

Fasttailed Girls

by Julia Mallory

When your baby girl asks you if the man with the big house and the big car is dead, you simply slip your hand over hers and leave the truth in the room where he lies, a victim of his own desires. You get in the driver's side seat after nestling her in the back with the seat belt over her shoulder. A prayer leaves your mouth as you put the keys in the ignition, a motion you haven't exercised in nearly a decade. Life and death will change you and change you until it puts you on the other side of all worries. But worry is too weak a word to hold what is happening in this moment as the sun rolls behind the hills.

From the backseat, Darling asks you why the sky is changing colors. She will ask as many questions to understand how a blue sky can turn pink can turn orange can turn purple, all by itself. You try to tell her it ain't by its own doing, but if she wants a sky that can turn gradient without intervention, who are you to ruin her understanding of it? You've always been partial to the amber throw of light before night falls around you, so in her wonder you see yourself. Even if it's a baby version of her dad staring back at you.

Somehow you manage to get inside your unit without being seen. Folks must be serving up supper. You almost trip over Darling's doll RV on the way to throw a bag of things together for babygirl and you. You grab one of Lenny's letters from the pile, the color-pencil art of the smiling Black woman lightest where his prison address appears on the envelope, her fro wrapping around the back to the words "I LOVE YOU." Then it hits you that Darling is wearing her jellies and probably will need her sneakers. You disappear into the bedroom to grab them. While you search under the bed and in the small closet, right in front of you—"If it had been a snake it would have bit you," your mother's words echo in your memory—Darling

grabs a letter from the stack too, a secret burning in her pocket.

Your hand over hers again as you return to the car, Pete's wallet bulging in your culottes. Darling with a library book under her arm. The click and snap of her rainbow hairbeads offers a soundtrack for your escape.

Cleaning house, that's all you were supposed to be doing. Beth Ann hooked you up with the gig. "Girl, I'm just looking to clean, not anything *extra*." She laughed at the good girl in you. "Since Lenny been down, I'm stretching one meal across three." She did not laugh. Beth Ann's children were older, so she could work whatever shift she wanted, but you didn't have the same space to provide. Especially with school out for summer. Beth Ann told you she'd call Pete and arrange for him to pick you up.

The outside and inside of his car were twins. The deep red velvet seats reminded you of your old next-door neighbor's hardback loveseat, which was almost too pretty to sit on, which she didn't wrap in plastic like other furniture that belonged in a parlor. Something about need made you swallow the bad feeling you had from the time his big car tucked in near the curb. He sat in the front seat like he owned the whole world, looking in the rear view mirror as if to see who he needed to reign over. Beth Ann had set the whole thing up so you didn't know what his voice sounded like. You stood by the curb as instructed, you and Darling wearing yellow, competing with the sun, your mind too elsewhere to have planned almost matching outfits.

The kindness in his ordinary voice alarmed you. It did not match what your eyes told. "Hey, how you doing, Willamena? Who is little mama with you?" Darling waited until you nudged her to speak before returning the greeting, including her first name.

He said your name in one breath, holding all parts of it together. Not at all like a man who was sloppy with his want.

You fully expected him to overdo the introduction, to change the tone of his voice, to force familiarity in the way adults were prone to do. To even lean in and attempt to touch what was not his. But he just smiled at y'all, said hello, almost too normal, while quickly opening the back door of the car. He was already back at

the steering wheel before you were settled into your seatbelts. You made note of how he didn't crowd your space and relaxed a bit as his car motioned alongside the riverfront. You enjoyed the sun kissing the top of the river, glancing ever so often over at Darling who had her face in a book about a little girl with eyes the same shape as hers, who could fly over bridges. Your sweet Darling, forever with a book in her hand.

Now three states away, Beth Ann's intentions crossed your mind again. Your oldest homegirl in the city. You up from Alabama, her from North Carolina. The first time her accent floated through your screen door, you were lulled to your front porch to find the person it belonged to. Her talk curled around your ears and made you homesick. Standing on the porch, you looked in her direction and her hometraining greeted you. Fully sure the voice you heard belonged to her, you returned the greeting, and her smile stretched so wide her eyes disappeared. Y'all became thick as molasses. Her braiding your hair: corn rows, box braids, some design you saw in a magazine. You cooking all her down-home favorites; she loved all your food, but your collard greens made her obsessed. She made you promise her the potlikka, which you did generously, claiming she ain't have a cold all year. Y'all sat on your cement porch of the brick one-bedroom walk-up in plastic folding chairs facing patches of grass that never quite grew to their full potential. Trading Black Girl War Stories™ over gold- and burgundy-wrapped 40s and sharing shame about being called fasttailed girls. Branded by women who watched the wandering eyes of men folk, and instead of lunging for their sight balls, they launched attacks on you, still learning how to walk in your growing bodies. Beth Ann, who seemed to always pat her stomach when she made mention of her mom to you, who didn't just look the other way, but outright refused to acknowledge that she had brought a wolf from the wilderness into their home. Beth Ann and you, who didn't sit still because that made you a target, a vessel for other folks' desires. Beth Ann and you, who just wanted to be free with the wind at your back. Feeling like you couldn't meet your mother's mark, you'd taken flight as soon as you could, especially when the grief crowded you out of your own

home.

Now on the run, you shake off the thought of betrayal along with the fatigue weighing down your eyelids. “Ain’t no way,” you say out loud. You, godmother to her youngest child. You, stepping on the gas in a pair of shoes she let you borrow. She couldn’t give them to you outright, or she’d have to admit that they hurt the corn on her right pinky toe the very day she first tried them on. They were simply in your house for safekeeping, she said. You knew how to take care of your stuff, she said. Her affirmation let loose a memory in your mind about your daddy teaching you grooming rituals, which she let you fall into without disturbing you with talk of if you were okay.

But by the next exit, your doubt returns. Your thoughts turn back inward. She had to know, right? What kind of woman delivers her friend to the lion’s den? You could never really know all of someone, but you know Beth wouldn’t put not only you in harm’s way, but Darling, whom she adores.

He turned lion on your third trip to the house big enough to hold the possessions of you and your neighbors. The day air was peak summer, warm and sticky. You had changed your clothes twice before you were at the curb with Darling. Going through the motions of your usual routine.

As you cross states, Darling comes up out of her sleep long enough to turn the stone on your ring finger into a North Star as she moves back into a dream. You always loved adornment. Playing in your mother’s necklaces and any pair of heels you could get your feet into. The ring, a fake, your real wedding set long since traded at *Joe’s Just for Today Pawn Shop*. You showed up right before closing. You had only intended to sell one half of the set, but Joe told you that the band wasn’t worth much on its own. A set had more value, he said: “Two things that go together.”

The saddest thing was you easing the rings off your finger. Your whole body felt naked as if you had stepped out of your nightgown in the middle of the well-lit store. All your struggles bare and on display for a man whose money you needed. You looked past his head, him down at his feet, an unspoken agreement to look away

from the discomfort. He couldn't handle your eyes, past sad, and instead fixed his gaze on the rust-orange carpet beneath both your feet. Everyone knew your old man was in the pen. No matter how much he sympathized with your situation, you weren't unique. Half of your neighborhood was beholden to a love elsewhere. You all were like this. He had all y'all love on his shelves. Belle's toaster. Cammy's TV set. Sarah's record player. Yeah, the love-lined walls were staring you in the face.

The money got you through the spring, but it did not last forever, which is how you found yourself in a house in the middle of somebody's somewhere. Hills that came alive after dark, the shine of house lights turning the earth into an altar. Cleaning for a man that seemed to have an abundance of time, the way he kept after you. You doing what you came for, his intentions starting to crowd you out of each room you entered. He was more quiet than usual, creeping in and out of each room, an apparition of the version of him that you had settled into. His house shoes gave up no trace as he moved across the carpet, the tile, the wood, any surface you had tended to. His sudden need for attention unsettled you, turning his small talk into what felt like a looming threat.

You were standing in front of the toffee-tinted large glass window, staring into the many greens of the woods—each tree, plant, weed with its own hue—when an albino deer weaved in and out of the trees. It did not take its eyes off of you. You returned the gesture. The candelabra (a family heirloom?) you were dusting, now at your side, hanging by your thigh, without weight. The deer disappeared and all feeling returned to your body. You were holding your breath in your ears by the time Pete's breath was on your neck. You were frozen with fear. You wished you were not in your body. You could feel his erection in your back. Was there mint on his breath? His wet mouth was on your ear. He said your name the way you'd thought he would on the first day you met him. The way that would have sent you back to your house and back at Beth's door to tell her, "Girl! Clean for that pervert? Hell to the nah!"

His greedy hand dropped between the apron and the cropped terry-cloth polo shirt you were wearing. With his hand in a place it

had no business, back in your body, you introduced the candelabra to his face. Two more swings, and he was one with the carpet that cradled the sound of his fall. You were sure he was dead. You did not check his pulse. His breathing. His nothing. When you turned to leave the room, Darling was staring at you, face full of questions. You rushed her to the front door and told her not to move. You searched for his keys. His wallet. By the time you were behind the driver's seat, you had rehearsed line after line about why you were driving this man's car. Why you were in possession of his personal effects. A girlfriend gifted a weekend out of town. Spoiled by a man that loves you but gets drunk and changes his mind. A man without good sense at times, but a good heart. You prayed that you wouldn't need any of these lies to get to where you're going.

The map you picked up when you left the motel in North Carolina would only get you so far.

When you pull into Maroon, the muscle memory of riding these same roads comes back to you. Life here has moved on without you but somehow managed to hold a small place in line for you.

Three more turns and you will be parked in front of your mother's home. You will take your time leaving the car. More rehearsing. There will be a light shining in your dead sister's bedroom. You holding Darling's hand, who will be unsure of if she should complain about the wet, red dirt sneaking into the triangles of her clear shoes. When your mother answers the door wearing the same face but with more seasoning, three generations of Snapfield women on the porch, she will move her eyes equally between you and the grandchild she has never met. Under an indigo sky, you will collapse into her arms.

You are home.

“”