

SECOND LINE FOR THE LIVING

Long Excerpt

THE NOTICE IS TAPED to the door with painter's tape, which means whoever put it there knew what they were doing. Regular tape takes the paint. Painter's tape comes off clean. That's a person who has done this a hundred times and learned, somewhere around the twentieth door, that the paint is not the point.

I stand on the step and read it twice without touching it, the way you read a thing you already know.

STATE OF LOUISIANA, PARISH OF ORLEANS. NOTICE OF DELINQUENCY AND INTENT TO SELL TAX CERTIFICATE.

Then the address of the house I'm standing in front of, 2288 Danneel, in a font nobody chose. Then the number.

Eleven thousand four hundred eighty dollars and sixteen cents.

The sixteen cents is what does it. Eleven thousand I can't argue with. Eleven thousand is a wall. But somebody sat down and calculated the sixteen cents, added it, checked it, and let it print, and that means a person was involved. Somewhere in an office there is a human being who decided that my grandmother owes the state sixteen cents on top of everything else, and that person went home after, and probably had dinner.

I snap the rubber band on my wrist. Hard enough to sting.

It's 7:52 in the morning and the heat is already sitting on my chest like a hand. Late August in this city isn't weather, it's a mood the sky is in. Behind me somebody's window unit is running so loud it sounds angry. Down the block, a rooster. There is always a rooster. Nobody knows whose. Bunny's already got the sno-ball stand cart rolled out front of his store even though it's not even eight, red syrup dried sticky on one knuckle from testing the pumps, getting ready for kids who won't show up wanting one for another five hours yet, because some mornings you get ready early just to have something to do with your hands.

I fold the notice into quarters and put it in my scrub pocket, where it will stay for eleven days, going soft at the creases, until it's more cloth than paper.

Before I go in, I look up and down the block like the paper might explain itself if I give it an audience. The new gray house at the corner has black window frames and a realtor lockbox bright as a tooth. Across the way, Miss Pat's grandbaby has chalked a sun on the sidewalk, yellow already bleached almost white. The neutral ground is burned down to dirt except for the weeds that know how

to live anywhere. Danneel looks regular enough to make me angry at it.

Bunny sees me from his doorway. He doesn't holler. He just puts one hand over his heart, not theatrical, more like he is checking that it is still there. I lift my chin back. That's all either of us has in us before breakfast.

The paper has my name nowhere on it. Odette's, yes, in full, big enough that I could read it from the curb. The state knows who owns this place. It knows the parcel number, the assessed value, the year the roof permit got filed wrong and turned into a lien. It knows every way to count a house except the way we do: my sister asleep on the sofa after Tookie was born, my granddaddy's boots in the back room, the forty-one-inch line that says we came back. I put my thumb over Odette's name before I fold the notice. A little childish. A little useless. Still.

Then I go inside and make my grandmother's coffee.

The house is a double, which means it's two houses that were never quite two. We live in the left side. The right side has been empty since Miss Loretta went to her daughter's in Slidell in 2019, and every year the door on that side warps a little more, so now you have to lift and shove at the same time to get it open, like you're helping it up off the floor.

Odette is at the kitchen table when I come in. She's dressed. That's a good sign — dressed means she woke up in the right decade. Blouse buttoned right. Earrings in. Eighty-one years old and she still puts on earrings to sit in a kitchen where nobody's coming.

"You slam that door," she says.

"I did not slam it."

"You slammed it. I felt it in the floor."

"I closed it with intention."

She makes a sound in her throat that has meant don't get smart with me since the Eisenhower administration. I put the coffee in front of her. Chicory, four minutes, the little enamel pot, no measuring, because measuring is what people do when they don't know.

"You working today?"

"Both."

"Both." She doesn't say it like a question. She says it like a diagnosis. She wraps both hands around the cup even though it's ninety-one degrees in this kitchen, and she looks out the window at the fig tree in the neighbor's yard, the one that's been dropping fruit on our side of the fence for fifty years.

“They put a paper on the door,” she says.

My hands stop. Just for a second. “Yeah.”

“Which one they put?”

Which one. Like there’s a menu. Like she’s seen the whole catalog.

“The tax one,” I say.

Odette nods slow. She drinks her coffee. And then she says, in a voice so clear and level it scares me worse than the confusion ever does:

“Your granddaddy laid that floor you standing on. Nineteen fifty-nine. Cypress out of a barn in Vacherie. He was singing the whole time and he couldn’t sing.” She looks at me. “You understand what I’m telling you?”

“I understand.”

“No.” Her eyes go somewhere and come back, and when they come back she’s smiling, and she’s holding out her cup, and she says, “Marisol, baby, is your mama coming to get me today?”

Marisol.

My sister has been dead six years. I’ve had this conversation two hundred times. There’s a way to do it. You don’t correct. Correcting is for you, not them. You go where they are and you sit down.

So I take her cup and I say, “Not today. But I’m here.”

“Well.” Odette settles back, satisfied, like a woman whose ride has been confirmed. “That’s alright then.”

I go stand in the back room where she can’t see my face.

The back room is where the waterline is. Forty-one inches up the wall, a brown ring like the tide going out and deciding to stay. We painted over it in 2007 and it came back through in a year, the way certain things do, and after that we stopped fighting it. Odette used to say a house is allowed to remember.

There’s a mirror on that wall now. Big oval thing with a chipped gilt frame, hung there for exactly one reason, which is to cover the stain. Underneath it my grandfather’s floor, cypress, 1959, worn pale in a path from the door to the bed.

I stand there and do the math I’ve done every night for a week. Sacred Heart pays me \$16.40 an hour, thirty-two hours guaranteed, sometimes thirty-eight. Lafitte’s pays me nothing plus tips, and tips

in August are what people can spare in August. Tookie needs cleats and a graphing calculator, which is a hundred and twenty dollars of things a fifteen-year-old shouldn't have to hear the price of. Odette's medication, the one the insurance decided last spring is not medically necessary, is two hundred and ten dollars a month.

Eleven thousand four hundred eighty dollars and sixteen cents by October the seventh.

I could get maybe fourteen hundred together. If nothing broke. If nobody got sick. If the car held.

The car is a 2004 Buick with a check-engine light I've been treating as a personality trait since March.

Tookie comes out of his room at nine with his shirt inside out and his sticks in his back pocket, because he sleeps with them there like a man with a gun.

"You got camp?"

"Sectionals." He goes into the refrigerator like it might have changed. "Aunt Mars, we out of everything."

"We're out of some things."

"We out of eggs, milk, butter, and hope."

"We got hope. Hope's in the freezer."

He snorts. He's got Marisol's exact laugh and he doesn't know it, and I'll never tell him, because that's mine.

He gets a piece of bread and eats it dry, standing up, sixteen next month, taller than me since April. He looks at the door.

"Somebody put a paper on the—"

"I saw it. It's handled."

"Handled how?"

I look at him. Fifteen. Honor roll. Snare drum. His mother in his face.

"It's handled," I say.

And here's the thing about lying to a child who's already lost his mother: he lets you. He lets you because he needs it to be true more than he needs to know. He looks at me for a second too long, and then he takes the lie, and he puts it in his pocket next to the sticks, and he says, "Aight," and goes to sectionals.

That's what it costs. That's the whole price of being the one who's left. Not the shifts. Not the money. It's that he chose to believe me, and now I have to go be worth it.