



DRUNK MONKEYS



A monthly online magazine
devoted to literature & film.

Featuring short fiction, flash
fiction, poetry, creative non-
fiction, film reviews,
interviews, & podcasts.



Read Our March Issue

Released

FICTION

Walter

Levis



Racial. Barrier. Falls.

The words like a meditative mantra for Violet, a promise renewed in each breath, deep and expanding, as strong and sure and filled with hope as the sweet smell of autumn in New York. It was November 4, 2008. The news—world-historical news—flashed across every television-computer-cell phone-smartphone-website-newsstand all over the country, all over the world, each headline a slightly varied version of the one she liked most, the one from her very own hometown paper, the good ol' *New York Times*, which ran the banner: "Obama Elected President as Racial Barrier Falls."

And it wasn't only President Obama who inspired her. First Lady Michelle—strong, successful, independent, with accomplishments of her own, including being the mother of those two gorgeous children. Yes, the faces of those little girls in their red dresses, smiling, waving, sending her and Jason—who sat together on the couch watching the inauguration, holding hands, tears in their eyes—a private message: *It's possible. Everything you want is possible.*

But seven and a half months have passed since that glorious November moment, and now—it all feels different. Now, it's a muggy morning in May 2009, and Violet is back in Hunts Point, back where she and her brother Victor grew up, back in the place she takes perverse pleasure in calling "the jungle." She hates it—she loves it. She knows what it triggers: the monster of doubt in the back of her mind. So old, so maddening, so hopelessly self-defeating. It's not headlines that matter, not the promise of politics; what presses right now is the scared, angry, fist-tight part of herself that she wonders if she can ever overcome.

Jammed inside a cramped, greasy-smelling storefront diner on East 156th Street, Violet is sitting with Loella Dixon, her best friend in the world. Or, rather, Violet hopes they're still best friends. The awkwardness of the past eleven years—beginning just after high school when Loella went off to Connecticut on a fancy college scholarship while Violet ended up on West 45th Street, using Victor's drug money to pay her tuition at DeVry University's secretarial school—their different paths couldn't erase the intimacy of growing up together. They'd been like

sisters. Real sisters. It was Loella's grandmother who showed them both how to wear a bra and insert a tampon and countless other major life lessons that the girls should have learned from their mothers, except that neither really knew their mothers—or, in fact, their fathers. And this was the bottom line permanent link. The cold hard facts of their sad, sparse families: Loella had her Grandma Opal; Violet had her brother Victor—beyond that, they had only each other.

The waiter comes with their food; pancakes, eggs, sausage, toast. Violet doesn't feel the least bit hungry. The sausage looks fatty—the toast, burnt. But she smiles enthusiastically and watches Loella poke the yolk of her fried egg. A quick jab with the tip of her fork, it's so familiar that it makes Violet want to laugh—or cry. The absurd concentration on the features of Loella's big round face, lips pressed together, eyebrows raised and tense, her broad smooth forehead creased with worry, as if there were some grave danger of damaging the fried egg. So familiar, so crazy—the egg yolk poke. They once wrote a rap about it. After a night of teenage partying, when they ended up at this very same diner having a one-in-the-morning breakfast and giggling away their cheap-beer buzz, they wrote a rap with a borrowed pen on the back of a napkin. Something lewd about boys whose "poke is a joke." Violet tries now to recall the words or the rhythm of that stupid song, but she can't. There's only a vague tug at the back of her throat as she feels the old affection and care and you-one-crazy-girl-but-I'll-always-be-there-for-you love between friends. Yes, she needs that now. More than ever.

Swallowing hard, hoping to contain this swell of emotion, Violet's hand shakes as she lifts the plastic pitcher of pancake syrup. Nerves, the worrying that kept her awake all night—she wants to tell Loella about it, the whole story, exactly how and why she's back here in the neighborhood with her life threatened, or, rather, Victor's... It's too horrible to consider, what she knows they can do, like that runner a few years back, just a boy, couldn't have been more than fifteen, who ended up dead in his bathtub with his hands and feet hacked off and the letters R-A-T gouged out of his back. Not that Victor turned police informant—far from it. But a payback killing is the

worst, she knows. She once heard Victor say: “If it gets personal, you can stab a fucker fifty times and still ain’t be done.”

The thought makes her shudder, and she obviously does a poor job concealing it, because Loella stops mid-chew, her fork inches from her mouth.

“Wha’s matta w’you?”

Code switching, Violet thinks—Loella stirring their old argument about standard English versus “soundin’ black.” But no debate, please, not now. In fact, right now, the old sounds are soothing to Violet. “I’m jus’ fine,” she says gently, then gazes down at the pancakes she has just drenched in syrup.

But there’s no fooling Loella. Violet never could lie to her.

“That squeeze on your face look like you jus’ caught a wicked headache—and you say it’s nothin’? Want some aspirin,” Loella goes on. “I think I got me some aspirin here.”

Loella puts down her fork and starts to grab her purse, but Violet reaches across the tiny booth and squeezes Loella’s arm. “You know I never been happier in my whole life than I am ’bout getting married, Lo. I mean, I never dreamed I could feel this way—’bout anyone, ’bout anything!”

She feels her heart pounding and catches her breath with a quick gasp. “I wish you knew Jason better ’cuz he is the most wonderful man—not like the typical guy who—I mean, Jason listens, you know, really listens and—he cares about me, cares about how I feel, what I think.”

She doesn’t realize that she is squeezing Loella’s elbow tighter and tighter until Loella takes her hand and unwraps the clutched fingers. In the moment of silence that follows, Violet sees the puzzled look on her friend’s face.

“DK’s outta prison,” Violet says in a low tone. “And he and Mr. J. are settlin’ up with Victor and puttin’ me in the middle ’cuz they already gave Victor a beatin’ two nights ago and messed

him up so bad, he can't hear nothin' out of one ear, and now I gotta go see DK—this weekend, I gotta meet up with DK and —”

“DK?” Loella says, her eyes wide. “You gotta see DK?” She shakes her head and blinks, as if she'd just been splashed with water. “That shit with DK was a hundred years ago, Violet.”

Violet pushes her plate of pancakes into the center of the table. “I know and I tried to tell him, but he—well, I didn't even open his last letter, but in the one before that he said—”

“He still writin' you letters?”

Violet doesn't answer. She freezes like a kid caught in the middle of doing something naughty, and she notices that she is holding her breath. She knows what's coming.

Their eyes meet. After a moment Loella slowly lowers her gaze, then carefully soaks a corner of her toast in the yolk of her egg. Violet recognizes the tactic. It's the way Loella has always expressed her most harsh disapproval: quiet, calculated, as if every gesture contained a precise moral message. Goopy egg dripping from her bread, Loella looks at it thoughtfully, then takes a small bite. Her eyes close briefly as she chews and swallows, and she seems almost to be in pain until, finally, she looks up and says in a low voice, “You been writin' him all these years?”

Violet doesn't answer. She doesn't need to answer.

Loella stares at her. “You visit him up there at Wallkill?”

Violet nods. “Twice. 'Bout five years ago, after I went on that trip with that stockbroker—and then, 'bout four months ago. When Jason proposed. I had to tell him. DK stuck on me in some crazy way, you know, and now—you gotta help me, Lo. I mean, I haven't even told Jason about any of this 'cuz I don't—” She stops and swallows hard, squelching the threat of tears. Her throat feels like there's something squeezing it. “I need some help dealin' with this.”

“You need some help bein’ honest with yo’ friends,” Loella snaps, but then seems to immediately regret her harshness. She puts down her fork and leans forward, continuing in a softer tone, “Vi, lemme be sure I’m gettin’ this: You’ve been movin’ on with your life all these years, havin’ all kinds of relationships with all kinds of men, including the Caribbean cruise dude and that Italian cop on Staten Island you moved in with for—whatever that was. Five months? And...and now, you’ve got this engagement to Jason—rich, Jewish Jason, and them your words, girl, not mine—a wedding, Vi, your wedding! It’s ‘sposed to be in—what? Six months? And still, still, with all this, you been keepin’ on with DK? That boy been in jail for almost seven years!”

“It’s not like I’ve been telling him I’m out here waitin’ for him! I changed my e-mail right away, and he don’t even have my right snail ‘dress—they jus’ come forwarded—and DK know about me and Jason, and he knew when I was livin’ with—I been tellin’ him all along that—that stockbroker, that cop—I went and saw DK and—I went up there and told him myself that I was engaged—DK knows—but he jus’ ignore whatever—he don’t listen—all that time he been inside he never—”

“Then why d’you keep writin’ to him? And how come you never told me? Any other secrets you got?”

Violet looks away. From the diner’s window she can see where she and Victor grew up, and two doors down, Grandma Opal’s building, where Loella lives now. Two years ago, after getting her paralegal degree and landing a job with a law firm downtown, Loella moved back into the building, right next door to her grandma. She says she likes saving money on rent, and, of course, she can care for Opal, who is getting up in years. Between Grandma Opal’s building and where Violet grew up stands the same old run-down six-story walk-up that Victor always hated—and it hasn’t changed a bit, might still be a crack house for all she knows, same blotches of red and blue paint streaking the soot-covered cement.

Just then, coming around the corner, Violet sees thirteen-year-old Tamiqua Rivera wearing blue jean shorts and a pink cotton tank top walking hurriedly toward the diner. It lifts Violet’s spirits. The sight of the girl’s big dimply smile, her gangly

teenage legs, lanky arms swinging, an easy lilt in her walk— Violet loves and cares for Tamiqua as if she were...what? A sister, a niece, a daughter? Violet always stumbles over how to describe the relationship.

Eight years ago Tamiqua and her mother moved into the apartment next door to Grandma Opal's. At the time Violet, finishing secretarial school, was living with Victor; Loella was away at college. One day Violet found Tamiqua in the hall by herself. Her mommy, she explained, was sleeping on the bathroom floor and wouldn't wake up. Violet called for help, and when the police and ambulance arrived, Grandma Opal and Violet took five-year-old Tamiqua under their care, thinking it would be for only a few days. But the end of the week—Tamiqua's mother was diagnosed with stomach cancer. And her father? Killed in Iraq when she was a baby. So Grandma Opal and Violet took her into the family. Couldn't bear handing her over to "the system."

Whatever happened to her biological mother, nobody knows. Either dead or lost in the labyrinth of state hospitals. In any case, Tamiqua, now in eighth grade, still lives with Grandma Opal, but it bothers Violet that the issue of legal custody needs to be resolved. Soon, she thinks, right after the wedding. Jason will help.

Tamiqua jerks open the diner door and shouts, "Violet!"

Rushing to the booth, she almost knocks down a Hispanic teenager carrying a tub of dirty dishes. "Sorry, sorry, sorry!" she says, squeezing her bony shoulders together to let the boy pass. Then, she throws herself into the booth, where Violet holds open her arms for a hug.

"Mmmmm, Tamiqua, you smell good," Violet says, "you wearin'—"

"My perfume," Loella cuts in.

"It ain't your perfume." Tamiqua looks at Loella, then at Violet, then back to Loella. Like a squirrel, she twitches excitedly, that quirky unbounded energy Violet loves. "Grandma Opal said

that perfume was to share, Loella, and you—” But she stops herself and turns back to Violet. “You hear?”

“Hear what?” Violet asks.

Again Tamiqua shoots a quick look at Loella. “I’m gonna take you,” Loella says. “This afternoon. Just like we planned.”

A sudden stillness comes over Tamiqua. She lowers her gaze, staring blankly at the food on the table. Violet, confused about the particulars, nonetheless understands what’s going on. There’s real love and affection between Tamiqua and Loella, but there’s an even more special feeling between Tamiqua and Violet. Especially since Jason came into the picture, with Tamiqua’s “special visits” to Manhattan, now the little girl sometimes says she wants to be “just like Violet.” Between Violet and Loella, this dynamic stands in a long line of unintended competitions—that Violet always wins.

“I’m gettin’ my ears pierced today,” Tamiqua says softly, eyes lowered, her body remaining still. Then, she looks up at Violet. “Will you take me?”

Violet shoots a look at Loella and sees the hurt in her friend’s face, lips tightened, a barely perceptible grimace. But it lasts only a second. “Wha’chyoun lookin’ at me for?” Loella says. “I already got my ears pierced!”

They all laugh, then Violet tells Tamiqua she’ll take her in about an hour. But now she needs to finish talking with Loella.

Another hug and kiss, then Tamiqua slides out of the booth. Violet watches, noting that Tamiqua’s straight, narrow little-girl hips are beginning to change. Won’t be long ’fore she starts turnin’ heads, Violet thinks.

Then she looks back at Loella, who’s cutting into the uneaten plate of pancakes. Violet hesitates, watching her, trying to read whether Loella wants to talk about this little awkwardness of the ear piercing.

Finally, Loella swallows a forkful of pancakes and pushes the plate away.

“Bottom line is I gotta help Victor,” Violet says quietly. “That’s all that matters, right? After everything Victor’s done for me. I owe him... You know it. Better than anyone, Lo, you know how much I owe Victor. How much I love him.”

Loella shakes her head, leaning back, her lips thrust into a small doubting pout. There’s a long pause. In the silence Violet hears dishes clattering, muffled shouts from the grill, a swell of throaty laughter from an old man sitting at the counter. Finally, Loella leans forward and says, “I’m not sure what I know, Violet. I can’t believe you are even thinkin’ ’bout DK. I’m the one back in the hood with Grandma, but you—jus’ like Tamiqua always say, you livin’ the life in Manhattan!” She laughs with a trace of bitterness, but then takes a deep breath, reaching across the table to grab Violet’s hand. “You still one crazy girl,” she says, squeezing hard, “...but you know I’m gonna be there for you.”

Loella’s firm grip is so comforting to Violet that she almost starts to cry as she says, “Victor’s ear—from the beating—he can’t—and now—you know how Vic set up DK, so it’s gonna be payback and—but Victor, you know, he was jus’ protectin’ me, all them years, that’s all he was ever—the only thing he —”

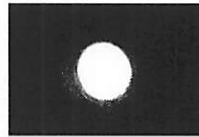
“I know—I know,” Loella interrupts. “Just take it easy. Let’s just go over this whole thing and lay it out straight, OK? And no secrets.”

Violet shuts her eyes tight and nods, her throat aching with the intense effort to quell her tears as she squeezes Loella’s hand. She’s thinking about Jason, about what she has told him—and what she hasn’t. Her brother’s situation, the “former gang member,” a phrase she hates, but Jason could understand all that, probably. But DK—the childhood friend, the first kiss, first boyfriend-real lover-gangster getting out of prison and still stuck on her like a dog holdin’ a bone... No way. She knows what she’s afraid of: that in spite of all Jason’s openness and compassion and total commitment, the truth about her and DK will frighten him away. *Even though I’m done with that boy, she thinks. Completely done. Finished. DK ain’t nothin’ but ancient history, she tells herself.*

But there's something tugging at the back of her throat, thick and salty and difficult to swallow.

Walter B. Levis was nominated for a 2006 Pushcart Prize and is author of the novel MOMENTS OF DOUBT (2003). His work has appeared in a variety of publications, including North Dakota Quarterly, The Amherst Review, The Cimarron Review, The Connecticut Review, The National Law Journal, The New Republic, The Chicago Reporter, and The New Yorker, among others. Complete information at www.walterlevis.com (<http://www.walterlevis.com>).

Featured



FICTION / There's No Lasagna in Here / Carol Pierce (/2017-posts/2021/3/8/fiction-theres-no-lasagna-in-here-carol-pierce)

I slam the refrigerator shut and ask myself why? Will keeping it make it fresher? "There's bananas and oatmeal over there," I say, gesturing to the space I made near the sink. "And chocolate cupcakes with sprinkles."

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FICTION / One Day, It's Gotta Find You / Scott Mitchel May (/2017-posts/2021/3/8/fiction-one-day-its-gotta-find-you-scott-mitchel-may)

People like the Restless Man always got to enjoy the benefits of admiration without doing the admirable thing. When his father was alive (time since father's passing is unknown to the Restless Man), he was the same way — always in some hole where he did not belong. People looked the other way, then, too.

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FICTION / The Turnaround / Jeffrey Messineo (/2017-posts/2021/3/8/fiction-the-turnaround-jeffrey-messineo)

"That's a lot of time spent. It's a nice song with something to it." The old man smirked through the crackle and smell of a freshly lit cigarette. "If you like, we could run up the hill here and see. Maybe there's a place for you. A chance to use your gift - a time to call your own - an audience out there. Travel. Lots of people could hear you play."

Mar 8, 2021

[fiction \(/2017-posts/tag/fiction\)](#)