

Fifth Picture

The Old Man

I thought I was alone, sitting on the bottom step in front of the house, drawing the Old Man, working with a flesh-peach pencil. Quick sketches, one after the other: hat down over his eyes in the first, standing in front of the river in the next, sleeping in the hammock in the third. His beard and the way he leaned forward, listening. I was trying to capture what he looked like so I'd have it to take back with me. To remember.

The screen door opened in back of me with that soft swishing noise, and the Old Man came out to look over my shoulder. "Oh, Hollis," he said. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

I shook my head.

"Hollis?"

I looked toward the river, green today, a willow hanging over the edge.

He put his hand on my shoulder. "It's a gift," he said, "to draw things the way they are."

I sat very still. No one had ever said anything like that to me before.

"And something else," he said. "You shine through in your drawings."

I looked up at him, really looked at him, not a quick glance that darted away so he couldn't see my eyes. "My name ...," I began as he folded himself down on the step next to me. "Hollis Woods is a real place." I shrugged a little. "Holliswood," I said. "One word, I think."

When the Old Man spoke, I jumped. "It's where they found you, as a baby?"

"An hour old," I said in an I-don't-care voice. "No blanket. On a corner. Somewhere." Didn't a baby deserve a blanket? "And just the scrap of paper: CALL HER HOLLIS WOODS."

One day I had gone to see that place. I ran away from one of my houses—tan, green, brick? I circled Queens, on the subway, off the subway, onto the Q2 bus and off the Q2 bus, until I found the spot.

It was winter, bleak, but the houses were pretty. I never did find the woods, though. I tried to picture it in the spring when I had been born, with birds chirping and the sun shining.

Now I saw Steven come into view in the rowboat.

"I play hookey," I told the Old Man. "Everyone says I'm tough, they say I'm trouble."

The Old Man made a sound in the back of his throat.

"Steven is a great kid," I said.

The Old Man looked surprised. I waited to hear if he would say anything, but Steven banged the rowboat hard into the rocks along the bank.

The Old Man made another sound. "Watch that, Steven."

"The kingfisher is on the branch downstream," Steven called. So we went down to the boat and climbed in to go have a look.

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