

## Wilderness House Literary Review 13/2

Terry Kitchen  
TCB

*"If I wasn't tough I wouldn't be here. If I wasn't kind I wouldn't deserve to be here."*—Elvis Presley

"THE BOY'S IN TROUBLE."

That's what they always called him, the Boy, even though he was now past forty. And tonight, Estelle thought, he looked – and sounded – more like sixty.

"That's for damn sure," her sister Sylvia agreed. She was taking off her stage make-up with a damp paper towel. The Boy didn't like them to go too far over the top, like LaBelle or the LA funk groups, but she snuck a little sparkle into her eye shadow to catch the lights.

"Somebody should do something," Myrna, the third sister, said as she slipped out of her gown. There was a shower down the hall, but she'd wait until they got to the motel. Can't trust them Southern boys, always out for a peek of Nubian pussy.

Estelle shook her head. "They workin' him like a racehorse til he drops. What do they care he can barely stand up." She was in street clothes already, always the first sister ready to go.

Myrna pulled a TCB sweatshirt on over her Afro. "He drops, you cleanin' bathrooms again." She zipped the gown into its garment bag.

"So ain't your black ass," Estelle shot back.

"Not me, baby," Sylvia, the youngest, said. "I still got my looks. I'd move to LA in a heartbeat."

"Fly solo," Estelle said. "Thanks a lot, Syl."

"Nah, she'd probably join the Hues Corporation."

"Up yours, Myrna." Sylvia wadded up the paper towel and tossed it at her sister's head.

It was a touchy subject. They'd cut a demo on "Rock the Boat," Sylvia taking the lead, but the Hues Corporation's version had come out first and shot up the charts. Their own label had responded by shelving their entire album, so here they were, three years later, still touring with the Takin' Care of Business band, singing backgrounds for the Boy.

"Let's hope he don't drop," Estelle said, folding her own garment bag over the crook of her arm. "Now can we get out of here? I'm starving."

As they packed up there was some commotion in the hallway. Sylvia cracked the door open. Chas, the stage manager, was hustling a goateed white man in a seersucker suit down the hall. The man's black doctor's bag bounced off his thigh with every step.

"Uh oh," Sylvia said. "Another house call."

"Too much of that shit," Myrna said. The Boy had once caught her yawning before a show and promptly offered her a pill from a vial he kept

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in his jumpsuit pocket. It looked like a Red Hot, one of those little cinnamon candies her nephews were always fighting over. She'd taken it, and hadn't slept for a week.

"On the bus, girls," Chas yelled back over his shoulder. "Stick to the schedule."

The schedule. This wasn't Vegas, three weeks of lying by the pool until show time. The Boss – the Boy's domineering manager and father-figure – was crafty. He knew the shows these days were hit or miss, mostly miss. So no more Vegas, or Madison Square Garden, or LA Forum, where a bad review might travel, let the word out, kill his golden goose. Now it was Bumfuck, Iowa; Hartford, Connecticut; Norfolk, Virginia. Stagger onstage, mumble a few greatest hits, then back on the bus. Cash the check. The string section was gone, replaced by one of those new electronic synthesizers. It was even money which would happen first, their being fired to save on expenses or the Boy dropping dead of exhaustion. Either way it was time to work on their résumé.

Estelle herded them out of the room and down the hall, the opposite direction from the one Chas and the doctor had taken. None of their damn business.



The outside air was cold. Winter hung on in the north, long after the magnolias were in bloom back home. They often said they would take the South's weather and the North's people – let all those racist crackers in Ole Miss freeze their balls off in Minnesota for a change. Maybe, Estelle thought, Sylvia was right. LA. California. The Boy was done with his movie career by the time they came on board, and he'd only done the occasional show out west since, but it had been nice – cloudless skies, friendly people, even palm trees.

But who was she kidding. Estelle was pushing thirty, Myrna right behind. LA record producers wanted smooth young legs on their album covers, and on their fold-out couches. Besides, she and her sisters had grown up singing soul music, gospel. LA was disco. The Boy's moment may have passed, but on good night he still had more soul than any white boy she'd ever heard.

The TCB bus door swung open. Most of the band were already on board, the perpetual poker game restarted, a flask being passed around. These were white Southern boys, their red necks and back porch ways unpolluted by college, so whiskey was still in vogue, grass suspicious. Estelle and her sisters laid their garment bags on the overhead luggage rack, grabbed fast food bags from the pile behind the driver, then took their usual seats towards the front, where drunken groping was less likely. The Boy himself always rode separately, flying if there was any distance involved, but he occasionally stuck his head in the door to say "good gig, see you in Cincinnati." Not tonight. Estelle wondered if he was even conscious.

"Think they know?" Sylvia asked softly. "About the doctor?"

Myrna huffed. "Don't seem too concerned."

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"They know," Estelle said. "We all know."

There was some laughter from the back – someone had lost their night's pay on a bad hand – when Chas stepped on board. "Everybody here?" He did a head count, like a summer camp counselor on a day hike, then conferred with the driver a minute. "See you there."

"Where the fuck we goin' again?" the bass player called out. He was new, hired the day after the regular bassist, a friend of the Boy's since childhood, had asked the Boss for a raise.

"Indianapolis," Chas said. The driver opened the door to let Chas off, but he stuck his head back inside.

"TCB, guys."

"TCB," they all said, without looking up.