

Folks in Peachstock, Georgia got so much to say about Beverly Hastings.

The women here swap Beverly gossip in bare kitchens over scant slices of bologna sandwiches, between sips of lemonade from stained jelly jars and over buckets of cut collards positioned between their wide legs. After a crowded game of checkers on the porch, a man will say her name and the syllables will drift above their heads and mix with a cloud of baritone laughter. Then they pass their idle ramblings down like a rickety heirloom and now children as young as four years old, hoop and holler about a woman they've never met.

These people surely talk, but all you'd have to do is ask what she did and most would go mute and shuffle away. Some might mumble about her giving them "a bad feeling" but nobody in this town can give you a straight answer.

It's funny how now I can barely catch all the details because at one point, long ago, Beverly was all we talked about. Back then we'd sit around and carry on about how hard she'd made her life, while Bessie and Hattie puffed their skinny cigarettes, I never did, I hated the taste. So yes, at one point I was talking too, I ain't gon lie, but at times I was also staying quiet, just listening. Sometimes because I didn't have any juicy bit to add, but mostly because deep down I was thinking how Beverly had more courage than all of us, yapping, and laughing, combined.

The path was made plain: to be a woman was to be a wife, and wives were to honor, cherish and obey. We weren't taught to think too much of our own lots, but serve our husbands and children. Keep your house pure and never refuse your husband was something Willie Mae repeated to over and over to all her daughters like a rhythmless song. Our mothers, grandmothers and aunts sprinkled it on our oatmeal, fastened it in our buttons, spoon fed it in our mouths, greased it in our scalps. But Beverly was hearing another song, underneath the one told to

her. Beverly's mother, Willie Mae was scared from the beginning; the hours her daughter would spend reading and writing crazy things about people and places she created in her mind; there was a fire in Beverly's eyes that wouldn't burn often giving herself over to girlish daydreams when life called for concrete facts.

That's why when Sam started coming around, Willie Mae was thrilled, it seemed like, she was finally getting what needed to be got.

Sam and Beverly's romance, if you want to call it that, was unremarkable but she was committed and ready to embrace the many roles predestined for her. She followed suit and married young like we all did. Wasn't any fanfare to the occasion, just a plain white cotton dress and stiff caramel cake after the living room ceremony. I think two other couples got married right beside them. And just like her, Sam grew up hearing similar songs of how things ought to be, except as a boy his tune was much different than hers.

The union started in a predictable fashion. Beverly, eager to create a home, tended to the scrubbing of floors, the frying of chicken and the insatiable snake swinging between Sam's legs. At least for the first few years, she believed if she worked hard enough she could make him happy. But all that work could only do so much. Cause to tell you the God honest truth, Sam had a mean streak. One he mostly kept hidden until she was all the way in. I can remember a handful of times one of us would be over there and he'd come home in one of his moods and she'd make up some reason why we suddenly had to go while biting her nail, but we all knew the real reason.

Then Sam Jr. came and the look on Sam's face was of absolute joy. The happiness of the moment seemed so deep, she tricked herself into thinking the new life would smooth out the man's mean edges. But the baby barely sat up on his own before Sam's sullenness moved back in like a relative with no intentions of leaving. Seemed like the more she tried, the more agitated

he got. It was a shame too, because she loved that baby with everything in her, but she was so preoccupied with Sam's dispositions she couldn't devote all her time to him.

Once I was passing by and through the window, saw Sam smack her down with the back of his hand. Thinking about it all now, it's like a blade in my belly; I should've done something but things were different back then.

"Mama what should I do?" she asked, one Sunday after church, off in the corner thinking no one could hear her.

"Pray honey pray. What else you gon' do? That boy needs his father and you need a husband. Marriage ain't easy you took those vows to withstand the good *and* the bad, and I know that man ain't all bad,"

And he wasn't, so she clung to those words, the same words we all clung to during the dark times.

To bring in extra money, Beverly, Hattie and I got jobs cleaning houses and running errands on the white side of town right before Christmas that year. Bessie said she'd rather have no presents under the tree than run around town for those white people. She could say things like that because her husband made a lot of money at his job.

Beverly and I was leaving this one family's house when the wife stopped us on the sidewalk.

"Whose is this?" she was waving papers in her hands and walking toward us. Beverly hesitated at first then reached out.

"Mine," Beverly looked at me while saying it.

"You wrote this?" the woman squinted her eyes. Beverly nodded.

"This is good, I'm sorry for snooping but I couldn't help myself, I glanced over the first line and I was hooked,"

Beverly laughed and in that velvety voice said, "It's just silly things, really,"

"Silly? Please. I know a good story when I read one and this—have you ever considered publishing your work?"

I think Beverly and I both jumped when she said that, well I know I did.

"I don't—I can't—I," you could tell the mere thought was choking out her words.

"Listen, I'm serious. I help edit for a magazine, it's local, nothing big but we publish stories twice a year and pay all the authors; a few of them sometimes even get picked up by the big publications in New York. This story is better than most of the slush we pay for,"

"Naw I think I'm alright but thank you," Beverly gave a smile and the one on the woman's face dropped. She was disappointed for sure but she couldn't begin to understand how her words sounded like to us: nonsense.

"Well if you change your mind let me know. The deadline for the next issue is the first of year,"

Beverly smiled and we kept on down the sidewalk, neither of us mentioning what had happened but instead talked about the upcoming Christmas play at church.

Sam Jr. was 6 or 7 by then and he played Joseph, my two played were Mary and a goat. Beverly went over those lines with that boy for weeks, I know it, but once he stood up there he froze and couldn't remember any of 'em. Even wet his pants from all those wide eyes looking at him. It was a few people laughing but you know to a boy, it probably felt like the whole world. Beverly was so embarrassed for him. She got up and took her son right off that stage to get and got him cleaned up. When they got out the bathroom, Sam was waiting, angry as a bull. Calling

the boy names, smacking him around like he really did something bad. Sam Jr. started crying, then peed himself so more. Whew, then that's when Sam lost it for real. Hitting, cussing, punching the boy. Til' something in Beverly snapped and she caught his hand mid-air. Whatever pride Sam had in that moment was gone, you could he wanted to lay her down flat in that moment, but he couldn't. not with all us watching.

We was all at Beverly's a few days before Christmas, while Sam was at work. She had the house decorated real nice for Sam Jr. There was red and green paper chains over every doorway and popcorn strings and candy canes fixed up on the tree. The snow was heavy that day.

"I gotta get away from him, I can't live like this no more," I remember her saying cigarette in between her finger, we was all sitting around her kitchen table playing cards. Hattie blew smoke in all our faces and put down a card.

"And where you gonna go? You talkin' crazy, Sam Hastings one of the finest men in this town, so he got a little temper? What man don't?"

Bessie smashed down her third cigarette in the ashtray beside her, "Well she shouldn't have to put up with *all* the stuff Sam doing. But maybe if you soften up a bit. Let him be a man,"

I don't remember what I said, knowing me, probably nothing.

Beverly ain't say much after that, Sam Jr. walked in so she changed the subject and we just kept on tossing out those cards.

A few days before the new year she called me talking in a low tone, almost whispering. She asked me if I had wrote that white lady's number somewhere. I hadn't and she went silent, I thought she was about to hang up, but then she came back and asked me to meet her at the lady's house. Meet you there?! I still don't know how she convinced me to do that, but

I did. That's the one part I never told Hattie or Bessie; I was there when she gave that white lady her story.

She paid her \$30 right there on the spot. Don't sound like too much now, but it was a lot then. I was amazed, shoot—made me want to sit down and write a story.

"What made you change your mind?" I had to know.

Beverly flashed those bills in my face.

"Yeah I see, a little more money around the house won't hurt"

Beverly shook her head and gave me a look that told me I didn't understand.

"Naw, this is ain't for the house, well not that house at least, this for me, and Sam Jr., this my out,"

"Out? Out where?"

"Out of here, well at least away from Sam, I don't know.

All of the sudden, all the bad things that could happen was at the front of my mind.