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BONECARVER: The Bonecarver's Daughter (Excerpt from)

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Sheree Renée Thomas

**EXCERPT FROM BONECARVER: The Bonecarver's
Daughter**

On the night they were going to kill her, Dusa Dayan left her damp and shuttered house at a quarter past seven to wait and see the fireball fall from the sky. She wanted to see the sun make its last evening descent before the preacher came blocking the air with his prayers, toting his Scriptures and his sorrow. She'd dreamed she was pushing through headwaters, slick thighs straining, her head thrust into the last embers of sunset and blueblack waters, but the waters were so deep when she awoke she felt completely drenched in them.

"That child was always dreaming up some kind of flood and trouble," Willie J. Kimbro, her grandmother, told me some seventeen years later, remembering every shade and shadow that darkened that somber Sunday. "The day before, she'd dreamed that she was sitting up under them three elm trees when the river come busting up through her navel." I wanted to ask her what elm trees—Willie J. was pointing at a clearing, and there were none sheltering her airless yard, nothing but a twisted bit of willow not fit to switch or fan with and that old stump she sat on. But Willie J. cut her eyes at me and sweating as I was in that linen suit, the beads rolling round the nape of my neck, I didn't dare speak, for fear I might not like her answer. Now, I'd been told by some folk north on the island that Willie J. kept to herself and stayed out of most folk business, but she was known round these parts for not taking kindly to criticism, so I kept my tongue resting firmly behind my teeth—'cause everybody know don't no conjurer like contrary.

I watched her as she sat on a painted tree stump, whittling what looked like some kind of bone whistle. Her knotted hands flew across the petrified piece in swift, graceful motions. It was hard to imagine such skill in a woman folk said was more than a

century old, but the grooves in her skin, the deep lines marking her neck and jaw and them high cheekbones seemed to tell a story one hundred years couldn't begin to hold.

When they didn't come for her whistles, said to call up only the plumpest croakers in the creek, or her baskets woven from sweetgrass, braided in ancient patterns designed to prevent the basket from ever going empty, then they came for her visions, and them was just about the only thing Willie J. gave somebody for free. "They come through me but not for me," she answered when I asked her why she hadn't been able to foretell the nature of her knee daughter's passing. "When I was a young'un, not much older than you, child, I used to try to make myself see what I want to see, try to bend the Will to my end, but I done lived long and hard enough to know that kind of Seeing don't never see straight. The Sight like chil'ren," she said, smoothing the shiny bit of bone with the back of a rusted knife. "They come through me but not for me. I can't make'm what they gone be. They is."

The knife rested in her hands and for a moment I thought she would cry, but then again, I couldn't rightly tell. Her eyes were already rheumy and water-filled, murky marbles wavering like some kind of trick glass in the light, and her voice sounded like two trees falling or the wind sulking beneath a sagging roof. They say a lucky bone will swim, but from the bend of her back it was clear that Willie J. hadn't foreseen anything, not a sliver of moon in gutrot or footprints in molded clay, nothing that could have warned her of her granddaughter's future, or the pain that would wake her most everyday.

Nor did Dusa Dayan see the signs waiting for her at the end of them headwaters. She had slept in fits and spells most of the morning and none at all it seemed the night before, lying in her bed, her head throbbing beneath a thin layer of cotton, still dressed in her wedding gown or what had passed for it. She lay

Sheree Renée Thomas

there, watching the band of copper and brass turn green on her ring finger and thought it a telling marker for a marriage that most everybody knowed was already bad before it was on. Besides that, all the folk who had seen her tear out of the church that evening, not even bothering to snatch off her wedding veil, hadn't even raised a toe or a heel to come after her, not even her so-called groom who was barely standing, and she suspected once they'd gotten over the initial shock, they'd gone on to fetch the liquor, the sour peach whiskey that was tucked in a corner in the Fellowship Room, waiting. At least that's what she'd do, and she told them as much over her shoulder.

All during the night the scent of ripe peaches, wet and pungent, had left her nose burning, the skin rising up off her flesh in protest, and later, after she'd been quietly burned to ashes, every blueblack bit of skin and bone, they remembered the odd smile on her face, wide and generous like the underbelly of the moon, almost ecstatic, as if she had no idea that in running, she was shaming every drop of blood, aboveground and below, that could ever claim her as kin. "Don't let it go to waste" is what they had thought they heard, her lips curving beneath a beautiful gap tooth. Nobody could reckon for sure if she was speaking of the whiskey, the music—a banjo and a mouth harp had been employed despite the preacher's protests—or the wet ground beneath their feet, the world connected from the heart to the head. Folk remembered this and remarked on it, like the passing weather. It was just another strange thing that happened that night on the island when a yellow caul had slipped over the moon, while the storm clouds hung low, hovering above the marshland, and later, at the very moment of the trouble, when the dark waters started to rise and pitch and the sky overhead seemed to catch afire just like Dusa Dayan had seen in her dream delivery. But it's been a long time since I ran fast as a young'un, and back then I was hard to catch, recovering from my peach

The Bonecarver's Daughter

whiskey in the apocalyptic arms of John Immanuel Porter, and I only woke up because he rolled over on top of me when the racket from the church bells reached a crescendo, and we was both trying to catch our breath and wondering what could have happened, thinking somebody drunk had set them to ringing to welcome the guest preacher, forgetting that he had already come cross the waters for a wedding that was never held.

Dusa Dayan slipped out of her gown and put on a blouse and skirt of stained indigo, no shoes, and a blue ribbon tied around her throat like a scarf. It was the same wardrobe she had worn on the night of her proposal, and she wore this for most special occasions, rare as they were. If it hadn't been for the preacher's coming, she would have worn a plain cotton shirt, a pair of blue denim, and some highwater boots she'd inherited from her mama who got them from her daddy, the heavy-toed shoes she wore up and down the island, over most of the land that was left to her and her grandmama. In the marshland she wore the boots with a machete dangling from a wide leather belt that sloped low across her high waist, and it was said that the machete, forged by blood and hammered from the chains and neck collars of the first Africans who lived on the island during slavery days, carried spirits and the only way to stop the machete from killing somebody, should it come to that, was to call it by its right names. Now, anybody who remembered them first nine Africans was probably long dead, but it was said they were two men and seven sisters. Folk said their spirit lived in the machete, not to harm but to protect, and they believed Dusa's grandmama, Ms. Willie J., had taught her how to swoop and handle the machete quickfast as any man chopping cotton or cane. And in this place where salt and sugar burned, where folk tied three knots in any string they owned to hold their luck, only fools misbelieved and even the preacher lit a candle and carried a key before he took the ferry across the water.

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