

Tyriek White

Fiction

The Bondurant Prize

010668078

### Before You Leave

There are mostly women in housing court. It's not like men don't get put out — she had put Virgil out years ago, in the middle of night, and that was her husband. This was just who was left. When a home is emptied out, usually the men take what they can and the women are left to put it all back together again. They were old and young, exhausted, often bounced around buildings, across plazas, directed to addresses across town. *You need to go here for a copy of your voucher. The main housing office can verify your proof of address. This form needs to be notarized.* Women who worked all kinds of hours to keep a roof over somebody head. Women like momma, Audrey thought, who would've spent a lifetime in waiting rooms, behind counters or glass windows, filling out paperwork — all to keep it together.

The central air nipped at the tender parts of her arms, the pinch of flesh above the elbow. The judge listened to the statements her landlord made. Audrey, who was sixty-three this October, was fed with it all: the ring cycle, the taxing of spirit, the cost of forms, and subway fare. There was a young woman Audrey had kept seeing at the main desk asking questions. She was a nurse at Methodist; Audrey knew because she was still in her scrubs. She explained how she walked from Ingersoll Houses, down the stretch of Myrtle to Jay Street to get here. Now she had

to walk to Atlantic Avenue, all the way across the Park to get to work. Audrey had asked what she was here for.

“My brother did something stupid,” the woman said, almost through closed eyelids, “now they can evict me and my son cause my name is on the lease.”

Audrey couldn't afford an attorney but her cousin, Gloria, had a son who was studying for the bar and worked as a public advocate at a nonprofit. Demetrius was a nervous boy, with hands like saucers that seemed to large for his wiry frame. He kept adjusting his cuffs when he spoke to the judge. “Social Security hasn't increased her benefits in years, and with medication, cost-of-living...”

“It's still not up to your client to make that decision,” the judge said, which Audrey found peculiar.

She didn't pay last month's amount due, nor did she care to the month before. Not even the month before that. She continued writing her checks for her rent-controlled apartment, all for the same amount as she had before the last increase. The landlord wouldn't even call somebody about the ceiling, or the stuff that comes up out of the drains every so often, but asked for extra dollars more each month. In that regard, yes, she was guilty.

When they filed out of the courtroom, Demetrius turned to her to apologize.

“Its alright baby, what can you do?”

“If I can get them to give us another day,” he said, holding open the door for her.

The sun was hardly over the other side of the East River, laboring over the skyline, peeking through the alleys and streets. She waved the young man away and caught the subway back down to Flatbush, flipping through the *New York Post*.

She got off at her stop and walked toward her building. There were women her age

gathered by the corner, dressed in polished leather flats and church hats, Watchtower pamphlets in hand. The ladies who ran the tenant association sat outside on the sidewalk, gossiping in beach chairs. Their husbands played dominos out front the bodegas, or tuned their cars up in their driveways. They would be out there until dusk, drinking cold beer across from the park.

When Audrey finally closed the door behind her, she dropped her bags and removed her clothes. She turned the kettle on. She let the silence wash over, looking out the window as light strained through the blinds. Shadows moved across the apartment walls.

*Where are you going to go?* She asked Virgil. He sat in an armchair across the room, grunting at something only he could see.

*Are you going to stay here?*

Still no answer. He didn't say much when he was alive either.

~

The height of the June heat set the day in its lap and wrapped the city in its arms as proof. Audrey pulls a weed from the soft soil and wonders whether the day has ever wanted room to grow. It sits all day and everyday, the world in its lap, watching trees stretch toward it's light. Audrey looks up, jealous of day, wondering *is it ever jealous of me?*

As the sun hung over the trees the mosquitoes would join, a song of blood. Audrey usually worked in the mornings, before the heat, planting green onion and cucumber. Today she had to begin a little before noon. The soil was dark and rich between her fingers. The garden was a square plot behind her apartment building. When she found it years ago, abandoned with drug vials and scraps of metal from soda cans, she cleared the plot out and began put a layer of topsoil. She then began working her tiny piece of land, despite her bad knees and lower back that flared up if she bent to long.

Audrey gathered some of what she had been growing. Sweet blueberries, tomatoes crossed with mustard greens, leeks, and a couple peaches from a slender tree. Being close to the soil cooled her skin under the noon sun. It took her mind away from the fact that it would be gone soon. Her home wouldn't belong to her anymore, as if it ever did.

When she was a young girl, she would spend every summer on her grandfather's farm. She hated it. She watched a carrot seed grow and milled around, doing a bunch of yard work when she'd rather just clean the house. *You'll thank me later*, her father would say. He showed her how to plant the seeds, in rows along the furrows they made, measuring how deep into the earth, how far apart. His big hands kneaded hers into the cool, damp soil. She was more interested in the movie theatre that offered tickets for ten cent, the diner so crowded at midnight that folk spilled out to onto its back porch, the boys who were wide as the trees that lined her grandfather's property.

Back then, every boy in North Carolina had a car and no reasonable curfew. They spoke slow, more to her cadence. Not like Georgia boys or Mississippi boys, too fast with mouths full of rocks or gold. Virgil was no different, talking to her as sweet and slow as growing molasses. He was sun-dried and tall, blocking the sunrays from her eyes when she looked up at him. He was just a boy then, genuine, but with something unquenchable behind his eyes. He drove his car too fast and came home when the sun was just above the hills. Audrey hoped to beat the morning, before the dew set over the land like a spirit, before her grandfather — old as all hell — rolled out of bed to check the farm.

As the sun would climb higher and higher, her grandfather rode to town on the back of his wagon, tumbling amongst the canvas bags stuffed with potatoes he harvested. He had been a sharecropper as a young man, on the same plantation he worked as boy. He always told the story

of how he got the farm, how a slave ended up with a few acres for some crops and a mule. Her father forced them to sit around and listen, sprawled across the carpet of grandpa's den, warming their hands around mugs of lemon juice and honey in boiled water.

At the end of one of those summers, as the sun rose later and later, one morning the carrot was fully bloomed. She stared in wonder, this orange stump with roots disappearing into the soil. It was the brightest thing she had ever seen.

Audrey looked up now, sweating, surrounded by fruit flies. Across the street were building fronts, lopsided and too close to one another, packed along the sidewalk like crooked teeth. Nina Simone's live interpretation of 'Take My Hand, Precious Lord' played from her stereo, a cheap wireless speaker shoved rather unceremoniously into the soil, somewhere tucked between the greens and peaches. Her daughter Key bought it for her one Christmas, tired of her complaining about cheap earbuds. A billboard advertised a discount to Jack's World from two years ago. Car horns blared from the traffic behind her, the distant buzz of power drills and construction workers shouting into the side of a halal truck. Her joints throbbed, her knees seemingly heavy with water.

"Rent-controlled?" Joyce exclaimed from behind the smoke of her cigarette. Her blood was hot and streaked her butterscotch skin, even in the winter. Despite the wrinkles around her eyes, she still looked like a little girl with two missing teeth and ponytail braids. "I'd give anything to hear you say that back in Warren County."

They sat at the kitchen table of Joyce's apartment on the eleventh floor, hollering over the running water and sirens from below. The windows were wide open because she was cooking at least three pounds of pork shoulder for a baby shower. She catered; Joyce and her son would

show up with a dozen aluminum pans, wire chafers and some Sterno cans. She even made coquito in the winters and sold it around the neighborhood. *What poor Spanish woman did you scam out of her recipe?* Audrey would tease.

Joyce got up and moved to the stove. She was sure in her shoulders since she was young, ambling through the world with an ease that may have been pure luck. Even though she looked after her when they were girls, she always felt Joyce didn't need much of anyone. Audrey had always been jealous of that, she an awkward thing that tumbled through life bumping its edges like finding your way through a dark room. It was like everyone else had the light on.

"Where do you even go after forty years?" Audrey asked no one. Her sister put the top back on some collards.

"Maybe we should put you in a home?"

"If you don't quit it," said Audrey.

"You know I'll put you up," Joyce said through a grin. "It'll be like when we used to sleep in the cellar during them hurricane warnings."

"And momma would let us eat all the sweets we could bring down there."

They laughed, Audrey leaning back before rubbing her knees. Joyce checked the oven once more.

"Don't nobody owe you anything," Joyce was saying. "And you don't owe nobody. If you were to up and leave, no one would complain."

She was in love with Virgil around the summer of 1969, when she seen him one morning on her way to work. He had moved North a few years ago, he told her, to make a real living. That's just what folk did back then. He worked at the Navy Yard and smelled of seashell and

burning metal. He lived with his wife and kid in a lopsided walkup in Bushwick. He'd come by almost every weekend for Audrey, something she waited for all week. She had grown to be of this place, looked like she belonged in New York like subway tokens and Anthora coffee cups. Big hair, gold hoops, and long, knee-length coats. She ran out whenever he pulled up to her apartment, soca blasting out the windows of his green '68 Astro. Joyce, who lived with her for a while, would kiss her cheek, waving from the front steps as the van pulled off.

Audrey had a studio in Flatbush, above a fish restaurant which left the room heavy and damp from the steam below. Sometimes she'd invite him up. Virgil told her his dreams; how he wanted to tour with a band through a dozen cities. He had his eye on this Fender bass guitar. It had caught his eye through a shop window on his way to the docks.

“What about the yard? Ain't you say you might get moved up to the main building?”

“I thought so too,” he said, looking down at her wiry hands. “New shift leader. I could've stayed down South if I wanted to be somebody's boy.”

His hair coiled, snapping at the teeth of her comb as she ran it through, black like the shell of a beetle gathering food in the moonlight. When she brought his face up to hers, she seen in his eyes what she felt — an almost painful desire to be washed in some kind of infinite. So she slept with him in the middle of her apartment, seeing only the lines of his skin under a silver half-moon and halogen street lamps.

He reminded her of Warren, the back of her grandfather's wagon, the cool balm of morning before the day would break open and sunlight would heat the fields. Virgil had been brought to her because of what was in his eyes, mirrors to what she felt, that life could be as sweet as it was sticky. “My mother always said if you were dropped into a well,” Virgil told her “you don't find your way out by looking down.” They spent that whole summer together, making their way

through the city and everything it could offer. One night she decided she had come to love him, under the glow of a moving picture. That night, when he was inside, it felt like she wanted him out. She how the sound of thunder stirs something, moves below the navel, at some frequency tucked deep away inside them both.

When her daughter was born, it was a grey and rainy Wednesday in April 1970. Key was seven pounds and six ounces. Audrey held the slithering thing in her arms, protective and firm, looking for some recognition of what she had grown. Joyce looked elated, splashing big tears everywhere from what she could see of the labor room. She realized, as her womb bled and the sweat became cold on her face, that she had always been afraid to be alone.

Audrey had made her choice that first time she encountered Virgil on the street, eyeing the wedding band on his finger as he slid his hands in his pockets. She had eventually learned to glue everything out and could sit for hours without a thought, Key pulling at her breast for milk, listening through the thin walls of her studio, could retreat into this new world, one where her daughter became her anchor.

One evening, days away from '71, Audrey sat in the darkness of her studio with a glass of wine. Key was out cold in her crib, the silence almost dissonant without the child's fussing. She knew Virgil had seen his first daughter, knew he'd been with his ex-wife, knew that he'd slept with her after putting his child to bed, most likely in the bedroom they shared when they had been married. Audrey had decided to keep her apartment, even though Virgil divorced his wife and found a place of his own. It was because of you, he had claimed. He had moved out because of her, and now she wouldn't move in with him. *Why are you being difficult?* He asked. His apartment was larger, a two-bedroom with actual walls so the child could have a room and not too far from the old neighborhood. So what was it? Her mother told her once that a man can

literally leave you with nothing so make sure you have something to call your own. Audrey had feared this very moment, had perhaps guarded a piece of herself all these years just to be prepared.

“How long are you going to keep this up?” Audrey asked him.

“I have to see my daughter.”

“But do you have to fuck your ex-wife every single time?”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” Virgil muttered into his hands cupped against his face. The hell she didn’t, and most of what wasn’t bolted down became a projectile she sprung across the room at him, the first being her mug. As he yelled at her, called her crazy and possessed, Audrey froze — she was breaking her own shit.

“I want you out of here.”

“Audrey I’m not going anywhere,” Virgil said. “We have a daughter together.”

“I guess that gives you the right to do whatever you want?”

“I didn’t do whatever you think I did.”

Something her mother used to say. *Strange how we women know when a man leaves us— even when he’s still with us.* She had told him to be gone before the sun rose.

She had stormed out in her pajamas and rain boots, a warm spring night that swelled from the coming summer. Behind the building, in the center of a courtyard that split open toward the street, had been a large plot of dirt covered with bottles, scraps of newspapers, and plastic wrappings. Audrey wanted to dissolve into the earth, crumble between the soil like sand in a riverbed. She raked her fingers into the ground in frustration, as if trying to climb her way inside.

Virgil saw Key as often as she’d let him. We all struggled to find work and after he got fired from the docks, he ran a numbers ring with a crew near Cityline. He would go door to door,

jotting numbers on anything — his hand, his sleeve, newspapers. Years passed; Prince begged Ronnie to talk to Russia and Aretha with Annie Lennox figured the Sisters were Doin' It for Themselves. She felt like she had always been doing it herself, but for who? Certainly not herself. The bass guitar Virgil had bought, the Fender, his most prized possession, was pawned off to a shop. He needed another high, another mouth of a well to gaze up at.

It was always about what she was left with, even after she sent Virgil away. Audrey had felt emptied out, all the water in her eyes no longer fell, but stayed there, until it threatened to drown her, to carve out a voice to resemble what seemed like her own. When he died, it was sudden and violent, and made her weep when she heard. Key was hardly in elementary.

Now, instead of a fish restaurant, she was above an organic mini-market. Around the corner was every food you could think of and it wasn't too far from the park. Most train lines were nearby and she even seen a gallery open up a couple blocks down. The renovations to the building itself were suppose to be a reward for the tenants who remained over the years, but now they were the reason she was getting priced out. She glared at Virgil, who was still mumbling something to himself through clenched jaws.

“I oughta leave you here so they can put you out,” she said, shaking her head.

Audrey opened a bottle of cheap zinfandel and sat by her window, regarding her face amongst the jaundiced light from the street. She was losing weight, sullen brown eyes that looked big compared to how small she seemed. What if she moved back to Warren? Went back for the farm, still in her and Joyce's name. She remembered the old supply store in town, the stretch of roads that led to the swamps, the Chapel on the hill that filled the air with the sound of

bells at dusk. She wasn't sure however, after all these years, it would feel like home. If so, how could she feel she ever belonged anywhere?

Her phone rang and it was her daughter, asking about a remedy for sinuses. She heard the kids in the background, loud enough that she had to look at the clock to make sure of the time. Before she could ask why weren't they in bed, Key was already mentioning tomorrow morning. *So, you might lose the apartment?*

"It's not important," Audrey said. Then: "Is that bug-eyed husband of yours there?"

"No."

"Well you should be glad, I know you always hated this place."

Key was silent for a moment. Then, she said, "I just hated not having my own room."

"Who you telling?"

"So why'd you stay all this time?" Key asked. Audrey stared across the room at Virgil, who seemingly snorted at her through his nose.

"Where am I supposed to go?"

"You can come home, Ma."

"And where is that?"

"With family," Key exclaimed. "With me."

The second part was quieter and reminded Audrey of the quiet young girl who trailed after her in the garden, the bobos in her hair bouncing together like toy clackers they'd buy at the supply store. She took another sip of zinfandel, cutting through the dull fog she felt in her head.

"You know I don't like that boy you with. Who *happens* to look like my grandkids."

"We have that in common," Key said as an aside. They cracked up, Audrey dabbing at her eyes on the other end of the phone. Eventually: "doesn't it get better?"

Audrey remembered little Key crouched between her legs, showing her how to plant the seeds, firm hands kneading Key's into the cool and damp soil. She told her only daughter to measure how deep into the earth, how far apart. The secrets of the land.

"Sometimes," the old woman said to her daughter. "I'm better because of you. You're all I've ever wanted."

"Are you trying to make me cry mother?" Audrey laughed and laughed.

"Go to sleep."

The next morning, Audrey sat across from the judge, who spoke with her nephew and the landlord's attorney, who now claimed she was a rent-hoarder. She had somehow made it into the courthouse, it's cavernous hall of marble and dust, through it's metal detectors, down the long corridors and into a large room that was different than yesterday. She was wrapped in a shawl, prepared this time for the cold air that crept from the vents. Key had took off the morning and held Audrey's hand before the judge took his seat. There were several cases going on behind them, women with their daughters at their heels, young people who seemed too small for their clothes and their chins forward. There were case workers, public defenders with a dozen cases at a time, law students with their tablets and laptops blinking away. Abandon hope, it all seemed to say. She had to lean forward, over the table, to hear what was being said in her own case. Demetrius had approached the judge with a folder full of printouts. Audrey groaned, her head pounding from the night before. How she had come to drink that much was nothing short of a miracle.

This time, her landlord decided to grace the court with his presence. He was a squat man who seemed to take great effort with every blink, somehow keeping straight ahead even though

she stared right at him. Audrey liked to imagine a hole at the side of his head she bore with her eyes.

“I was under the impression the tenant understood the rent increase,” said the judge, an almost translucent man with silver hair that grew at the sides and out his ears.

“No sir,” replied Demetrius as he went to stand next to Audrey. Oh, she had understood every word.

“Your honor,” her landlord’s attorney began, clearing his throat. “Management has continuously notified the tenant of the citywide increase, starting this past September of 1.25 per cent—”

“—I’m aware of the rent board’s decision,” said the judge.

“She paid the same amount for almost six months,” Demetrius offered. “And they cashed the checks, meaning they accepted those payments.”

“Yes because my client has bills as well,” the attorney said..

“How about this,” the judge took off his glasses and rubbed the inner corner of his eyes. “Ms. Granville pays the remaining balance and adjusts to the increase.”

She turned to Demetrius, who had stopped fidgeting with his cufflinks for once.

“Pay the difference auntie,” he said. Audrey had never seen him so poised.

It was simple enough, so simple it seemed foolish not too. But the easiest part of writing a check was filling out the front. People mistook being poor for complacency. Audrey knew she couldn't afford it. Even so, she could raise the money. She could go to her church; pastor was happy raising impromptu offerings for members in need. They could have a fish fry and raffle, Audrey thought, and invite the whole neighborhood. She imagined Joyce with some obscene

amount of whiting, hands caked in flour and seasoning. There was Key with her kids hanging at her hip, serving those who wandered by from the smell, the line halfway down the block.

When she thought about it, her face grew hot with tears. Why should that old fool get a dime more? If she did raise money from other poor people, she wouldn't give it to him. She worked all her life and deserved a place to live. Deserved not be taken advantage of for the rest of her life. There were dozens of black women down the hall and in the receiving area just like her. They were either victims or looked to galvanize, to transcend their surroundings. Maybe something else was wrong and there was a reason women like her found themselves in courtrooms, in shelters, or in the streets, or dead. Why should she have to transcend a goddamn thing?

"I don't think I will," was all she said.

Joyce came by afterwards with leftovers from the other night; roasted pork, rice, and pigeon peas.

"Come on you," Joyce said. She filled the air with a frantic music, opening curtains and window shades. Key had way too much time to kill before the kids got home from school, so they all sat around the table, talking about this morning.

"Mama was so badass," her daughter said, "she told the judge 'I'm not paying a damn thing.'"

"She's exaggerating," Audrey said.

"Hardly."

The scene reminded Audrey of mama's on Sundays before church. They'd be asleep and Ma would bang on the door of the room, Cream of Wheat wafting in from the kitchen. Nat King Cole crooned from the vinyl player as the old woman hustled them into the washroom.

Now they were the old women who had hustled children of their own to school, to jobs, out the house. Ma never lived this long, never could sit back and enjoy the fruit she bore. Joyce already had the oven on and was turning up the radio.

“I know how you are on days like this,” Joyce said over the steam. She warmed up the rice and peas on the stove stop and reheated the broiled meat under the oven flame for a few minutes. Key went in the back room to make a call.

Audrey leaned up against the doorway to the kitchen, playing with the fabric of the oversized sweats she had changed into.

“I have about a week,” said Audrey.

Joyce shook her head and put her arm around her sister’s shoulders.

“None of that today,” she said. “We will celebrate each other.”

Joyce served them all the dinner from last night, humming whatever came from the radio. Audrey looked to the armchair, for Virgil, but he was standing by the window, as she does. He looks young, like when they used to play gin rummy at the top of the stairs, drinking malt until the sun slipped below the hills. His daughter walked past him, putting her cellphone on the table as she sat.

“Will ya’ll still put me up?” Audrey asked.

“No mama,” Key said.

“I put up with you enough already,” Joyce teased. “What’s the difference?”

Audrey smiled at them both, the warmth from her sister’s food and the day outside filling the studio with a kind of pride that had been missing for decades. She wouldn’t stay with Joyce for long, or Key for that matter. She’d go back to the place Warren, the farm she went to every summer, on one of those thirty-dollar coaches that left from Chinatown. She’d start a new garden

four times as large as her plot, filled with greens and tomatoes and peaches. Perhaps she'd grow a blackberry or an apple tree — she'd have the space. Perhaps she'd grow the best potatoes North Carolina had seen in decades, since her grandfather's time, and before, when the land was still fertile with blood.