

PICK A COLOR

A black man moved into a white neighborhood. He had a black house with a black porch where he used to sit every morning and drink his black coffee, until one black night, his white neighbors came into his house and beat the crap out of him. He lay there curled up like an umbrella handle in a pool of black blood and they kept on beating him, until one of them started yelling that they should stop because if he died on them they might end up in prison.

The black man didn't die on them. An ambulance came and took him far, far away to an enchanted hospital on the top of an inactive volcano. The hospital was white. Its gates were white, the walls of its rooms were white, and so was the bedding. The black man began to recover. Recover and fall in love. Fall in love with a white nurse in a white uniform who took care of him with great devotion and kindness. She loved him too. And like him, that love of theirs grew stronger with every passing day, grew stronger and learned to get out of bed and crawl. Like a small child. Like a baby. Like a black man who had been badly beaten.

They got married in a yellow church. A yellow priest married them. His yellow parents had come to that country

on a yellow ship. They had been beaten up by their white neighbors too. But he didn't get into all that with the black man. He barely knew him, and anyway, he didn't want to go there, what with the ceremony and everything. He planned to say that God loves them and wishes them all the best. The yellow man didn't know that for sure. He'd tried lots of times to convince himself that he did. That he knows that God loves everyone and wishes us all only the best. But that day, when he married that battered black man, not even thirty and already covered with scars and sitting in a wheelchair, it was harder for him to believe. "God loves you both," he finally said anyway. "God loves you and wishes you all the best," he said, and was ashamed.

The black man and the white woman lived together happily, until one day, when the woman was walking home from the grocery store, a brown man with a brown knife who was waiting for her in the stairwell told her to give him everything she had. When the black man came home, he found her dead. He didn't understand why the brown man had stabbed her, because he could have just taken her money and run. The funeral service took place in the yellow priest's yellow church, and when the black man saw the yellow priest, he grabbed him by his yellow robe and said, "But you told us. You told us that God loves us. If he loves us, why did he do such a terrible thing to us?" The yellow priest had a ready-made answer. An answer they'd taught him in priest school; something about God working in mysterious ways and that now that the woman was dead, she was surely closer to Him. But instead of using that answer, the priest began cursing. He cursed God viciously. Insulting and hurtful curses the likes of which had never been heard in the

world before. Curses so insulting and hurtful that even God was offended.

God entered the yellow church on the disabled ramp. He was in a wheelchair too; He had once lost a woman too. He was silvery. Not the cheap, glittery silver of a banker's BMW, but a muted, matte silver. Once, as He was gliding among the silvery stars with his silvery beloved, a gang of golden gods attacked them. When they were kids, God had once beaten one of them up, a short, skinny golden god who had now grown up and returned with his friends. The golden gods beat Him with golden clubs of sunlight and didn't stop until they'd broken every bone in His divine body. It took Him years to recuperate. His beloved never did. She remained a vegetable. She could see and hear everything, but she couldn't say a word. The silvery God decided to create a species in His own image so she could watch it to pass the time. That species really did resemble Him: battered and victimized like Him. And His silvery beloved stared wide-eyed at the members of that species for hours, stared and didn't even shed a tear.

"What do you think," the silvery God asked the yellow priest in frustration, "that I created all of you like this because it's what I wanted? Because I'm some kind of pervert or sadist who enjoys all this suffering? I created you like this because this is what I know. It's the best I can do."

The yellow priest fell to his knees and begged His forgiveness. If a stronger God had come to his church, he probably would have carried on cursing him, even if he had to go to hell for it. But seeing the silvery, disabled God made him feel regret and sorrow, and he really did want His forgiveness. The black man didn't fall to his knees. With the bottom half

of his body paralyzed, he couldn't do things like that anymore. He just sat in his wheelchair and pictured a silvery goddess somewhere in the heavens looking down at him with gaping eyes. That imbued him with a sense of purpose, of hope, even. He couldn't explain to himself exactly why, but the thought that he was suffering just like a god made him feel blessed.

when the art dealer comes to see her, he tells his wife he's going to Bibi's. Once she bumped into him and his wife in the mall. They were standing a few feet away from each other; she gave him a small, secret smile and he ignored her. His eyes were on her but they were completely blank, as if she were nothing. As if she were empty air. And she understood that he couldn't smile back with his wife standing right there, or say anything to her, but even so, there was something very hurtful about it. She stood there by herself next to the pay phones and started to cry. That was the same night she slept with me. In retrospect, it was a mistake.

Four of the guys she dated tried to commit suicide. Two even succeeded. And they were the ones she cared about most. They were close to her, very close, like real brothers. Sometimes when she's home alone she can actually feel us, Kuti and me, in the living room with her, looking at her. And when that happens, it's scary but it makes her happy too. Because she knows she's not completely alone.

ONE STEP BEYOND

Killers for hire, they're like wildflowers. They pop up in more species than you can name. I used to know one who called himself Maximillian Sherman, though I'm sure he had other aliases too. Max was one of those top-tier, high-end sorts of killers. Classy. The type that seals a deal maybe once or twice a year. And with the price he got per scalp, he didn't need to sign on for more.

My man Maximillian had gone vegetarian at the age of fourteen. He told me it was for reasons of conscience. He'd also adopted a kid from Darfur—a boy called Nuri. Max never once met the kid, but he'd write him long letters, and then Nuri would write him back and shove some photos in the envelope for good measure. What I'm trying to say is, Maximillian was a compassionate killer. He wouldn't murder children. Also, he had a problem with old ladies. That kind of high-mindedness cost him a lot of money over the course of his career. A whole lot of money.

So there's Maximillian, and then there's me. And that's what's lovely about this world of ours, that it's such a rich tapestry. I don't sound all polished like Maximillian. And you won't ever catch me with my nose buried in some scientific

paper about toxins that can't be traced in the blood. But, in contrast to Mr. Sherman, I *am* willing to butcher an old lady. I'll kill children by the pound. And I'll do it without stuttering or blinking, and at no extra charge.

My lawyer says that's exactly why they stuck me with the death penalty. Today, he says, it's not like it used to be. In the old days folks preferred a public hanging over a good meal. These days people have lost their taste for killing murderers. It makes them sick to their stomachs, makes them feel bad about themselves. But child-killers? Those they still go after with gusto. Maybe you can make sense of it. As far as I can tell, a life is a life. And Maximillian Sherman and my righteous jurors can twist up their faces until the cows come home, but taking the life of a bulimic twenty-six-year-old student majoring in gender studies, or a sixty-eight-year-old limousine driver who fancies a bit of poetry on the side, that's no more or less all right than snuffing out the life of a runny-nosed three-year-old. Prosecutors love to split hairs over this. They love to mess with your head, talking about purity and helplessness. But a life is a life. And as a guy who's stood over plenty of corrupt lawyers and dirty politicians in his day, I've got to stress that at the appointed moment, the instant that the body gives a flutter and the eyes flip in their holes—right then, everyone is innocent and everyone helpless, not a lick of difference. But go and explain that to some half-deaf retired jurist from Miami whose experience of loss—apart from a husband she couldn't much stand—was nursing a pet hamster named Charlie as he succumbed to a case of cancer in his tiny-tiny colon.

In court they alleged that I am a hater of children. Maybe there's something to that. They dug up an old incident wherein I murdered a set of twins that weren't in the con-

tract. It wasn't pro bono or anything, they just got caught up in the mix. And it's not that I've got any problem with kids when it comes to, say, their outward appearance. Because kids—in appearance—are actually pretty sweet. Like people, but small. They remind me of those mini cans of soda and eensy-weensy boxes of cereal that they used to hand out on planes. But behaviorwise? I'm sorry. I'm not exactly a fan of their little tantrums and breakdowns, the hysterics on the floor in the middle of the shopping mall. All that screeching, with the Daddy-should-go and I-don't-love-Mommy—and all because of some shitty two-dollar toy that, even if you buy it for them, won't get played with for more than a minute. I even hate the whole bedtime-story bit. It's not just the awkward situation where you're forced to lie next to them in their little uncomfortable beds, or that emotional blackmail of theirs. And, trust me, they don't hold back, they'll roll you over a barrel to get another story out of you; but, for me, the worst part is the stories themselves. Always precious, with sweet woodsy creatures stripped of their fangs and claws; illustrated lies about worlds without evil, places more boring than death. And if we're back on the subject of death: my lawyer thinks we can appeal the sentence. Not that it'll help. But making sure this whole performance reaches a higher court would buy us some time. I told him I'm not interested. Between us, what would I get from that little slice of living? More push-ups in a six-by-nine cell? More college basketball and crappy reality TV? If the only thing I've got coming down the pipeline is a needle full of poison, let them stick me now and move on. Let's not drag our feet.

When I was a kid, my father was always yammering on about heaven. He talked about it so much that he completely

lost sight of who, in this world, my mother was fucking behind his back. If my father's take on the world to come is right, then it'll be anything but boring to be there. He was Jewish, my father. But in prison, when they ask me, I request a priest. Somehow, those Christians just seem a little less abstract to me. And in my situation, the philosophical angle isn't exactly relevant. What's important right now is the practical. That I'll end up in hell is a given, and the more information I manage to draw out of the priest, the better prepared I'll be when I get there. I'm speaking from experience when I tell you there's no place where crushing a kneecap or caving in a skull won't increase your social standing. It doesn't matter if it's a reform school in Georgia, basic training in the Marines, or a closed prison wing in Bangkok. The wisdom is in being able to identify on who, exactly, to crush what. And this is precisely where the priest was supposed to help. In retrospect, I see I could've requested a rabbi or a qadi or even a mute Hindu baba, because that chatterbox priest hasn't helped at all. He looks exactly like a Japanese tourist and must know it, because the first thing he rushes to tell me is that he's already a fourth-generation American, which is more than you can say for me. The priest says that hell is completely personal. Exactly like heaven. And in the end, everyone gets the hell or the heaven he deserves. Still, I won't give up. Who's in charge there? I ask him. How does it work? Is there any history of people that manage to escape? But he won't answer, just nods his head up and down like those dogs you stick on the dashboard. By the third time he asks me to take confession, I can't stand it anymore and I pop him real good. My hands and my legs are restrained when I do it, so I've got to use my head. The noggin is more than enough. I don't know

what materials they use to build Japanese priests nowadays, but mine came apart in an instant.

The guards that separate us beat me something serious: kicking, and clubbing, landing punches to the head. They act as if they're trying to subdue me, but they're just beating me silly for the hell of it. I understand them. It's fun to hit. The truth? I enjoyed that head butt to the priest more than the steak and fries they gave me for my last meal, and that prison steak wasn't half-bad. It's great fun to hit—and I can only imagine what violence awaits me on the far side of my shot of poison. I promise you that as much as it will be unpleasant for me in hell, it'll be worse for the son of a bitch standing within reach. And it won't matter to me if the guy's a run-of-the-mill sinner, or a demon, or Satan himself. That bleeding Japanese priest got my appetite going.

The needle hurts. They definitely could've found one that didn't, those self-righteous puritans, but they chose one with sting. They do it to punish.

While I'm dying, I remember everyone I killed. I see the expressions that spread over their faces right before their souls escaped through their ears. It's possible that they'll all be waiting there, seething, on the other side. Right then I feel one final, massive spasm take over my body, like someone's just closed a fist tight around my heart. My victims? Let them wait for me. I hope they're there! It'll be a pleasure to kill them all again.

I open my eyes. There's high green grass around me, like in the jungle. Somehow I imagined a hell more basement-like, all dark and dungeony. But here everything's green and the sun is high in the sky and dazzling. I forge a path forward, searching the ground for something I can use as a weapon: a

132 SUDDENLY, A KNOCK ON THE DOOR

133