

318 is a single-wide—green with white stripes, overgrown with wisteria vines that act as shade in summer but rarely bloom. Under the too-small porch, there's a collection of household discards: an Easy-Bake Oven, a Black Barbie. Under the trailer, in the dark, there are snakes.

When Ebony was three or four, TV was her favorite toy. She'd sit for hours, nose pressed to the screen. Beauty pageants. Sometimes, a mass of makeup and blond curls would cover the screen, and Ebony would say *beautiful*—one of the first words she learned.

TV is still her favorite toy at 16. She watches shows about travel and celebrities. It's how she learned to speak with an American accent, instead of a Southern one. That's why sometimes people tell her she doesn't sound black.

Friday afternoon. She runs home after school. The books and gym bag strapped to her back weigh her down—it makes the workout harder. It's what they do in the army.

When she gets home, she stands on the too-small porch for a while. She stretches and shivers. Her velour tracksuit doesn't keep out the cold.

Inside, she eats a salad and reads an old-looking book called *How to Win at Everything*. She's alone. Mom's probably at work, or out with a guy or wherever she goes at night to get away from this place.

318's next to a field full of cows and the bones of old or burnt-out mobile homes. In the morning, the air smells like shit.

In the morning, Ebony drinks a protein shake. Mom eats pancakes, bacon, and eggs with too much cheese on top. This is the first time they've seen each other in almost a week.

How's the beauty pageant thing going?
Fine.
You think you could win?
Yeah.
What about the other girls? How are they?
They're OK.
Just don't be disappointed if you don't win.
Why not?
It'll be a miracle if you win.
Why's that?
Just don't be surprised if a white girl wins. You still keeping up with your studies?
Yeah.
Good.
The pageant has an academic award.
Oh, good, maybe you'll win that.
You're so supportive.
Don't get an attitude. Remember who's paying for you.
How could I forget?

Ebony brushes her teeth in front of a mirror. After she spits, she smiles, sincerely, and rehearses holding that smile while she speaks.

What's the biggest problem facing teenagers today?
Old people.
What's your town or state known for?
Cow manure.
Why did you enter this pageant?
To win.

Ebony sits alone onstage at a piano. She plays. This is her talent. She cries. Nothing sounds like a piano in an empty auditorium.

Halfway through rehearsal, the girls break for water and refreshments, but almost no one eats. Ebony talks to the choreographer, a white woman about Mom's age.

I just don't think I'm getting it, Ebony says. You've got me up front in this routine, and I'm not the best dancer here. I'd feel better in the back.

You'll be fine, the woman says. From the moment I saw you I knew you had a natural talent for dance. She smiles. Just keep at it.

Ebony does, for the rest of the day, and for the rest of the day, in every run-through, she makes a huge mistake.

It's after nine. Ebony knows that if she's home alone this time of night, there's a good chance she'll be alone for the rest of the night. Now is the perfect time to practice the dramatic monologue. She'll be in California, at an audition, before anyone knows she's gone.

Unless, of course, she wins the pageant. Then, she'll cancel the trip, and go to State. She thinks there's a good chance she'll win. Her grades are good enough; she's come up with a great low-carb sweet-potato-pie recipe; her essay on being black in the South is sure to be a hit.

The L.A. thing and acting are Plan B. Mom says, Have something to fall back on. Mom says she wishes she had.

Ebony wrote the dramatic monologue herself. It's about a woman who realizes her dreams will never come true.

Ebony's face glows in TV light. She's on a yoga mat on the floor in her room—upward-facing dog. Her back pops and the sound reminds her of being six years old—of her father cracking his knuckles. To this day, she hates the sound. She remembers telling him that, and him doing it more to annoy her.

She's glad he left. Ebony felt sorry for him. Mom was the main reason—she only married him because she was pregnant and didn't want her family to stop giving her money. The day before he left, they had a fight. He wanted her to stop taking her clothes off; she said that stripping made her feel sexy and powerful. He called her a whore; she told him he was right. He said he was going to leave if she didn't stop. She said go ahead, and he wasn't Ebony's real father, anyway. He left. Ebony would've done the same thing. She might.

Ebony dreams. In a red ball gown, she runs through a field of black arums, crushing them underfoot. She's chased by a purple cobra with a sword. As she runs, her dress rips and her legs grow tired, but she doesn't stop. No matter how fast she runs, she can't get away from the thing behind her.

Voices coming from the too-small porch wake her—Mom and some guy. Ebony waits about ten minutes after she hears them come inside. Then, she checks to make sure the front door is locked. It's not, so she turns the deadbolt. Then, she turns around and sees Mom having sex on the couch. Ebony locks eyes with the guy. This must be the guy that's paying their rent now.

She turns out the light in this room and goes back to bed.

Sunday. Ebony skips church to get some pageant stuff done. In less than two hours she runs an extra mile, does one hundred extra crunches, and bakes a sweet-potato pie. God helps those who help themselves.

Mom's home. She skips church, too. She says she's tired. She says she's always tired.

She says, He found a snake in the yard yesterday.

Why are you telling me this?

You're afraid of snakes.

No, Mom. You're afraid of snakes. What did he do with it?

He killed it.

Where were you?

Hiding in the house.

It's not a house, Mom. It's a trailer.

Same difference.

Not really. That's like you saying you're a dancer.

I'm an exotic dancer.

You're a stripper.

And what are you? You're nothing.

Sasha's here for a joint practice session. She helps Ebony with the choreography, and Ebony helps her with everything else. They come up with a good (but not as good as Ebony's) recipe for Sasha to use.

Sasha says, I think your chances are as good as anybody else's. If anything, you being the only black girl helps. You stand out automatically. That's what the rest of us are struggling to do.

Mom says, How's the pageant stuff coming?

Fine.

You know, Sasha, I did pageants.

Sasha says, Yeah?

Miss Smith Station. 1984. I was seventeen years old.

You won?

It was a huge deal. It said in the papers, "Local Girl Goes Places," and it had a picture of me in a red ball gown. That dress was amazing.

Did you go to State?

No, Ebony says. She got pregnant. Now, she's paying for me.

The pageant finale is two days away. Ebony's already won the academic award. She lost the recipe contest to some wannabe Martha Stewart.

(continued on back)

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Big Doug Rides Torch

by Jonathan Messinger

I've been thinking of getting a moped. My neighbor Doug has a motorcycle, a hulking Harley Davidson VRSCD Night Rod. The thing is a plasticky blue, a color mostly associated with miniature-golf water traps. He works on it every Sunday in his driveway, literally spit-shining the chrome. We argue about it sometimes at neighborhood barbecues.

"That thing guzzles more gas than you do beer, Doug," I say.

"Who cares? It's a thing of beauty."

"It's a thing of eco-terrorism."

"You ever dance with metal in the pale moonlight, Johnny?"

Given enough beers or social pressure, Doug will refer to his McHenry County Motorbike Enthusiasts' Club as a gang. His motorcycle gang. It's a little game I play at barbecues. I find children are the most active catalysts. Afraid to look like a weekend canoeer in front of the kids, he'll do his best to impress them.

"When we get on the highway, we ride four strong," Doug says. He's not joking. He delivers this speech like a military commander. "The right and left wings we call Thrust and Parry, respectively. The one up front we call Torch. The one in back, Cashmere."

Doug's wife Claire watches all of it from the shade of the big ugly tree in their backyard.

"No one with a moped was ever called Torch," Doug says, pointing at me.

The first time Claire and I had sex, she was nervous afterward, her feet bouncing under the sheets like knitting needles. Doug was away at a Harley trade show for the weekend; we couldn't be caught. But that was guilt talking, not fear. Now, when we're through, she lays her head on my stomach, and I drape an arm across her chest, in the smooth slate just below her neck. This particular time, Doug is out on a ride with his club. They've gone to the mountains, where they'll fish and, failing to catch anything, eat the frozen hamburgers they've brought along.

"Maybe I should leave him," Claire says.

"And run to me?"

"No," she says. "Probably not."

We fall asleep. I haven't looked it up yet, but I'm pretty sure that if I had a moped, I could outrun a cheetah. I remember cheetahs being able to run up to 40 miles per hour in short bursts. I could get a moped up to 35 mph, which means that so long as the cheetah was sufficiently behind me, if I had a head start I would be completely safe. I don't know when this became the standard for my mode of transportation. I need to be able to outrun something. I start checking newspaper ads.

When Doug gets back from his trip, something is different about him. He's out in front of his house all the time now with his Harley. Every day he tinkers. He wears a tool belt while he works. The thing seems light on his hips, his belly eclipsing the pliers and wrenches that hang from the front. I watch all of this from the second-story window of my house. I make my way down to my driveway and look across at Doug and his house. Our houses look the same, the paint variations on the same light blue, the asphalt of my driveway slightly grayer, having been most recently tarred two years before Doug's. His house has flower boxes and flowerbeds. That's what separates them. Nothing grows on my property.

It's been hot and wet all week, but tonight is the worst of it. I'm on my third T-shirt. I walk over to Doug, who gives me a nod as he fiddles with something under the fuselage of his Night Rod. Fuselage may not be the right term. So I ask him:

"Something wrong with the fuselage?"

"Would you even begin to understand what I'm doing down here?" he asks, without looking back. "Inside here is a Revolution V-Twin power plant."

I have to admit, it sounds impressive. I notice he isn't sweating.

"That sounds like a lot of power, Doug. You need all that?"

"That depends," he says. "Just how deeply you delve into the night, Johnny, is up to you."

I nod and walk back to my house. From upstairs, I watch him pace around the motorcycle and dive in at different spots, the way I'd imagine a painter might finish up a masterpiece, though I've never seen a real artist work. Across the way, a window lights on the second floor of his house. It's Claire. She stares out from the glass with hollow eyes. I flick the light switch twice. On, off. She begins to undress.

There's a guy on Craigslist selling an Italian moped for \$325, just in my price range. We make arrangements over e-mail for him to come over and show me the ride. When he arrives, I realize he's a she. She pedals up into my driveway. It's morning, and when Erica—I see now that I just ignored that last vowel in her name—sits down in my kitchen, the light through the window is full-on, like someone has lit us for filming. We drink iced tea and talk mopeds. There are things that I know and things that I don't. Moped is short for Motorized Pedal Bike. Knew that. All around the world, moped riders meet up in local branches of the Moped Army. Didn't know that.

(318, continued)

Mom says, Don't get too excited.

Mom says, Have something to fall back on.

Mom says, Apply for scholarships.

Mom says, Start with the junior college across town.

It's dusk and Ebony smokes a joint out back. There's a small porch out here—even smaller than the one up front. From here, she can see well into the cow pasture. She spots a figure moving between the old trailers. It's too dark to see much, but she knows she's seen something.

She walks to the fence that separates the pasture from the rest of the trailer park. There's not much to it—two boards a couple feet apart. She can't figure out how it keeps anything in. She climbs right through.

Ebony walks directly to where she spotted the figure from the porch. She goes between two charred-black trailers. She sees a figure standing there, in the dark. It's a life-sized Black Barbie, in a full-length gown. Ebony steps closer, and the figure becomes clear. It's a charred-black dress form melted to some curtains—an aspiring designer must've lived here before the trailer park burned. But now, in the silence and the dark, Ebony's all alone.

She runs back to 318.

Day Before Pageant:

manicure

pedicure

perm

liquid diet

at-home

chemical peel

wax

one hundred

extra crunches

two extra miles

dress rehearsal

photos

awards banquet

Ebony can't sleep tonight. If she stays up much longer she might as well quit trying and stay up the rest of the night. She's got a hair appointment at 5 AM.

She gets up and walks through the trailer. TV's still on in the living room, so she turns it off. Some guy's in the kitchen, in his underwear, pouring a drink.

Ebony says, I thought you both were in bed.

We were, says the guy. It's the same guy from the couch.

Night, Ebony says.

Wait, says the guy. Come here. How old are you?

Sixteen.

Sixteen's a good age. And you're a pretty girl.

I guess.

You guess. You wouldn't enter a beauty pageant if you didn't think you were. Your mom told me about it. She's real proud of you. Not just the pageant stuff, but school and piano and everything. So, you think you're gonna win?



"Is that like a gang?" I ask Erica. She looks at me like a patient surgeon.

"It's an army," she says. "Wanna go have a look?"

Back outside, Erica and I inspect her moped. It's shiny red, with new tires and new pedals. She says she has to sell it because she's moving, otherwise she wouldn't dream of giving up on such a beautiful piece of machinery.

"Why do you want a moped?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I just like the idea of something being both man- and machine-powered."

She nods.

"Well, this will get you 100 miles to the gallon," she says. "And you can get up to 30 miles an hour."

"Oh," I say. That clocks ten miles slower than a cheetah. "Well, is there a way to make these things go faster?"

"Sure," she says, her voice bubbling. "It's called derestricting. You can look it up on the Internet."

"Done." I write her a check and roll the moped behind my house, out of Doug's sight.

Claire wants to know who the girl was. Doug is out on one of his nighttime, lone-wolf rides, where he gets out on the road just to clear his mind. I tell her that I just bought Erica's moped, nothing more.

"I can smell her on you," Claire says.

"That's impossible."

"I don't mean literally. Besides, it's not like I'd care."

We're lying in our normal position, but on the floor. I get up and walk over to the computer. I type "cheetah" into Wikipedia. According to the website, the cheetah can get up to 60 miles an hour in short bursts. No derestricting in the world would double the speed of my new bike. In the wan light of the laptop, I must look pathetic, because Claire asks what's wrong.

"I don't think my moped could outrun a cheetah."

Maybe, Ebony says.

Well, says the guy. Good luck.

Thanks.

Did your mom tell you I found a snake?

Yeah.

Doesn't that freak you out? There are snakes under here—under your room.

It's the vines, Ebony says. They're beautiful in the spring, so we let them grow. But they attract snakes and bugs, and without enough trimming, they'll take over. It's a shame they hardly ever bloom.

Yeah, says the guy. It is. Don't be too hard on her. She loves you.

Does she?

Today's the day. She's made-up, costumed, and in place for the opening dance number. She's still got the spot up front. Mom's in the audience, probably with that guy.

Ebony runs her tongue across her teeth—a last-minute guarantee there's no lipstick there. Mom says, Say a prayer before the start.

Curtain up, lights...

Smile. God helps those who help themselves.

Ebony doesn't win.

She doesn't even place.

Hours after the pageant's end, she goes out behind the trailer and stares up at the stars. What happened? The dance routines went all right. Her dress was amazing. She did everything right.

Mom says, Don't be upset. We knew this would probably happen. God knows, around here, black women are only beauty queens when we take our clothes off.

Ebony recites the monologue in her head to keep from thinking about the turbulence. She's not used to rough skies. She's not used to the sky at all. This is her first time. They've got the A/C cranked up high. Her velour tracksuit doesn't cut the chill. The monologue doesn't stop her thoughts.

What if things don't work out in L.A.?

McDonald's.

The military.

A strip club.

Worse.

The resumé of a 35-year-old woman living with her 16-year-old daughter in a trailer with a too-small porch.

At least it'll be beautiful, Ebony thinks. Wisteria blooms year-round in California.

Nadria Tucker's "318" was the winner of THE2NDHAND's 2007 competition attendant to the Birmingham Art Walk festival. Tucker hails from Atmore in South Alabama and lives and writes in Birmingham, where she's working on her Master's in the University of Alabama Birmingham's creative writing program.

boxer briefs. I think she's here to tell me that we can't do this anymore, and I don't know if I should stop her.

"Is this OK?" she asks. "That we just lie here?"

"I guess."

Doug is out on another ride, this time in some sort of nighttime hot rod parade. He'd told me the other day that he was excited about it. He was going to ride Cashmere.

"Doug thinks we should move," she says.

"We've lived in the house long enough, we can sell it for a good profit and get something nicer."

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'Whatever you want.'"

We lie still. Eventually, I get cold and get under the covers. But Claire, in her clothes, doesn't need to.

"What would you have wanted me to say?"

"Whatever you want," I say. She thinks I'm just repeating her answer, but I'm not.

I roll over onto my side, slide an arm under her shirt and across her bare belly. I settle my hand there in the loose nest of her stomach. I squeeze and poke to tickle her, but she doesn't laugh. I listen for her breath, sliding in and singing out of her nostrils, but I pick up something else. Down the block, I can hear a guttural sound, almost like an animal. Its growling grows louder and louder. I imagine Doug on his Night Rod, the machine flinging itself across the pavement. Even from so far away, the noise of it fills my empty house.



"Big Doug Rides Torch" is part of Jonathan Messinger's collection, Hiding Out, out now from Featherproof Books (featherproof.com). Messinger is the man behind Chicago's Dollar Store reading series and the books editor at Time Out Chicago.

For the first time, Claire and I don't have sex when she comes over. We lie in bed and don't touch. She keeps all of her clothes on, and I lie next to her in my