

ODIE LINDSEY

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## Panoleah

Leah knew him so well that she could even read his wince. Though no more than a note on the accordion of his crow's feet, she could decipher any twitch as a marker of hurt or humor, surprise or fury. It could be a synaptic beat of confusion—or hell, just a simple tic.

In theory, her attunement could bring a new life somewhere else, administering to people crushed by stroke, and who communicated in glances and sighs.

Only, she would never get out of this house. She could never, ever leave him.

He sat on a couch in his neglected postwar prefab, on the throwaway side of Pitchlynn, Mississippi. The wall clock ticked in the pine-panel room. The air was a clot of rotted nylon carpet and wet summer air. The mannequin in the corner wore ACU camo and Interceptor body armor. Salvaged from the alley behind an athletic wear store in town, its head was now outstretched in a beige *shemagh* and polycarb ballistic shades.

Van Dorn had just asked Leah if she liked horses; she should have said *Yes*, or *No*, or better yet, *I don't know—you?* Instead, the question had pushed her memory of the man called New Father, a recollection so acute she had reeled off four sentences before catching Van Dorn's wince...and shutting up.

The silence was now pregnant with anxiety. She winced when he cleared his throat.

"I hate horses," he said. "They're just too expensive for anybody not rich."

"Of course," she replied. "I'm over it now. Horses."

She couldn't help but smile. Because this was the beautiful thing about Van Dorn: he, too, had learned so much from their conditioning. Six months ago, her

outburst would have provoked contusive instruction. Care of his st, or his pliers, or whatever was around him—she would have experienced pain. Yet today, now, he had noted the speed and sincerity of her adjustment to the wince...and he had forgiven her just as quickly.

ey were tranquil, at last. “Twinned,” he called it.

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Her mother was mostly Choctaw and some black. A storyteller, she had most o en regaled young Leah about the ladybug—the “luckybug”—as a symbol, a gi to their family, and their world. “A trickster,” her mother had claimed; if ants attacked the ladybug, for instance, the insect would fake its own death, emitting a terrible odor until le alone.

When Leah was ve, an oven-hot autumn brought a plague of gnats into their trailer. Within days, the insects had lay dead on every surface, a holocaust of crust over every window sill and counter top, plate or piece of fruit.

e ladybugs followed, to feed on the gnats. Leah’s mother, far from disgusted, had instead become ripe with laughter. She treated the swarm like the family’s own personal windfall, and was ecstatic when counting the bugs’ spots.

“*Katsi’nonwt:io*, girl!” her mother sang out, ladybugs trickling across her arms and neck. “Nine dots are lucky—and so, so rare. is is a gi from god, Panoleah. Like you.”

Panoleah was Leah’s full name, though nobody else had called her that. During the time when Van Dorn had still needed to curb her, when she still wore the collar, she would think of her mother and the ladybugs and spots, and of her full name, Panoleah. is memory had at rst helped her get through the process; she cherished the strength it brought her. Ultimately, however, she realized that the letting go of individuation would prove pivotal to their development, and to the methodical elimination of con ict.

*We are so nearly tuned*, she thought now, grinning. It was exactly as Van Dorn had promised.

“You’re hungry,” she said.

“I am,” he con rmed.

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She'd been adopted once before. Her patron, Theodore Hollis, was the runt from a north Mississippi heritage clan, a shunned trustee who lived on a former plantation outside of town. Hollis, who would ask Leah to call him New Father, had first been prone to visitation with her mom. For several months, he had shown up at their trailer on a regular basis, bearing trinkets: imported bottles and delicacies, or sometimes just hand-me-down, tall tales. Leah's mom called him "Old Man," though Leo was middle aged. He was generous and jokey, and he made everyone feel good; he could sit and sip at the kitchenette table for hours, wooing Leah's mother over a marathon of Spades (draw, no deal). Now and again he'd wink at Leah and ask if she wanted to play "52 Pickup," a gag she only fell for once.

Over the months, Hollis's affections had dripped to the child. Instead of marriage to Leah's mother, one night he had proposed a stewardship of the girl. He was kidding, of course—or so thought her mom. Soon enough, however, Hollis had cast out a line of sober promises about private schooling, new clothes, and a bedroom of her own. Princessdom.

Panoleah was 14, and the narrative bristled like magic. She had griped to her mother about wanting it, *needing* it. She moaned and had wept over how unfair it was not to have it, until eventually, Leah's mother had ordered her to go on, get. To figure out how the spider spun his web.

Of the many things that marked Leah's time with New Father, she mostly remembered his horses. A drove of failed Tennessee Walkers, geldings, they'd been rescued from an illegal breeder farm outside of Maryville. Their hooves had been sored in an attempt to manufacture gait, so they were slightly hobbled at a trot.

Leah spent every available instant with the animals, going so far as to sleep in a paddock. In reply, Hollis had bragged to her that he was the one who had saved them. Sheltered them. Fed them. Loved.

A few months into the arrangement, it became clear to Leah that New Father was also keeping her as a pet. She ran away soon after, home to her mother at first, and then on to whomever could comfort her.

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Van Dorn first saw her at a moldering two-story motel, where he'd holed up to drink and remember the war, and accelerate the process of dying. The place was rented hourly or weekly. Migrant pickers clustered like vermin in the mildewed rooms. At evening, old men gathered plastic lawn chairs in the parking lot and lit trash fires.

A rotating squad of dropouts from the county high school threw parties at the motel—but always on the second floor. The boys brought in black girls and white girls, and whatever girls they could corral. The lot of them banged bass thump music and chugged weed by the brick, and mixed prescription cough syrup with Mountain Dew and hard candy. Their huge American sedans were painted in carnival hues of purple and red, like the cars down in New Orleans, with LCD screens embedded in the back of the headrests, and trunks full of knockouts, kicker box speakers. They rode on 22-inch chrome rims like charioteers of the backwoods blacktops, in and out of the motel lot at all times of night, carting the girls around, hollering.

Van Dorn loved them. They were the realest, most vibrant people he could have ever fought for.

Some nights, though, late, he had to pull his boots on and stomp up the metal-cement stairway, and lay into them. Blocking their open doorway, shirtless, his dog tags clattered against his slick, taut chest, his reaper tattoo, he would order them to shut it the fuck down. And he didn't care who he was talking to, and the kids were never too wasted to not take him seriously.

Except once, on the night he took her.

Early that evening, he'd been sitting in a lawn chair just outside his motel room, a tallboy in a bag in his hand. Leah and her girlfriend had walked up out of nowhere. She had long black hair, almond-y skin, was skinny. A tricky rap lyric tripped out of her lips as she passed him, glancing over. Seconds later, after she was out of sight, Van Dorn had heard her describe him as a "broke ass" to her friend. The girls had laughed.

He didn't care.

At least, he didn't want to. Still. As twilight leached away, the open doors of the party rooms above him burning yellow against the night; as the kids leaned against the second floor retaining grate, tucking their cigs into the parking lot, Van Dorn couldn't stop looking up, for her. At some point, he had even gone inside his room to watch television, to try and close himself out.

Every bass rattle had reminded him of a blast concussion. The crack of every beer can dropped on concrete was a rifle shot. The dancing had pummeled his ceiling for hours, until at some point he had stormed up the stairs.

One of the party boys pulled a weapon. Van Dorn marched straight into the pistol, its barrel denting his bare chest. When the boy, 17 or so, but with some pretty good muscles, began to unleash a torrent of threat, Van Dorn had snatched

the gun away in a blur, snapping young man's carpal bones in the process. He then offered the pistol to anyone who would take up the challenge.

Nobody did.

Scanning the room for hostiles, he saw the girl sitting Indian style on the splotchy brown bedspread. She was the only one who had met his stare. He paused, then marched over and yanked her up by her arm. She giggled as he led her out, and down the stairs.

He sat her on his motel bed, and offered her a Coke. She refused, so he'd given her the remote control. They could hear the boys above hollering about what they would do to him. The chorus of them sounded exactly like what they were: boys.

Van Dorn slept on the floor that night. Her first thought after he dozed was to go back upstairs and get high. She was seventeen and this had been her life for a time: she had gotten high, and danced, and had made good friends, and she didn't really have to fuck anyone she didn't want to fuck. The crew of them would fly over country roads in the big, bright cars and shout *Fuck Mississippi* into the summertime nights, and *Fuck Everything*, too. Doing this had felt so good, like a rupturing of the narrative that embalmed them.

Yet she didn't leave. Instead, she just stared at the pile of Van Dorn on the floor, his skin draped in the downcast of television light. She'd been mesmerized by the spot-like scars on his back, nine of them total, and had watched him clench up in sleep as if being kicked. She lit cigarettes, and the little-girl part of her worried about him busting her for smoking. At some point, she had fallen asleep.

"It's your choice," Van Dorn explained the next morning. "I'm not stealing you." He'd been up for hours, having brought coffee and a packet of mini coconut donuts to the room. "You can come home with me. Participate. But it must be your choice."

He'd thought all morning about his invitation, about how to define his hopes. He'd considered trying to explain Samarra—but didn't know how, or even what had happened there. Instead, he confessed to her about losing his twin sister, years before the war. How the siblings had known every single thing about each other, a river of feeling and thought, without words. How he needed so badly to replace this loss, to reinstate this sense of empathy, communion. The death of their closeness was where he'd gone wrong. It was the only time he had ever known peace.

He was terrified Leah would refuse.

She didn't. She didn't say anything, actually, only nodding an okay. She'd felt special, chosen, and had decided right then to do whatever he wanted—for a time, at least. Her only hopes were that he would not hurt her. (She figured he might

cause her some pain, but had hoped he would not *damage* her.) None of her friends had come to look for her, anyway.

Within minutes, they were on the road back to Van Dorn's little house, on the bruised-up side of Pitchlynn, Mississippi.

And now.

And now, she was conditioned to his every tic and whim, and she knew she could never leave him. He swore to her that there could be no closer love.

They were twinned, it seemed. There was nothing more to think about.

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**ODIE LINDSEY'S** writing appears in *Best American Short Stories*, *Iowa Review*, *Guernica*, *Electric Literature*, *Forty Stories: New Writing from Harper Perennial*, *Fourteen Hills* and elsewhere. A veteran, his related story collection, *We Come To Our Senses*, was recently published by W.W. Norton.