

# Lord, What Now?

Kaitlyn Taylor

Smoky's Pit was balmy and entwined with the husky cadence of the tenor sax. Crooked floorboards stabilized twisting, brown-black feet and creaked to the gyrations of round bottoms rubbing against lonely pelvises. Gold-toothed men held their filled bellies, cackling, tapping the rims of their overfilled beer glasses to reserved jokes. The women were copper silhouettes yielding waves in this ocean of prowls as their faces forged shy smiles to hide their raging impurities. A grooving piano fused with the sax into a syncopated combo. A raspy voiced woman sang lazily.

*I wish I knew how it would feel to be free.*

April May sat at the back of the juke joint taking a long, slow drag on her cigarette, rolling her head to the beat. Her pouty lips were matted with rich ruby lipstick to which she greeted with a quarter-filled wine glass, allowing the peachy champagne to fall onto her tongue. A short, red-boned waitress with black hair molded to finger waves and a busted lip came walking by with a dripping dish tray.

April May said, clearing her throat, "Hey baby. You think you can get me a refill of some of that good champagne y'all got? And what happened to your lip, sweetie?" April May leaned forward, hand to chin.

"Yes, and work, lady. Just work," the waitress said while chewing gum. "And what happened to yours?"

April May paused and ran her finger along the rim of her bottom lip. "Ah, work. And for me, just plain ole life." April May forced a smile.

The waitress's eyes became a dam of water. She placed her free hand on her narrow hip and tilted her head. "Anythang else you need while I feel like gettin' it?"

"No, love. That's it. I ain't mean nothin' by that," April May said as she shifted back into her seat.

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The young waitress walked away rolling her eyes and switching those hips. When she strolled past the bar, an old, drunken man slapped her ass to which she forced a pleased smile and an enthusiastic wave.

*I wish I could break all the chains holding me.*

April May scratched at the back of her dollar-store press-on nails, lifting remnants of champagne-soaked fried pickles some nice boy who visited Smoky's regularly had bought her. He told April May that she reminded him of one of his aunts that had recently passed away. He said she had died holding a bible and a Newport. She cursed like hell, but everybody loved her, from a distance. So April May ate them pickles fast and drank the champagne even faster, saying how sorry she was for his auntie. He sat running his eyes all down her long, nubile neck.

A soft, red-toned spotlight brushed against April May's supple espresso skin. The sax and piano continued trailing each other down a smooth drain that dripped creamy sensations into the abdomens of the audience. Smoky's Pit quieted as everyone succumbed to the thrust of the music. Eyes closed and jaws loose, they swayed.

Just as April May closed her eyes, she heard heavy, drained plops descending the joint's steps. In the distance, a giant of a man was tucking in his shirt as he searched his way through lingering fumes. April May straightened her back while adjusting her homemade, bedazzled, black dress, pushing loose rhinestones to her body, hoping they'd stay. As she was wiping the sides of her face and adjusting her medium-length fro, a deep voice said, "April May. I saw you and wanted to come speak."

"I don't know why you wanted to do that," she huffed, crossing her arms.

He looked down at her firm breasts poking through those rhinestones, positioning two of them to be formations of her nipples.

*I wish I could say all the things that I should say.*

He pulled a seat out from under the table across from her and placed a thick hand on top of it. The red spotlight caressed his opulent, golden watch.

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“Come on. Don’t be like that,” he said. His voice could take her heart and almost kiss it.

“I’m not bein’ like nothin’. You need to ask yourself that, *bein’* upstairs and all,” April May said, looking down at his unzipped pants.

Turning to the side and clenching his jaw, he zipped up his pants.

“Look, what do you want? Money or somethin’? I’m already like yo’ chauffeur,” he said, growing agitated.

“Well, don’t be. I can do without it. Besides, where that wife of yours, huh?”

April May put her elbow on the table to turn away from him. He went on talking about how he and his wife fought and argued so much that the rooster didn’t even want to wake them up in the morning anymore. Said he don’t feel like no man with her and hasn’t ever since she started talking to such and such about their problems. And supposedly she never tended to her hair and then got the nerve to nitpick when her chin drooped lower than his ball sack.

“Maxwell, just stop. I guess God can help you figure it out,” April May said sarcastically.

“So funny.” He rolled his eyes. “Look, let’s go for a ride and talk this problem you got out.”

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere with you anymore. I really need to be gettin’ to my child.”

“Where she at?”

“Where she always is. At Ms. Jessie Bell’s.”

“Mmh. I’m surprised you ain’t at the diner tonight. Hardly see you in here.”

“Yeah, well, I took off cause I needed to clear my mind. They be wearin’ me out up there. I’m always at somebody’s beck and call.” April May sighed.

“Won’t you come round to the church sometime? God can help you figure it out.” He chuckled.

Shame grew in April May’s face. He was laughing, just as he did when she’d suddenly get dry during sex. About eight strokes in he’d start dripping fusty sweat on her mouth. But

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then he'd start rubbing his dense fingers on her scalp, telling her how that dark, greasy fro sat nicely on her pretty head. He'd bend down to run his tongue across the rim of her bottom lip while holding her face in his palm. She peeped at his full lips and the gray-black mustache that curled above the top one. Those lips sent her to newfound places, places like rusty, antique jewelry. When cleaned and polished, something valuable awaits.

*Say 'em loud, say 'em clear.*

"Yeah, baby. I'm messin'. Where yo' drank?"

"Girl wit the finger waves 'pose to be bringin' it back. I don't know where she at now."

"Oh, she prolly upstairs try'na make a couple dollas. You know how that be. But look, I'll take you home. It's too late out, and you know Pumpin' Station Road be black as the deepest pit of hell this time uh night." He placed his hand on her bare shoulder. A half-concerned look glinted in his amber eyes.

"All right." She hesitated. "Only cause I need to go see 'bout Lil Bit. I know she waitin' for me."

As April May gathered her things, Maxwell grabbed her wrist.

"Do you need money, April? You know you can't keep keepin' on like this, all broke and stuff."

She looked down at his straight face. She thought about her empty refrigerator and hungry child. Then again, at least he was giving her a ride.

"Yeah, I do. But do you got it this time?"

Standing to fix the pants of his sleek, navy-blue suit, he said, "Yeah, let's go."

Maxwell walked toward the exit with April May following behind like a lost child. He kicked open the half-hinged, wooden screen door, and they descended two broken concrete steps.

"Oh," he turned around to April May, "won't you come by the church for real? Might do you some good. We got a new choir, and everybody forget 'bout they problems when they sangin'."

"You know how I feel about that church. I done told you. Ain't been back since my daddy died, and don't plan on goin' back."

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“Come on, April. It’s different na. Hell, some of these folks up in here be at the church every Sunday. Ain’t nothin’ but people try’na get close to God.”

“Okay. But why you want me to come so bad? Ain’t she gon’ be there?”

“Cause...I just think it’ll be nice. You know, goin’ to church and all to try to balance thangs out. And don’t worry ’bout ha. You gon’ be fine.”

April May thought for a moment.

“I guess. I’mma bring my daughter,” April May said to show that his convincing didn’t do the work of making her decision.

“Yeah, okay. But make sure y’all come nice, tho. Them folks is serious ’bout they Jesus na.”

*For the whole round world to hear.*

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“Get up, and let’s get ready for church.”

Sunday morning was thick in Progress, Mississippi. The birds frolicked about in the trees as their shrills and chirps coasted along the subtle wind. Faint sounds of children’s laughter and diesel trucks kicking gravel danced in the air, seeping its way into April May’s home on Pumping Station Road.

“Mama, I thought we was gon’ stay in today.” Lil Bit yawned as she sat up in her twin-sized floor mattress. She had frosted sleep plastered on the side of her face. She was worn out from spending the previous day with Ms. Jessie Bell—their elderly neighbor—finishing housework and listening to Ms. Jessie Bell’s agitations with a dull weight gripping her joints and “late food-coupon books.”

“Baby, don’t question me. Do as I say, and get ready for church,” April May said. She walked over to Lil Bit’s window and snatched open her rose-pink curtains, allowing the edgy sunrays to peer into the room. Lil Bit hopped out of bed and headed for her underwear drawer to prepare for a quick bath. She was quite attuned for nine.

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“I’mma go get ready, and you betta be dressed by the time I’m done.” April May’s slender hips rocked against the sides of her satin, wine-colored nightgown as she left for her bedroom.

This Pumping Station Road home sat between two other homes: Ms. Jessie Bell’s and an old, grouchy man’s who hardly came outside. April May’s home was small and made with dinged, chipped wood boards with metal sheets as a roof. The yard was often overgrown with long, skinny weeds and spotted with stray-dog shit. When her father had been in good health, he would tend to the yard “even if the house ain’t worth much.” But now, she bribed Ms. Jessie Bell’s two teenage grandsons to help with the upkeep in exchange for her handmade shirts, which she was only halfway decent at. Double shifts at Ronnie’s Diner left her worn out to where her thirty-year-old hands cramped like she had the rheumatism of an eighty-year-old.

“Mama, I’m ready,” said Lil Bit, her voice velvety, like the bottom of a cat’s paw. She had on her white, ankle, laced church socks with white hand-me-down shoes from a cousin and a baby-blue, polyester dress that April May had managed to piece together.

“Come here so I can do somethin’ to yo’ head,” April May huffed. She opened her legs to make room for Lil Bit. She also had on one of her homemade dresses: a plaid, blue-and-white dress paired with white sandals from Buck’s Dollar downtown. Her hair was parted down the middle and flat-twisted on either side.

April May took water to Lil Bit’s crisp, coiled hair, then slathered some green Blue Magic grease on her hair and forehead. She brushed it up to a tight puff, tautly pulling at the sides of Lil Bit’s gingerbread skin, bringing her button eyes to a slant.

“All right. Go wait in the kitchen. I’ll be out in a minute,” April May said, patting Lil Bit on the back, gesturing to her to get up.

“Mama, I’m hungry. Is it food in there?”

“No. We gon’ eat at the church. Don’t ask me that again. Do you understand me?” A rusted steel anchor lowered deep into April May’s soul. Typically, she could sweet-talk her way into free meals at work, but she’d always hope she sent Lil Bit to Miss Jessie Bell’s on a good day—where she had a fresh pack of beer and some food stamps.

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“I’m just so hungry. Ms. Jessie Bell only had some hot dogs and most of ’em had to go to ha gransons,” Lil Bit whined.

“Do. You. Under. Stand. Me?” April May hissed. “Go stand yo’ ass in the kitchen and wait.”

Lil Bit ran to the kitchen with her dress tail bouncing. April May lit a cigarette.

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A silky, humble rumble rested outside their home, sending quick, minute vibrations to the front windows and stacked cups in the cabinet.

“Mama! I think somebody outside,” Lil Bit said, running to her mother’s bedroom door.

“Okay, I’m comin’,” April May said as she walked to her oakwood dresser’s mirror to slick down any flyaways. She twisted the end of her cigarette in a glass ashtray.

After two piercing honks, April May rushed to the kitchen to straighten Lil Bit up some before opening the door. “I want us to look presentable.”

“Mama, who is that out there? They takin’ us to church?” Lil Bit asked as she looked down at her mother’s thin, veined hands aligning her dress buttons.

“It’s Pastuh Maxwell. He’s gonna drive us to church. Don’t you look pretty, baby. Now, you be a good girl in there, you hear? And don’t do no whole-buncha talkin’. Folks don’t like no loudmouth child, you hear?” April May said as her voice swelled with excitement. A steady smile eased on her face. She kissed Lil Bit’s greasy forehead and grabbed her white handbag from the kitchen counter.

Just as April May opened the front door, Maxwell honked twice more. She beamed a big clown smile at the sight of his royal-blue Chevy pickup. Showing was her gold-trimmed tooth, cushioned by crooked, off-white ones. She waved. “Hey Pastuh! We ready for church this mornin’. Thank you for comin’ to get us.” She grabbed Lil Bit by the hand as they descended the porch steps.

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“Glad to see you, sista. And you too, Lil Bit,” Maxwell said, getting out of his truck with a fat cigar drooping out the corner of his mouth. He stood at six foot two with golden-russet skin and high, pointy cheekbones. The sun’s rays beamed, forming a soft sparkle in his amber eyes. Maxwell stayed wearing a felt hat and three-piece suit, and today he had on a new gray one that perfectly accentuated his rich skin tone.

April May went to the driver’s side to greet Maxwell. They locked eyes, hugged, and kissed cheeks. It was only appropriate for this time.

“I missed you,” April May whispered with a shy smile.

“Mmmh,” Maxwell hummed, looking out of the corner of his eye as he was climbing into the truck. “Get in.”

April May rushed to the passenger side to help Lil Bit get into the truck.

“Mama, I never seen him befo’,” Lil Bit said as April May was buckling her into the middle seat.

“That’s cause he new, baby. Our new pastuh in town. Now be nice, okay?”

After buckling in Lil Bit, April May climbed into the passenger seat. She closed the door and let out a heavy sigh as his truck’s crisp air conditioner broke apart the blanket of Mississippi’s sweaty summer heat.

“Y’all ready?” Maxwell asked as he put the truck in reverse.

April May looked around, then down at Lil Bit. “Yeah, we ready.”

That pretty Chevy kicked gravel down Pumping Station Road, and off in the distance their three heads gestured side to side to the beat of the rocks.

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The melodious tones of aged church mothers huffed into the pine wall panels of St. Peter’s Apostolic Church. A collective bass from the instrument playing and foot stomping swelled in the red-velvet carpet. A single wave, the choir flowed as they stirred stark melodies. Together they composed a beaming ray of longing—almost penitence. St. Peter’s had, for over forty



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years, rocked the canoe of the gleeful possibility that God was, in fact, with them in spirit. With hope for a feathery release from the stale juice of moral estrangement, they yearned.

“Sit down right there,” April May whispered to Lil Bit, gesturing her toward one of the back benches to the right.

Lil Bit hopped along to sit at the center of the bench with April May to her left. There were only a few others on that bench, as most members sat closer to the front.

April May looked around the intimate sanctuary. That church had been her family’s source of redemption not long after its erection. Her grandparents had come to this church as newlyweds, with her father being born shortly thereafter. Her parents had met there, fought there, counseled there, and their funerals were held there. She had been born there and transformed there when, at age seven, a church deacon insisted on showing her the way to the bathroom. A single tear balled up and swam down her cheek, dripping off her chin.

“Praise the Lord, saints,” Maxwell projected as he walked from the back door. Before heading into the pulpit, he walked to the mother’s bench—first row—and gave his wife a staged kiss on the cheek. They both rode separately to church as he liked to “Go check things out befo’ service started, for safety reasons.”

“Praise the Lord,” the church echoed.

“I said praise the Lord, saints,” Maxwell repeated.

“Praise the Lord!” The church bustled and roared. Vibrant claps, shouts, and stomps boiled about in the small sanctuary. April May and Lil Bit watched as they sat tightly against each other.

“We not gon’ waste no time. Befo’ I touch on my lesson for today, I suppose we can have a couple testimonies from the saints,” Maxwell said as he stepped back to his seat.

The church body grew quiet as they looked around at each other, with some having nudged their neighbors. After a moment of indecision, an old lady wearing a cotton candy dress suit and glorious matching hat stood to profess her appreciation to the Lord for keeping her sane while her husband was undergoing medical treatment for his “man cancer.” Following, a hefty, young, bronze man with dinged work clothes thanked

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God for his Sanderson Farms job because he could now regularly feed his pit-bellied children.

Lil Bit shifted from side to side and looked up at April May. “Mama, I wanna go.”

“No, you betta sit yo’ behind d—”

Lil Bit sprang up from her seat with her puff dented from the bench’s curve.

“I wanna thank God for my mama and for our house. I wanna thank God for Miss Jessie Bell too.” She smiled, displaying her snaggle-tooth mouth.

April May pulled Lil Bit down to her seat, scolding her. “Girl, what’s wrong with you?!”

“Sista April May, won’t you let the lil’ sista speak? Lessin’ you got somethin’ you wanna say,” Maxwell said as he stood up to the podium.

April May shook her head.

“Come on, sista. Everybody got *somehin’* to thank God fuh,” he said, trying to convince her. Like that “give me *somehin’*” he would tell her when she’d reject his grimy prowl at the diner during a busy Friday night. “I’m too tired,” she’d tell him. “Well, baby it ain’t gon’ take that long.”

April May looked around at the umber church body. “If she ain’t gon’ go, I got somethin’ I can say,” someone projected.

Everyone looked around, and an uneasiness bulged in the room.

April May stood slowly, fixing her dress. “I suppose I’ll say somethin’.”

“Okay, sista. Tell us about the good Lord, won’t cha?” Maxwell said with a sly smile. For a moment, he looked down at his plain, bereft wife, who was surveying him with profound consistency.

“Pastuh Maxwell, I wanna thank God and all, but life just been so hard I can’t find it in me to do that sometimes.” April May’s arms were pinned to her sides in ninety-degree angles as she fiddled with her fingers.

“Well, what you mean, sista?”

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“I mean,” she said, clearing her throat, “that if God was really all that good and stuff, like in the bible, why my life so full of struggle?”

The church gasped and whispered among themselves.

“Sista, struggle ain’t but part of life. T’ain’t always God,” Maxwell said with a frown.

“I wake up and go to work so early in the mornin’. I got a baby to feed and no family round to help wit it. House paid fuh, but I can’t hardly manage the upkeep. I just need help, and if God cared, why he ain’t send it?” April May said as she started to cry. Her voice shook with a tender tremble growing in her hand. She gripped the back of the bench before her.

“Well, sista, that’s why prayer is impo’tant. You gotta pray to God. Philippians fo and six say, But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let yo requests be made known to God,” Maxwell said, gripping the sides of the podium.

A collection of whispers and movements creeped around the church.

“I do tell God, and I been tellin’ him this whole time. I’on think you really undastand what I’m tryin’ to say. It just ain’t no one-size-fit-all,” April May cried.

“Like you and everybody else in here, I go through my own struggle. Yes, some worse than othas, but God got individual plans for each of us, so we can get to the same destination—them gold streets up in heaven.” He smiled, displaying his stained, reaper-like teeth, nodding.

Some of the saints clapped and cheered, shouting amens and hallelujahs.

April May grew uneasy. Tender trembles turned to firm grips, with a sheet of heat sliding under her cheeks. She cleared her throat and looked down at Lil Bit’s pearly button eyes holding her intently.

“Oh, come on. You know good and well most of us in here don’t got the luxury of dreamin’ about heaven all day when we always fightin’ off the wolves! What’s thinkin’ ’bout heaven gon’ do for me down here?” she yelled, looking around at the quiet church body for any nods or amens.

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A pressured silence filled the room.

“Sista April May, we gon’ have to move on. We can’t hold up service like this no longa. I got a lesson to cover. Now, if you need some good counselin’, just see me in my office,” Maxwell said as he opened his bible. He gestured to one of the women ushers at the front door to get poor April May.

“Don’t y’all touch me! I can handle myself, and y’all ain’t got to worry about me comin’ back to this so-called church of God!” April May grabbed Lil Bit and gathered their things from the bench.

While walking briskly out of the church’s front door, Lil Bit said, “Mama, what happened?”

“Girl, hush yo’ damn mouf!” She squeezed Lil Bit’s wrists so tight a long, plump vein in her forearm began to protrude.

“Mama, you hurtin’ me,” Lil Bit whined.

A grudging thunder hummed in the distance.

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April May descended the church’s steps and marched toward the main road. Lil Bit treaded behind her, mucus webbing around her mouth, her eyes filled with sticky tears. April May’s heart bounced around in her chest. Fury swelled up her neck and into her head. Her vision was tunneled and strained from chagrin.

The road, a distancing port, she marched. With each step, her grip tightened around Lil Bit’s wrist.

“Mama, you holdin’ my arm too tight again,” Lil Bit cried. She tried twisting her arm out of April May’s mighty grip.

April May viciously snatched Lil Bit forward. As she fell, her knees grated across the gravel. April May stopped and glared at Lil Bit cradling her thin legs to her chest—her knees were oozing, punctured, red cherries.

April May’s face scrunched in rage, and her mouth tightened. “Shit,” April May mumbled. Letting out a deep, heavy sigh, she put her hands on her hips, watching Lil Bit twirl and stiffen in agony.

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The girl wiped her bloodied knees with her dusty hands, then held them, begging God for the pain to cease. Still crying, Lil Bit stood and wiped her moist face, glancing at April May out of a freshly wiped eye. She straightened her back as her tears slowed, silent. Just like when she was born, early, scratching April May's uterus, trying to come out but quiet when she got here. "That child gon' be strong," the nurse had said. "I sho' hope so."

In the distance was a lady usher in white and a deacon holding her arm as they ran toward April May and Lil Bit.

Thunder boiled in the distance. The ground shook. Clouds moved and darkened.

"Sista, we come to see is everythang all right. We undastand thangs is—"

"Y'all don't undastand shit." April May gestured Lil Bit to come in her direction as she headed down North Cherry Street. Lil Bit jogged behind.

"Sista, won'tchu come on? We can talk about anythang you need. We here to help," the suited gentleman said, panting, wiping his forehead. He held his hands out to April May. The usher stood still. Arms crossed.

April May turned around. "Look, won't y'all just leave me and my child the hell alone? We ain't got nothin' to say to y'all. Y'all folks wouldn't undastand anythang wit y'all fancy clothes and cars and shit." Her abdomen tightened as the right side of her head beat to the pounding of her heart.

"Look, sweetie, we can just sit and talk about anythang you like. We'll listen to what's botherin' you. We all been through our fair share of hardship," the usher said. She walked toward April May and Lil Bit; her eyes held an endearing expression.

"Won't you come back in, sista? We can take you and yo' baby to the back. Then me and my wife here can take y'all home," the deacon said as he and his wife walked closer to them.

"I don't wanna go wit y'all, and I don't want to step foot back in that damn church! I shoulda known betta than to come up here. I just wanted to do some a lil' different for me and my child today since we ain't been in a few years, but no matta

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where I go, it always gotta be somethin’.” April May’s grip loosened around Lil Bit’s arm. She looked up to the murky sky as leaves chased and twirled about in the thick, earthy air. “Lord, why it always gotta be somethin’ wit me?”

“You’s hurtin’, baby. Just come on back in, and we can talk this out in the lady’s lounge. It look like it’s fin’ to rain any minute now,” the usher said. She reached out to touch April May’s shoulder, but April May pulled back.

It started to sprinkle.

“See, we coulda been gone if it wasn’t for y’all!” A thick vein surfaced from April May’s small forehead. She turned and paced down the street.

The couple followed.

“Come on, sista. We can’t keep doin’ this. We can go to God about it. Won’t you come? It’s rainin’!” the deacon yelled behind them.

Rain fell heavily onto the orange dirt. An extended thunder shook the sky and darkened the clouds. The winds whistled. Birds raced to their nests. Dogs howled. Light diminished. The church sang.

*Sometimes I have to cry out, help me Lord.*

April May’s polyester dress was heaved like wet paper towels.

*I know if I hold my peace, the Lord will take care of me.*

Lil Bit’s dress ran brown liquid at the hem from where she had fallen earlier.

“Mama, my socks are wet!”

*I’m going with Jesus all the way.*

April May turned around and walked toward the couple. Startled, their eyes widened, and they stepped backward, controlled. April May charged at them, hands pumping at her sides. Face tight. Mind gone.

“Sista, you all right?!”

“Y’all stupid mothafuckas made me get our dresses wet! I worked real hard to make these, and God knows it ain’t perfect, but it’s my work!” April May pointed her stick, knucky fingers at them, gasping for air after every couple words.

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“Whoa na. Hold that language near the church, sista,” the deacon said with his hands out to calm her.

“Oh, don’t say that shit to me. You know, if God really gave a fuck, and if he was really worth a damn, he at least wouldn’t let it rain on my dress! I could barely afford the fabric for it. My parents is dead, don’t no man want me but fuh sex. I’m po’. My child growin’ so she hungry all the time. Tell me, where the hell is God in all that? Huh? Tell me right now cause I ain’t seein’ it!” April May’s skin flushed red as her voice grew in volume. “That damn ‘Pastuh Maxwell’ ain’t worth a goddamn! Ain’t helpin’ no damn body. So worried ’bout hisself up there! Oh, right, I’m on ‘church grounds,’ but it ain’t nothin’ but a mound of shit!” She paced in small circles, grabbing her hair, then snatching her arms down—grab, snatch, grab.

Lil Bit and the couple stood looking uneasily at April May. Smells of pine and leaves drenched the air as the rain’s prowl grew denser. Lil Bit moved toward the usher, wrapping herself in her plump arm.

“Mama...are you okay? Let’s go inside,” Lil Bit said.

“We don’t want this baby to get sick, sista,” the usher said.

“Spsh. I guess this is what God wanted fuh me. A beggin’ child, no money, and a waste basket fuh men. Now I try makin’ and doin’ somethin’ good, it get messed up. God can strike me dead, hand on the bible, I been through all I can do and take. Salvation ain’t fuh everybody. Sho ain’t fuh me.”

“Don’t talk like that, baby,” the deacon said.

“Ha. That’s fine, Deac. Life can’t possibly get no worse than this. I prayed all the time. Nothin’. God ain’t shit fa that.”

April May fell to her knees, laid on her side, and curled into a fetal position. The rain merged with her tears into a single stream of surrender down her face. She closed her eyes and let out a heavy sigh. Her body loosened into a mound of sopped sap. The deacon picked her up, and they went back inside the church.

*I’m going with Jesus all the way.*

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April May's skin peeled from the couch's plastic cover as she achingly rose from it, wiping her crusted eyes. She stretched her long, thin arms and twirled her wrists until her elbows popped, sending a chill down her spine. April May freed a lengthy sigh and looked around her tight living room. On the recliner across the room, Lil Bit lay wrapped in a blanketed cocoon with her head on the armrest.

As April May stood to make her way to the kitchen, the house phone rang. She walked to the side of the couch to answer it. Lil Bit moved slightly.

"Hello?"

"April," Maxwell whispered.

April May brought the beige handset to her chest and eased it down onto the switch hook. She exhaled and continued to the kitchen.

On the kitchen counter were two takeout plates in plastic bags. Attached to one bag was a small note: *Sista April May, enjoy this food and get some rest. We love you.* It was signed by the usher and the deacon. On the way home, the usher had rubbed and patted April May's head while on the back seat of her and her husband's truck. Lil Bit had watched, crying as she held her mother's shaking hands.

April May took the plastic bags of food and placed them in the refrigerator. She headed for her bedroom. Once she arrived at its door, she slowly opened it, inhaling the faint fumes of Newports, hair grease, and molding walls. Her bed was viciously unmade with lingerie, sheets, and bills all over. She walked to her mighty oakwood dresser and looked into its mirror. Red thread gripped her sclera, her cheeks dried and crusted from old tears. Her hair sat snug on her head, matted with tiny pieces of leaves tangled in it. She traced her fingers along her mouth, touching the faint scar below her bottom lip, sending her back...

"Where you been?" April May asked Lil Bit's father as he came stumbling in at the break of dawn.



## KAITLYN TAYLOR

“Smoky’s,” he slurred.

“Let me help you take yo’ jacket off,” April May said as she walked toward him.

“Don’t touch me. And won’t you get dressed up sometimes? If I’m gon’ come ova here, at least look decent,” he drunkenly hissed.

Before she could say anything, he took his wide fist to her mouth. Four weeks later, Lil Bit was born, and he was gone. April May prayed that Lil Bit would come out okay because she was eight weeks too early. God blessed Lil Bit and took the feeling out of April May’s bottom lip.

April May gripped the edge of the dresser, dropped her head, and a stream of tears fell down the bridge of her nose and into the corners of her mouth. She grabbed a medicine bottle from her top-right drawer to take three Prozac. She wiped her face clean with a napkin, grabbed a cigarette and a lighter, and went to check on her baby.

Still sleeping, April May tiptoed to Lil Bit’s recliner. She eased onto her knees, placed the cigarette and lighter on the floor, and bent over to kiss her round cheeks, rubbing her thin, ashy fingers along her hairline and down her face. “That’s my Lil Bit.”

“Mama, you okay?” Lil Bit asked, stretching, sitting up in the chair.

“Yeah, baby. Where you get that from?” April May smiled, looking down at the green bible in Lil Bit’s hand.

“The usher gave it to me and told me to hold on to it and give it to you. What time is it?”

“Almost ten, sweetie. And hand it here.” April May held out her right hand while helping Lil Bit’s legs break free from the blanket with her left.

“We got food?” Lil Bit asked, handing April May the bible.

“In the refrigerator.”

As Lil Bit got up to head for the kitchen, April May said, “Come here, baby.”

“Yes, Mama?” Lil Bit asked, smiling. Her eyes were puddles of beaming aspiration.

## ***LORD, WHAT NOW?***

April May grabbed her and held her tight. She placed her head against Lil Bit's small body to fill her ear with the swing of her vital heart. Lil Bit wrapped her arms around her mother's head and planted a misty peck on her forehead. April May looked up at Lil Bit's precious face.

"I love you, Mama. I hope you feel better."

"I love you too, my baby."

April May stood, and with her free hand, she grabbed the cigarette and lighter from the floor. She went out onto the front porch to sit on its wooden steps. Tiny droplets of rain began to thud against the roof's metal sheets, and the winds blew heavily. Pumping Station Road pulsed a gilded rumination. April May placed the bible down to her right. Then she lit her cigarette, took a sedated drag, and closed her eyes. She angled her head back and hummed.

*I'm going with Jesus all the way.*