Ameka, who burst out with the high pitched giggle she was calling a laugh this week, and Pookie, who peeked through fingers covered in barbeque sauce, and Leon, who looked bewildered, not sure if he had the right to yell, or who to yell at.

“Wha goin’ on in heh?” Mrs. Milligan’s melodic bass, which always seemed to come from her massive breasts, penetrated the other ruckus easily, even though she was not the loudest.

“Mommy!” Lorraine noticed that her title exploded from Gerald with the tone of command he used on his so-called friends.

“Derri getting beat! Derri getting beat!” Ameka chanted.

“Ah thought you say we s’posed ta be nice ta Derri today,” Pookie said.

“Get out!” shouted Lorraine. “Get out, alla you!”

Derecia threw her legs out from under her and bounced butt first on the bed, capping the bottle of rum with her thumb.

Mrs. Milligan sidestepped the others and closed the door in their faces.

“Millie, you too. I’m handlin’ her.”

“Ah ain’ no horse,” mumbled Derecia.

“You doin’ a piss poor job of it, Lorraine. Now, Derecia, what all dis roogadoo about?”

“Eh-Eh, Miss Millie.” Derecia turned the bottle of Cruzan up to her mouth and drank while Mrs. Milligan clasped her hands under her ballooning stomach and waited. Lorraine collapsed on the nearest bed.

“Ah can’ be bodda, boddared wid ya nosy self today. Ah tired.”

Lorraine flicked the belt uselessly in Derecia’s direction.

Mrs. Milligan sucked in more air than Derecia thought possible. They stared at each other until Derecia crossed her ankles, and began caressing her toes with her other foot.

“Mommy, Ah tink you broke me toe, you know.”

“I been watchin’ you and lovin’ you since from de time you and you Mommy first moved in heh ‘cross de hall from me when you was no mor’n a pea in pod. I seen wha’ you been through and wha you facin’ now and Ah standing heh waitin’ for you ta tell me wha’ alla dis yellin and carryin’ on is ‘bout.”

Derecia tried hard to tell the old lady to mind her own business, but the words burst like bubbles before they reached her tongue. She remembered the day they moved into this apartment. She hadn’t liked anything about the place. The buildings towering over her, with windows like rotten teeth, vicious looking dogs roaming the parking lot, the bones of abandoned cars. The steps to their third floor new home were hard for her four year old legs to manage and when she looked between the porch railings she saw a rusted toaster, half a bike, forgotten laundry and a rainbow of empty bottles. After forty eleven hundred trips up and down the stairs Miss Millie offered her some limeade in a pretty glass. A glass glass with colors that came and went like magic. When she’d finished drinking Miss Millie told her to “keep workin’ chile, we gon’ talk togedda soon”.

“I’m tryna get the little heifer to come out and act decent.”

They may as well have been alone, Mrs. Milligan and Derecia.

Lorraine said nothing more. Her raspy breathing calmed slowly, noticeably.

Derecia’s eyes started to glisten. “Ahdonwanseenobody.”

“You ‘shamed, chile? You got nothin’ ta be shamed fo’. We all know you was takin’ good care of Jakiel. Can’ nobody s’plain de Lord’s way. Can’ nobody s’plain crib death neida. But we all know you was a good Mudda and he was a sweet liddle boy. T’ain your fault, girl. We know dat. An we gon’ miss him too. We heh to tell you dat.”

“Das, das, dat ain’—“

“Yes, t’is. But wha you ain’ say is deh’s mo’. You tink people judgin’ you. Because you took up wid dat high falutin’, wicked boy everybody buh you could see was evil, an’ he went an make you look like a fool, jus’ wha’ any bad man woulda do wid you actin like such a fool. An’ den cause you next go an get youself in de family way by any ol’ wormy apple wha’ fall off de tree. An’ den you went an’ quit school even doh dey was gon lea’ you stay and try make something a youself, an’ now you heh widout chit nor chile and you tink we judgin’ you.” Mrs. Milligan took another deep breath, “an’ you right.”

Lorraine’s head snapped up, “I thought you was gon’ try an make her feel better,” she said.

“Of course we judgin’ you. So wha? You hear me? So what? You ain’ spread off dere judging de rest a we? You calling me nosy. So wha’ now? You ‘spek me ta run go hide from you? Not ta share me coconut candy wid you no more? Not to ask you to come take me curtains down when dey need to wash? No. Don’ run from people, chile. Come out in de living room. We mournin’ Jakiel, we need to be togedda.”

“Shit, Millie, you’s a two hundred fifty pound waste a time,” said Lorraine.

Mrs. Milligan didn’t bother to respond. She’d known Lorraine when she was still drowning the death of Gerald’s father in other men’s tears. Had seen her go from needful of arms that held to distrustful of arms that trapped, burdened and beat. Thank God for Leon, though, he was starting to help. Lorraine she’d deal wid later.

“Bring you bottle wid you, if you have ta. Ah gon’ wait right heh.”

Derecia didn’t want to look up. Didn’t want to see Miss Millie’s stonelike face. She couldn’t escape it though, her image was there in her dead babies’ crib sheet. Pastel sheep, flowers and fish formed the pattern between Miss Millie’s broad brown forehead and jaw. Fishy eyes of still bright reddish brown, sheepish nose and flower teeth. Miss Millie had out waited her before.

She got up, eyes on the ever swaying worn linoleum tiles. She stumbled once and heard Miss Millie’s rumbling “das all right, chile,” as she followed Miss Millie’s leather soled flats down the hall. You could tell Miss Millie had good legs when she was young she thought.

Pookie emerged from her hiding place in the hallway between the chest of drawers that was used as a linen closet and the stack of milk crates that held up the ceiling tiles with books and records. Derecia switched the Cruzan Rum and crib sheet to the other hand as Pookie took firm hold of her knee.

“Jakiel don’ live heh no mo’,” Pookie whispered.

Derecia drew her little sister closer, then struggled to lift her up. They crashed against the walls on their way to the only vacant space on the couch.