

On the Swing

“**D**id I order the wrong thing? I told them exactly what you said. Maybe they mixed up the order somehow. I’m sorry... I’ll just call ‘em back.”

“No, it’s not that... It’s my own fault... When I said that this was my favorite dish, I might’ve been exaggerating a bit,” she said sheepishly. “The name Kung Pao Chicken sounds kind of classy—so I thought it would taste good. If I’d known it was going to be *this* spicy, I would’ve gotten fried rice like you.”

“I’ll eat it, Momma,” Chris assured her while sucking the last bit of meat from a tasty bone.

“Boy, if you don’t stop begging... It’s what I get for acting uppity.”

As Ontario watched sympathetically, she continued to pick at the dish with no desire to further inflame her mouth.

“Here, have some of these,” he said with a mouth full of food. “I’m not going to eat ‘em all.”

“No, I’m fine. I’ll just finish my rice and be done with.”

“Are you serious?” he slid the chair out from behind him as he stood and proceeded to add wings to her plate.

Chris’ eyes stretched wide as his mouth grew wet at the possibility of having another delicious piece of chicken.

“No, seriously, I’ll be okay,” she protested.

“Have some rice too.” Still leaning over the table, he raked on more food.

Relieved that her growling stomach would soon be settled, she accepted the offer by ending her objection. After Chris received another wing, an eggroll and fortune cookie, he was satisfied, and for a while they sat chewing and smiling, enjoying their first dinner together; no one wanted to ruin the

moment with words. That is until a particular three-year-old begged to know what his fortune read.

Mouth still chomping and savoring the sweetness of the cookie, he held the piece of paper out in front of his mother's face.

“Can you read it, Momma?”

“Sure, Chris,” she said between chewing and swallowing.

With the paper in her hand she read, “It is better to play than to do nothing... I must admit, that does sound like you Chris... What about you, what does yours say?” she asked Ontario.

“Huh, oh—,” he grunted while sucking up sweet tea through the straw. “Mine says, ‘You are sitting on top of the world.’ Wow—that sounds about how I’m feeling tonight.” With sparkles in his eyes, he glanced at Vanessa.

“What yours say, Momma? Read yours,” demanded Chris.

“All right boy, wait a second, you’re so doggone bossy, I swear.”

After returning Ontario's flirtatious glance, she broke the cookie in half and took out the tiny slip of paper. Focusing, and then refocusing her eyes, she couldn't believe what was happening.

While the piece of paper remained perfectly still in her hands, the little black letters floated up and hovered above. The sentence began waving like a flag would from a subtle breeze. Then, letter by letter they all reestablished themselves on the paper. Lively, and with purpose, the tiny symbols hurried to the edges and leaped off like happy children jumping into the neighborhood pool.

Distinctly, Vanessa thought *pool* because with each letter diving to the table she felt ripples in her consciousness. Nearly all of them did this, one by one until only a few remained. Her eyes followed the fleeing letters to the tabletop as they got up, brushed themselves off, and scurried away.

She looked up at Ontario, but he hadn't noticed a thing; neither did Chris.

Looking back to the paper from which they'd come, she saw that only three letters remained.

What's going on? She thought.

The letters spelled out the words **I AM**. Then, as a familiar whisper she heard, "***I am that I am.***" It was a revelation. Though she did not notice, for there was no discomfort, but she'd stopped breathing. Her heart beat had slowed to that of a Buddhist Monk in deep meditation. A satisfying tingle developed at the back of her scalp and gradually crawled down the length of her spine. Instantly her body felt as light as the air in the room.

She'd heard the voice of God and she knew it. It didn't say, I AM God, or this is your Lord coming to you live from heaven, but it was without any doubt the voice of The Most High. Her eyes opened wide as she took in a deep inhale. Still unaware of what was happening, both Ontario *and* Chris were now curious to know what had caused her to react in such a way.

"Well..." Ontario said half-smilingly. "Are you going to read it?"

Startled, but still in a trance-like state, she tried to come up with something profound enough to satisfy the inquisitive onlookers, but there was nothing.

Having faith that something would pop into her head, she uttered, "Oh, yeah, it says—."

Thankfully, before she could make up anything, something else happened. The three letters rearranged themselves. **I** moved farther to the left of the sheet while **A** and **M** reversed places. Now more amazed than ever, there was another pause as she watched and felt the other little symbols as they all started returning. Up her arms and hands, back onto the paper they came. Like the unknown source that'd activated her spine, they left tingling trails on the surface of her skin.

A few mischievous letters had landed on the floor, they began crawling up her sandals. From her feet to her legs, over

sensitive kneecaps to the thighs, making their way up the abdomen and eventually further up to her chest, they moved across warm flesh as though well-trained boy scouts. From her arms to the palms of her hands, joyously they went before leaping from her fingertips back onto the strip.

Reassembled, but now crooked on the paper, some seemingly amused by the ordeal, she cleared her throat and read cautiously, “Love is thou master.”

There was a much-needed exhale that came gushingly from her chest while keeping in mind to thank God. Her heart was beating fast now.

When the meals were finished, they went back into the living room where Barbara Ann was sitting on the couch watching television.

“Oh—goodness gracious, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get in y’all’s way,” she said while peering up at them. “The kitchen was so quiet; I thought y’all had gone out on the porch.”

“It’s okay,” Vanessa assured her, “we were just going to watch a little T.V.”

“You sure?” asked the woman. “I wouldn’t want to intrude on you and Onnie.”

With the mentioning of Ontario’s nickname, Vanessa looked at him with a surprised grin.

“No, it’s fine—right, *Onnie*,” she said.

“Yeah, that’s cool,” Ontario replied through his teeth.

As Barbara Ann she went back to watching television, Vanessa’s considerate words brought a feeling of warmth to the lonely woman. The two guests sat next to her, while Ontario remained standing a bit longer before sitting close to Vanessa in the wooden chair.

After watching only two episodes of *Everybody Hates Chris*, Vanessa looked over to see her son asleep with his head resting on Miss Barbara’s side.

“I’m sorry,” she said before attempting to remove her child’s sweaty head.

“No, let him rest,” insisted the woman. She then cradled the boy and stood with him in her arms. “Onnie, go to my room and get a blanket.”

The woman who’d been staggering drunk hours earlier, then removed the child’s sneakers and gently laid him next to his mother on the couch. When Ontario returned with a thin spread, she placed it over the child with the benevolence of a grandmother.

Relieved of responsibility, both Vanessa and Ontario were still somewhat giddy.

“Would you like to go out on the porch?” Ontario asked. “Maybe look at the stars?”

She looked at her sleeping son before glancing up at Miss Barbara Ann.

“Go ahead,” the woman said while shooing them with one hand. “I used to be young too you know. Go on and have some alone time. There’s a swing out there, and the night is beautiful.”

The woman was no longer terribly intoxicated and the two were only going to the porch, literally ten steps away, therefore, Vanessa felt that she was leaving her child in good enough hands.



The Carolina summer night was unusually cool. And with every breath, it seemed as though the air was filled with some magical substance that drew them closer in spirit.

By the mere idea of being on an actual date, she was being swept away. Ontario was such a gentleman, and *so doggone cute*, but she’d only known him for less than a day.

How can I feel this way about a person I just met?

Momentarily her mind went to Chris’ father Franklin, a boy who refused to grow up. She once hoped he would change his ways and perhaps give her a magical proposal, maybe even settle down and provide for his family. Ironically, it had been recent that she’d felt this way, but his attitude earlier in the presence of his son, made him repulsive and too sickening to

think about. Now, while standing there next to Ontario, when she tried seeing Pype as a father and husband it was unimaginable.

And while they stood with their hands on the railing of the porch, staring off into the night, suddenly Vanessa noticed something coming down from the dark sky.

“Ooo, look,” she said excitedly while pointing into the night. “A shooting star!”

For a brief moment, the blackness in the far distance lit up with a beautiful flash—pure whiteness trailed by a slender tail of orange and red, purple and blue. The sight left Vanessa flabbergasted. She had never seen anything so magnificent. It was gone as soon as it had appeared it seemed, but to Vanessa it made things official.

Moments after seeing the ball of fire, she remembered to make a wish.

I wish—I wish I’m not pregnant, she thought.

Shocked by her own thinking, the elated young woman had forgotten all about the rape. *Why now?* First it was the thought of Pype and his disrespectfulness that tried to force its way into her mind, now it was the unthinkable.

When she felt sick to her stomach, she remembered being pregnant with Chris. Now with the notion of being with child again, that same feeling was back. She was nauseous and needed to have a seat. *Why now?* She kept thinking.

But she was determined that nothing would ruin the night, not even that. She continued on as though all was well. If her body prevailed, it would definitely be something to worry about later.

“Make a wish,” she said. A sudden reflex nearly caused her to gag. He didn’t notice, and she thanked God.

“I think my wish has already come true,” he said while staring deeply at her.

Since they’d been outside, she’d done an excellent job at avoiding the lure of his eyes, but with the night-creatures singing and after seeing the shooting star, standing there next to him, she

realized the connection was back and more magnetic than before. She wanted to hold his hand, to feel his pulse while warm blood traveled through his veins.

With those thoughts surging, a draft of cool air came across her face and her sickness was gone. She had not expected the night to be so enchanting.

Earlier in the day Ontario had come to her rescue. He was her Prince Charming, her soul mate, protector, the man who'd eventually carry her across the threshold as the tail of her wedding dress trailed behind.

Now heavily engrossed in a fantasy, she heard whistles being blown, church bells ringing, laughter and cries of happiness; she could see and feel the rice being thrown as tiny pieces of grain fell to her feet. She felt tears of joy and him holding her in that very special moment when two people merge as one and nothing else exists.

When a second breeze came through causing the porch swing to squeak while lightning lit up the sky miles away, she was snatched out of the trance. The vision was gone.

Momentarily fixated on a fairytale future with a man she'd just met, the interruption served as a snap from a hypnotist's fingers, bringing her back to reality, embarrassingly so. *He must think I'm some kind of a flake*, she thought while looking away.

Ontario sensed something was wrong and suggested sitting together on the swing.

They sat down and began swinging, four knees bending simultaneously, feet pushing off of the cement floor, going back as metal creaked and the wooden beam above strained under the weight. Then letting go, coming forward they glided happily toward the starting point, only to do it all over again. With each back and forward motion of the wooden bench, the chains that hung from the eyebolts creaked and groaned, creaked and groaned.

Few words were spoken, but for those that were, received undivided attention. It was new to the both of them to have someone actually listen.

“Whoever said that darkness represents unhappiness or evil might want to be outside on a night like this,” said Vanessa while the swing and night creatures played a melody.

“Absolutely,” Ontario agreed before saying jokingly, “What are you, some kind of philosopher?”

The two laughed, and after a while began talking about everything and nothing in particular.

“It’s a good thing the mosquitoes ain’t out tonight,” said Ontario. “Last night Momma and me tried sitting out here and a few of ‘em started setting up Red Cross stands like it was a blood drive.”

Suppressing her laugh into a giggle, Vanessa swallowed a gulp of sweet tea.

Then, from left field she said, “My son does know who his daddy is.

Ontario was caught off guard. *Where’d that come from? I wasn’t thinking that—was I?*

“Excuse me,” he said out loud.

“As you probably guessed by now, Franklin is his father... Man do I wish that wasn’t the case, but it is. And it’s just somethin’ we have to live with.”

“Uh, why are you telling me this exactly?”

“Because, I don’t want you to think that I’m like a lot of these girls who sleep around so much that they have to go on some television show and embarrass themselves and the baby when even the third guy they bring on ‘*is 99.9% not the father.*’ I assure you—I’m not proud of it, but Franklin Wright is my son’s daddy.”

“Vanessa, that’s none of my business. Not to sound like I don’t care, but that’s between you and him, and your son.”

“All I’m saying is that you probably heard somethin’ different, but it’s not true. He was the first guy I’d ever been with—willingly that is.”

She stopped speaking suddenly, but Ontario was not naïve. He knew exactly what that meant. She'd been raped.

She continued.

"His name was Percy Bowman," she said, her head held high, eyes focused on the stars as the swing continued to creak and groan, creak and groan.

"You can say that I didn't know him all that good. He was Mrs. Eleanor Bowman's husband. They were my second foster family."

Ontario wondered, *why is she telling me this?*

"My first foster mother was a sweet old lady named Miss Martha; everybody called her Momma. She was the nicest person I'd ever known. After her husband died, she dedicated the rest of her life to taking care of unwanted children. She was in her seventies when she brought me in. I was the last child she took and the youngest, one of many she had living in her home. I was only two. As time went on and the older kids left, I found myself being a helper to her more than anything. You can say I got my parenting skills from her..." She paused before adding, "She passed away when I was still very young—after that the agency sent me to live with the Bowman's."

"Vanessa, you don't have to say anything else."

"No, its fine, I'm fine... Like I said, Percy Bowman was his name. He worked on the railroads so he was gone most of the time. When he did come home it wasn't to stay for long," her voice fluttered like a flame would from a sudden breeze. "I really didn't think he was like that... The first time it happened was the worst... He'd come home early that night... I guess Mrs. Bowman was asleep. I was too. Until—"

The strong persona was no longer there.

"Vanessa—you really don't have to talk about it."

How did it come to this? Why am I telling him so much?

Her emotions had taken over. The night had been going so well. But she'd somehow lost control. Eventually, as she insisted on continuing in graphic detail, and as the steady hum of the Earth could be heard, and its rotation felt, and while tears

welled in her eyes, it was a must that she told the story in its entirety. Someone other than herself had to know.

“I was only thirteen,” she said with a snuffle. “He was kissing on me; touching me. I felt *so* dirty—his breath smelled like beer and cigarettes, the prickly hairs on his face poking me... Ugh! I hated him so much!

I told Mrs. Bowman about it, but she didn’t believe me. Then one day she noticed that I was gaining weight... I was pregnant, and nobody cared... After a few days of noticing how I was changing, she asked him about it. That was the first time he’d beaten me.”

“You mean he hit you while you were pregnant?” asked Ontario with bewilderment.

“Yes...”

“What happened after that?”

“I lost my child,” she said. “I had a miscarriage and nobody cared. They buried my baby in the backyard like it was nothing.” Her sniffling now came at closer intervals. “She only made him promise not to ever do it again. I didn’t think he would either, but I was wrong. He kept being the animal he was, and I continued to hate his guts... He would sneak home early sometimes when Mrs. Bowman was gone. He told me to keep my mouth shut or else. I was always so scared around him. And then one morning while I was brushing my teeth, I threw up in the sink. When it kept happening, I knew I was pregnant again.”

Aghast, Ontario inquired, “How did his wife find out that time?”

“After he’d gone on the road again, I told her.”

“What did she do?”

“At first, she seemed upset, but then she explained to me that it wasn’t my fault. She said that she shouldn’t have married him, and that she was very sorry... But it was the *way* she’d said it that let me know that she was definitely going to do something. Later on, that same week, they’d gotten into a really bad argument, and he called me a lying whore and all kinds of other bad names.”

The wetness now on Ontario's eyes sparkled in the moonlight as they continued to swing. She had his full attention.

"The second time I was so stressed out. I started bleeding one day and couldn't stop. I lost two of his children and he didn't..." she halted.

"Vanessa, I'm so sorry."

"Look, I'll understand if you never want to see me again. I have a lot of baggage and you have so much going for yourself. I just want you to know that I've really enjoyed myself tonight, seriously. And please, don't worry about me; everything that happened in my life, happened for a reason. Everything happens for a reason."