



MY COUNSELOR

My children tell me I talk too much, but that is because they don't listen. The ones that are left to me: my son Darrell and my daughter Josephina.

Darrell asks me, just like his twin Louis used to, "Can't you hold it in, Mama? Just this once, can't you get a hold of yourself?"

"Why?" I ask him. "Is that going to bring back Maurice? Is it going to bring back Louis?"

Darrell, he just shrugs and walks off. Louis and Maurice, they were my strength and my light, I tell my counselor.

Darrell's son, he's called Darrell too, or Rell for short, he's got his uncle Maurice's ring, the one I gave Maurice for graduating from school. Ten years, Maurice nagged me about it, telling me I'd promised it to him, telling me it showed I didn't care. When I finally bought it for him—it's got a little diamond in the middle—he lifted me right off the ground. But I never saw it on his hand.

Now Rell wears it around his neck where he thinks I can't see it. Or maybe he's hiding it from his cousins. But they didn't want nothing from their uncle Maurice—except Pryor wanted the snakeskin boots—until he saw how Maurice had cut them off in the back so they was like mules.

Pryor is Josephina's son. He can afford to keep his distance. He can't remember how Maurice watched over him before he could walk or speak. Maurice only fourteen and Josephina not even a full year older. Rell now, he remembers what he owes Maurice. He's lived most his life under the same roof with him. Mine. Darell, Rell and Maurice, they were my home boys. I

miss Maurice something fierce, but it doesn't seem the same for Darell and Rell. Rell's got his own father to worry about now—that's what Josephina said. But she only said it once and it might have been spite. She did it just before she left for work this afternoon, slamming the door behind her. No need for her to come over. She send me Pryor or Juju, her daughter, and I can do just fine. No need for her to keep checking on me like I am up to something.

"Can't you hold it back?" she asked me. "Don't you think Rell has enough to worry about now, what with his father."

"What you mean?" I asked her. "You trying to tell me something?"

But she was gone by then, marching down the steps with her shoulders pressed back like a soldier. She knows what I think about her work, but she just tells me a man that's put off by a woman's strength ain't got no business with her.

She got no business with men period. I don't know how she got that way, seeing how good her brothers were to her.

My counselor, he tells me, never mind what they say.

My children love me. But that don't mean they won't pick up and go without notice.

"He told you," Josephina says to me. "Louis told you over and over again."

"Told me what?" I asked her. "Not that he had something like that. You think if I'd knowed I wouldn't have given all my blood, think I wouldn't have given it to the two of them? " You tell me what else mothers are for? They give kidneys. I just read about a man got his own daughter's heart. So couldn't a man take his mama's blood? They say they can't put a stop to it, this disease, but they're wrong. They took my blood, they'd still be here, my boys.

My counselor tells me to put my mind at rest. My boys never did drugs. Louis, he was a supervisor at the telephone company. Louis, he was my staff. Maurice, he was my light.

"Makes three in a year," my sister Rose told me when I called her today with the news about Darrell. "I don't know how you hold up."

"I have my counselor," I tell her. There's nothing I can't tell him, nothing I have to keep hid. Some days I think, I can't go to work today, so I don't and I sit and talk with my counselor instead.

I'll never leave you, he tells me. Set your mind to rest, Marvella. I will

be by your side whatever happens.

"I don't know how you stand up to it," my sister Rose tells me. I know, soon as we hang up, she'll call all my brothers and sisters. "Three," she says, like I can't see the fingers on my own hand.

"You don't have to protect me," I remember telling Louis as we sat downstairs waiting on Josephina and Darrell. They'd gone upstairs to pack up Maurice's things. That's when Rell found his uncle's ring. In a glass cookie jar filled with cat's eye marbles.

"I'm strong," I told Louis. "I can go up there and see where my baby lived. I can take it." But he told me to sit where I was.

"There's no need to put yourself through that," he said. His lips were in a fine tight line. He was only trying to protect me. I know that now, but he looked like a stranger to me that day.

I never liked the beard he wore the last years. We're a clean featured family. But Josephina says he had his reasons and even when we went to bury Louis, she said Louis wasn't going to have it taken off.

"How can I touch his sweet cheek, you leave that on?" I asked her. But Josephina can be hard. She was the same about the suit she buried Maurice in. She and Darrell and Louis all decided they wanted him in the white suit—even though Maurice would have been ready to dance, we'd put him in the blue one. "You want that blue suit for Pryor?" I asked her.

"What we don't put on him, we'll burn." She never even turned to look at me.

"You'll burn your brother's property?" I still didn't understand. Maurice, he went so quick, none of us was prepared.

How can you prepare for something like that? my counselor asks me.

You never saw Maurice when he was on the stage, I tell him. He was like magic. My baby was like magic. "Where you think I got it," Maurice used to tease me. "You're my spell, Mama."

It's true I dance better than most anyone I know. Not ballet—you have to go to school for that, like my baby did.

"What you been doing with yourself?" Josephina asked me, checking the garbage, then the shelves in the kitchen, still in her uniform. Like I was a criminal.

"It's all right," I told her. I got nothing to hide. My counselor told me I needed some relief. I told her about my plans to move and she just stood