

The Living Room, night. This excerpt picks up in the middle of the scene: Dan and Eric and their guests Terrell and Esme have just finished dinner. Terrell has gushed over the baby, and drawn Dan into reminiscing about the wilder days of their youth -- reminiscences that include Dan's long-dead boyfriend Carl. The conversation has now turned to news of Terrell's terminally ill mother, whom Esme has moved back home to help care for. It seems she has a story that has become family legend – and Dan and Eric prompt Esme to tell it.

ESME

You don't really want to hear it right now, you're just being hosts.

ERIC

No, really, we're not that polite.

TERRELL

It's true, they're not.

ESME

You're sure?

DAN

Sure. I'm always up for a Yolanda story.

Esme looks to Terrell.

TERRELL

Why not.

ESME

OK.

So, you guys know Yolanda. Did you ever see her wear a dress, or a skirt? No. Did you know why? It's because Yolanda didn't want people to see her scars. She didn't want people to see that, and then have to always be telling the story I'm going to tell you now.

When Yolanda was a little girl, she had a best friend named Beanie. Thick as thieves ever since before she could remember. When they were about 8 years old, Beanie's mom moved her out of the neighborhood, just a little ways away over to a white neighborhood. Now this wasn't a Movin' On Up kind of move: this white neighborhood was probably a little rougher than where they'd been living. Yolanda was little and doesn't know why this happened, but for whatever reason, that's where Beanie was living now: in a little shotgun apartment, on the ground floor of one side of a duplex. One of those where you enter in the back, in the kitchen, with the few little rooms all in a straight line back up to the front.

Now this was 1950, remember, and while Beanie's family may not have been the first black family in this neighborhood, their presence was not exactly welcome. There was some trouble. Little things: stuff getting said at them, eggs thrown at their door, a broken window. The window that got broke was in the front room, facing the street, which was Beanie's room. Her momma had someone put bars on the windows after that.

But in between these incidents, life just got on with itself. These girls were best friends and it wasn't far, so even after the move they still got together as much as they could. And one summer night, these two little girls were hanging out at Beanie's house while her mom was at

work. It was a hot night, and the girls weren't really doing much of anything but sitting around Beanie's bedroom drinking endless glasses of sweet tea and getting wound up and silly like little girls do. They were squealing and giggling – hopped up on all that sugar and caffeine – and didn't hear anything, Yolanda says. What got their attention was when they smelled the smoke.

The fire started in the back, in the kitchen. No one ever conclusively proved whether it was an accident or was deliberately set...but people made up their own minds. All these little girls knew was that there was a fire in the kitchen, between them and the only door out.

They shut the bedroom door against the smoke, and tried going out the window. But there were bars on those windows now – the bars Beanie's mom had put there to protect her. They called through those bars for help, but somehow on this hot summer night there was no one around: no one sitting on their front steps, no one hanging out on the corner, no one coming home from work... no one anywhere. Precious minutes passed as they called out for help that simply wasn't going to come.

By the time they gave up on the window, the kitchen was consumed. The middle room was burning now too, and the smoke was a solid, killing thing. They were kids, but they knew what their choices were: run into the fire and out the other side, or stay in the bedroom and die.

Burn or die. Imagine facing that choice at eight years old.

They knew they stood a better chance if they could wrap something wet around them, but they were cut off from the kitchen and bathroom. Beanie had an idea, though: she took two of her dresses, gave one to Yolanda and told her to pee on it.

ERIC

...?

ESME

Remember, these were two scared little girls who'd been drinking iced tea for hours, so they were fully loaded. It was better than nothing.

DAN

Mmph.

ERIC

Smart, though.

TERRELL

I wouldn't have thought of it.

ESME

So they peed on those dresses and wrapped them around themselves as best they could. Now they just had to do it: run in a straight line through two rooms of terrible smoke and heat, then one kitchen's worth of flame...and out the door on the other side. With a running start and if they did it right it should take about five seconds.

Easy, right?

Yolanda was shaking, and Beanie told her she'd go behind, to help push her forward if she had to. Because they were going to get hurt, probably hurt bad, and they knew there was no way around it. But to do the natural thing, to pull back from what hurt, would kill them. Beanie told her: when it hurt she had to push into it, not pull away; to pull back was to die.

Eight years old.

ERIC

Jesus.

ESME

They got themselves lined up, wrapped their little damp dresses around their heads and shoulders, crouched down for a last deep breath of air...and they ran.

What exactly happened in the next several seconds, she can't say. It was days before she was even conscious again, and months before she left the hospital. She says she remembers two things: the noise of being inside the fire, so loud it was like silence -- and the smell of burnt pee.

Eyewitnesses -- because once it was too late, suddenly I guess there were people around -- described watching the blaze and being shocked when a little burning person suddenly came shooting out the back of it.

A little burning person.

A little burning person.

When Yolanda came running out of that fire, she came out alone.

What they found of Beanie in the burned out kitchen didn't tell them much of anything. We know Yolanda ran into a metal chair in there -- she still has the imprint of it on her thigh, amid all the swirls and rivers of scars, like she was branded -- and maybe Beanie then tripped on it. Maybe she just pulled back, even for a second, and that was enough. Either way, it ended the way it ended: Yolanda got out, Beanie didn't.

Pause.

ERIC

That's...awful.

DAN

I didn't know any of that.

TERRELL

She doesn't talk about it much. She won't talk to me about it at all anymore.

ESME

Well that's only 'cause you called her a liar.

ERIC

What?

TERRELL

I did not, that is not true at all. I never said she was lying, I'm just skeptical about...certain things.

DAN

Like what?

ERIC

You think she made up getting burned?

TERRELL

No! Of course not. Settle down, y'all. It's the after part I just... *(shakes head.)*

ERIC

After part?

ESME

The after part didn't happen 'til 18 years later.

DAN

There's more?

TERRELL

Oh, yeah.

DAN

Rising, exiting to the kitchen

I need another drink.

ERIC

I want to hear it.

DAN

Don't wait for me. *(exits)*

TERRELL

I was around for this part, so I know.

ESME

You weren't even walking yet, so what exactly do you know?

ERIC

Tell.

TERRELL

Go ahead.

ESME

Yolanda healed and grew up; she met Gerard, my granddaddy, and he didn't mind at all about her scars I guess 'cause she got pregnant and they got married and by 1968 she'd had three babies: my mom, Shana, was eight then; my uncle Deveron was around four; and this one was just a baby -- what? 10 months, when it all happened?

TERRELL

Allegedly happened.

ERIC

Says the 10-month-old lawyer.

TERRELL

I was very precocious.

Dan re-enters with a fresh drink.

ESME

These were years when Yolanda's world was pretty small, and that was just how she liked it. Gerard traveled a lot for work, so she spent long stretches at a time just being at home alone with her babies. She describes it as one of the most contented times in her life, actually -- until stuff started to happen.

TERRELL

Here we go.

ESME

Terrell here was not a good sleeper -- and when you would wake up in the middle of the night, Yolanda would pick you up and walk you around the dark house until you fell back asleep. She said there was practically a groove in the rugs from her walking that same path every night, singing quietly to him in the dark.

And one night that summer, as she was walking him through the kitchen, along the same drowsy path she walked every night, she tripped and fell. She managed not to drop the baby or land on top of him, but that meant she hit the floor badly, hard and twisted. Knocked the air out of her, banged up her hip, elbow and wrist so hard she couldn't even see through the pain for a minute. The noise woke my mom up, who came in and turned on the light.

And sitting in the middle of the kitchen was what she had tripped on: one of the metal kitchen chairs, pulled out from the table and standing alone in the middle of the floor. In the middle of the path she walked every night in the dark.

TERRELL

...

ESME

Momma said she didn't do it. The next day Deveron said he didn't do it. But somebody moved that chair.

DAN

...

ERIC

...

TERRELL

I'm not saying anything. Not yet.

ESME

She was kinda banged up from that, bruised all up her side and had her arm in a sling for a while. And just a day or two later she was taking out some trash when the second thing happened.

They had a garbage shed out back, on the alley where the garbage truck would pick up. It was a simple little wood shack with a metal gate that they never closed because it was all rusted and stuck open and it was just garbage in there anyway.

So she's taking out trash one afternoon, and it's a little more of a task than usual because one arm's in a sling. And she has to kind of get back in there to pick up spilled trash or something, all with only one good arm -- and she comes face to face with a big old rat.

Yolanda isn't particularly bothered by rats or mice or anything like that, but this was a little too close and took her by surprise. She stood up real quick, and kind of froze for a second. And as she was staring into that rat's eyes and starting to back out of there...behind her, the gate swung shut.

This old rusted gate that never moved...swung shut.

So she goes to push it open, and it's stuck. It doesn't have a lock, but it does have an old rusted latch, and it had latched as stuck shut as it was normally stuck open, like it had always been that way.

And when that gate didn't open, it was about two seconds before Yolanda completely lost her shit. Full on screaming panic.

She can tell you exactly why. I mean, yes, she didn't want to be in a garbage shed with a rat; yes, she had left the back door wide open with the kids inside; she needed to get out of there, no doubt. But that wasn't why Yolanda went from zero to crazy train in two seconds flat. It was experience, hard-wired into her brain at 8 years old: when you're trapped with something bad behind metal bars, terrible things will happen to you and help will never come.

ERIC

Oof.

ESME

But this time help did come. One of her neighbors, an old German woman who lived across the alley, heard her screaming and came and yanked that gate almost off the hinges. Helga. Big gal.

She got Yolanda out of there and took her inside and calmed her down. Helga could see the bruises and the sling and pushed Yolanda to tell her what was going on – clearly she thought Yolanda was getting smacked around. But Yolanda explained that no, Gerard wasn't beating her, he wasn't even home -- and told her what had happened. Helga nodded and said very firmly, "ein Geist."

A ghost.

Helga talked about it like you would a plumbing problem, or ants – you can pay an expert or do it yourself, but you got to get rid of ghosts when you get them. Can't let it go, 'cause it'll only get worse. Yolanda assured her it was just a couple of accidents, accidents happen, and as she thanked her again and showed her out, Helga was very stern with her: you do something about that ghost, before it causes some real trouble.

Well, the next night: real trouble. Yolanda woke up smelling smoke.

She jumped out of bed and ran to her kitchen. Smoke and flame were pouring out the top of the stove and the door of the oven. And as she stood in the kitchen doorway with her heart pounding, all of a sudden she noticed that she didn't just smell smoke. She smelled something else, too.

ERIC

What?

ESME

Burnt pee.

She says she got real calm then. Got the children out of the house, then handed the baby to my mom, told them all to stay put, and went back into the kitchen. She unloaded two full fire extinguishers into that oven (because you know she had several), and found the charred remains of the baby's diaper bag inside.

Then even though it was the middle of the night, she went over to Helga's, who was awake like she'd been expecting her. Yolanda told her: I know who my ghost is.

So the next morning, Helga came over and sat them all down on the floor of Yolanda's sunny kitchen. She set Momma and Uncle Deveron to work pouring salt in a circle around them while she tore up sage leaves in a small pot, and told Yolanda to tell Beanie's story while they worked. So Yolanda sat there and rocked the baby and told them all about her best childhood friend and the terrible thing that had happened to her.

Momma says she'll never forget it: being eight years old, pouring salt out onto the kitchen floor because a giant German woman told her to, and watching her mother sit on the floor and cry like she's never seen before or since.

When the story ended and the salt circle was complete, Helga burned her small pot of sage and said a little prayer.

Then she got up, swept up the salt with a broom and dust pan, gave Yolanda a big kiss on the cheek, and headed off to start her day.

Oh, and she scoured out the burnt-up oven, too.

Helga cleaned like a boss.

Pause.

ERIC

And that was the end of it?

ESME

Yes. That was the end of it.

"And she lived happily ever after. The End."

Pause.

DAN

Well, that was a real upper.

ERIC

I have a million questions.

DAN

God. Really?

TERRELL

So did I.

ERIC

I...why would Beanie want to hurt her? I mean, shouldn't she have been haunting whoever set the fire?

TERRELL

Bingo. And listen, Yolanda is super churchy, OK. She will tell you that Beanie went from that fire straight into the arms of baby Jesus. So I'm like, if she went straight into the arms of baby Jesus, what's she doing 18 years later knocking your furniture around and torching my diapers?

ESME

I don't think Yolanda would actually claim that the ghost was Beanie herself. I think she believes Beanie did go straight to Heaven.

ERIC

So what was it?

ESME

I don't know, something. Something that wasn't Beanie, but was made out of what had happened to her. All that pain, and terror, and outrage fastened onto a piece of her life force as it left her, and created some new, twisted thing. And this thing floated around confused and lost, until it came upon a soul it recognized: the soul that was present at the moment of its birth. Yolanda.

ERIC

But why then? Why after 18 years?

ESME

Maybe because my momma was the age they were when she died? Maybe that triggered it.

TERRELL

That, I believe. That makes sense to me. Seeing Shana at the age Beanie was may have provoked something psychologically in Yolanda, is what I think.

ESME

It was all in her head, is what you're saying.

TERRELL

No, that is not what I'm saying. I believe things *happened*, yes. I just don't think it was what she thinks it was.

ERIC

What do you think it was?

TERRELL

...

ESME

Deveron.

ERIC

You think it was your brother?

TERRELL

Deveron's trouble. Always has been. Yolanda just won't admit it, even now.

ESME

You're telling me you think little bitty Deveron a) already knew what had happened to Beanie, and b) was tryna gaslight Yolanda?

TERRELL

I don't think he knew, no. I think he was messing for the sake of messing, and she interpreted it how she interpreted it.

ESME

At 4 years old?

TERRELL

All I'm saying is: Deveron has never not been Deveron.

DAN

All I'm saying is: *can we please talk about something else?*

There is a very uncomfortable pause.

ERIC

...OK.

DAN

Can we please just talk about something that is not depressing and awful?

ERIC

Dan...

DAN

No offense, but Jesus.

Pause.

ESME

None taken.

Beat.

How 'bout dessert? Why don't you and me go talk about getting that dessert together? How's that?

DAN

Yes. Sorry. Thank you.

Esme and Dan exit.

ERIC

I'm so sorry. I don't know what the hell that was.

TERRELL

It's fine. Dan being Dan.

ERIC

I mean, she's our guest, we've just met her...

TERRELL

She's fine.

ERIC

Well...she's incredibly gracious.

TERRELL

She's perceptive. She knows that wasn't about her.

Pause.

ERIC

What was it about?

TERRELL

...

ERIC

...

TERRELL

...

He looks offstage, checking; maybe lowers his voice a little.

We talked about Carl.

That's what you get when you talk about Carl.

Dan re-enters.

DAN

Who wants cheesecake?

END OF SCENE