

Before He Comes Home

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“Nobody’s gonna sit in it tomorrow either if you break the seat off.” Yvette peered at Ruth over her magazine. Ruth had sent the rest of the stylists home an hour ago, but Yvette insisted on staying. She often said Ruth was too impatient.

Ruth swung the empty swivel chair around for the seventh time, trying to distract herself from flipping the OPEN sign to its other side. It was raining and cold, and Ruth knew most of her clients walked to the shop when their husbands were at work. But still, the quietness of the salon was insulting. She promised her mother that sending her to cosmetology school wasn’t a waste, and she had proven her right all these years by always keeping every chair in the salon occupied. Until today.

“Why don’t we just close? I don’t want the rain to pick up too bad now.”

“You mean you don’t want your mama to come over here and see the place empty.” As soon as Yvette’s snarky comment left her lips, the salon phone rang. Ruth skipped to the wall to pick it up before Yvette could even stand. She chuckled.

“Thank you for calling In Good Hands Salon. This is Ruth Moore speaking.” Ruth often put on her best customer service voice in case white women called the shop, which is the only kind of woman who could afford a chauffeur to drive them to the salon right now. Yvette didn’t like Ruth’s fake voice; she didn’t understand it was just business.

But this time it wasn’t a white woman who called. And not only could Lola Battle afford a nice black car and a driver, she could also afford a house call.

“Today?” Ruth blinked, half hoping Lola would look at her clock, sigh and say she would just come to the salon tomorrow. But she didn’t and offered to pay five dollars extra.

Ruth hung up the phone, and stared at the empty chair.

“Who was that?” Yvette had wandered closer to Ruth, the magazine now folded at her side.

“A house call. You can close up.”

Ruth hated last minute appointments. She kept a planner by the front door of the salon for this very reason. Ruth also hated walking in the rain. There was something different about water coming from the sky than it coming from a faucet or a shower head. It felt invasive, uninvited, unpredictable. She held the umbrella handle closer to her chest, careful to not let too much water get on the ends of her pants.

She closed her eyes and walked mindlessly, listening to the hits of Mary Jane’s on concrete around her. They clicked in harmony with the raindrops on her umbrella, taunting her with femininity and elegance. Ruth quickened her step, following the street signs until she came to Lola’s brownstone. It sat between two others, but had a white and black door for it to stand out. A lamp post on the left side of the door was turned on, and the blinds on the secondary door were pulled up.

Ruth could see directly into the foyer. It sported a long, red oak table in the middle, decorated with a yellow vase of white tulips. All but one of the flowers stood straight, their centers unopened and tight. One tulip leaned slightly away from the others, its bud threatening to expose itself. Ruth walked up and slammed the door knocker twice before anyone could catch her staring.

Lola came to the door a few moments later, her body enveloped in a white silk robe. Her head was covered by a floral scarf, obviously folded and tied by someone who had never tied a headscarf before. The pattern of the scarf fought chaotically with the simple silk draped over her shoulders. Ruth had to bite her lip to keep herself from giggling. Lola opened the secondary door, and then the front door, and ushered Ruth to come in.

“It’s freezing out there ain’t it.” Lola made a show of rubbing her arms voraciously, sending waves through the robe. Ruth nodded, the sight of her darkened pants reminding her of her annoyance.

“What’s under there?” Ruth lifted her chin to the headscarf. She had no time to waste and no intention of being stuck there if the storm got worse.

Lola pursed her lips and led Ruth to the dining room table. Lola sat down at the head of the table, crossed her legs, and slowly started to peel the fabric from her head. Ruth let her eyes widen, though she knew better. Spikes of dark brown hair sprouted from Lola’s scalp, some straight like picks of wheat, some wavy like vines growing on the side of a house. They were all different lengths, as if someone real tall was dancing above her head with scissors in their hands.

“What happened?” Ruth asked, putting her tool kit next to Lola’s feet.

“You know, you sound *real* different from the phone.” Lola chuckled briefly, looked down and played with the scarf in her lap.

Ruth ran her hands through what was left of Lola’s hair, occasionally met with jagged edges and split ends. Ruth sighed, wondering what kind of woman her clients thought she was. Her hands had saved some awful things; half-a-head burnt, a bad perm job, uneven bleach. She was unsure if she could save Lola.

“Well, can you fix it?” Lola’s voice sounded feeble to Ruth’s ears.

“If I can, you’ll have to pay me more next time.”



Ruth spent another three hours at Lola’s place, cutting and straightening and moussing and molding. The rain was so bad Lola called her a cab back to her mother’s apartment. Ruth rubbed her fingers the whole ride home.

By the time she walked in, all the lights were off and Ma had already put dinner away. She laid in her nightgown on the couch, a nearly finished glass of brandy sat on a coaster beside her. The television spotlighted Ma’s wrinkling face with a yellow tinted glow and hummed with steady static, the image slightly fuzzy.

“Hey Ma,” Ruth kicked her boots off at the door, maneuvering her umbrella and her kit through her cramping hands. Ma took her time sitting up, giving Ruth a straggled look, shooting thorns through her temples.

“Do you know what time it is?” Ma huffed, taking the glass with her to the sink. She always said she couldn’t sleep until she saw Ruth walk through the front door with her own two eyes.

“I had a house call.” Ruth watched her mother reel away to the kitchen, clutching the small of her back with her spare hand. When she finally got to the sink, Ma moved her fingers to the edge of the counter, crouching up her shoulders and lowering her head. She turned her neck to the side, allowing her chin to cross her collarbone and become parallel to her shoulder blade. A small crack discharged from her bones, and she went on to do the same to the right side of her body.

“A house call,” Ma shook her head and turned around, folding her arms under her tired chest. “In this weather?”

Ruth nodded and began to move about the house to avoid the questions that were sure to come. She slid into her room, which wasn’t much bigger than a closet, and dropped her things. She shoved her pants down from her waist before even unbuttoning her jacket, eager to relieve herself from the unpleasant sensation of wet clothes on dry skin. As the trousers laid unshaped on the linoleum floor, Ruth spotted a herd of short hair scattered across the area where her thighs would fill in. She bent down and scraped at the fabric with her fingers, catching a few stray pieces under her nails. They went everywhere except the floor, clinging on to her bare legs, her cold palms, the fur on the ends of her coat sleeves. She closed her eyes and breathed.

“Ruth,” Ma stood in the doorway, her small stature somehow still threatening to straighten out the door frame. Her arms were still across each other, her bones flaring out from her skin. She looked suspicious. “Who the hell asked for a house call?”

“Lola Battle.” Ruth stood up quickly, abandoning the Lola ridden pants for the time being. She suddenly felt hot, Ma’s eyes lurking across her skin, skipping to the corners of her room and onto the black crackles sprinkled along the teeth of her hot comb.

“That girl that lives on 78th?”

Ruth spun around; her coat now exchanged for a night gown. Ruth only knew Lola from the hour she sat in her chair every other Tuesday. She was a client that did not say much, did not gossip. Her eyes stayed in her lap for majority of the appointment, and Ruth often had to pull the back of her head down to straighten her. She always paid the exact amount in cash. Never with a check, and never with a tip. Ruth had only learned of her address a few hours before.

“How do you know her?”

“I don’t. I sure as hell do know her husband.” Ma dragged her feet to the end of Ruth’s bed, leaning against the right wooden poster.

“Her husband?”

“Yes, her husband Ruth. I forgot you don’t know what one of those are. Y’think she lives in that brown stone all by herself?”

“Ma, I’m busy running the salon. I don’t got time for no husband.”

“Yeah, busy doing house calls.” Ma chuckled, her ridicule like pliers on Ruth’s nails. Ruth paying the bills, buying bottles of Ma’s favorite brandy, even upgrading the living room’s television, still wasn’t enough defense for Ruth continuing to use her hands for hair.

“How do you know her husband then?”

Ma stood, the bed exhaling from the release of her weight. “It’s not right to gossip. Just be careful ‘round that girl. And don’t do no more house calls.”

“How you gonna tell me to do that? She gave me five extra.”

“I bet she did.”



About a month went by before Lola requested her second house call. This time, for ten dollars more. Ruth’s fingers tingled at the thought of a crisp Hamilton to put in her own pocket rather than the register at Good Hands. Christmas was coming, and she’d been eyeing this set of hot rollers on sale. Ma didn’t understand; this was just business.

Lola’s white and black door was decorated with an exorbitant wreath that took up nearly half of the door itself. A bright, red silk ribbon pinned perfectly in the middle of the shrubbery was encircled by gold and white bells and ornaments. The ordinary, soft white lamp post bulb was swapped out with a festive green one.

The inside of the house looked like the Battles had witnessed the birth of Christ themselves. As soon as Lola let Ruth through the door, she went back to setting the long dining table that was not there when Ruth came for the first time. Ruth watched Lola as she skidded along the red blanketed mass adorned with candles and plates and fake pinecones. Lola tugged aimlessly at the ends of the tablecloth only to uneven another side. Her pumps collided with the floors rhythmless, just as chaotic as that godforsaken head scarf. Her hair was actually wrapped in it, though the rest of her was pressed and fitted. Ruth dropped her bag loudly to get her attention.

“Not there. Would you?” Lola motioned to a corner with a singular chair and a folding table. Ruth suddenly missed the old table. The corner reminded her too much of life before the salon.

“Ruth, you think you could be quick today?” Lola now stood behind Ruth, her hands clasped above the crown of her head.

“I don’t rush.” This was the third thing Ruth hated.

“I know, I know, it’s just that my in-laws are coming in tonight and I’ve just been so worked up with everything. I didn’t know ‘till yesterday so I ain’t even have time to do my hair!” Lola plopped herself in the ugly wooden chair, still ranting. “Does the table look good to you?”

Ruth didn’t bother to look up from Lola’s barely grown roots, knowing she had spent the last ten minutes with nothing else to do but stare at that damn table. “It’s nice.”

“Charles’ parents are real fancy. They both went to Howard, that’s where they met. But they never been to New York. Can you believe that?”

Ruth didn't answer because she noticed a bruise on Lola's right ear. It hadn't turned purple yet and it was a decent size, like someone strong had tried to yank her ear from the side of her face.

"Did I burn you last time?"

Lola's hand quickly went to the ear, caressing it with her pretty manicured fingers. "No! I just tried to touch it up myself and I surely had no idea what I was doing." She looked back and shot Ruth a lying smile.

Ruth chose not to ask another question, to not find a reason for Ma to be right. She carried on with bumping and curling and setting, guiding her hands to do the best work she'd ever done. After she released the last bundle of hair from the curling barrel, she admired Lola's head in awe.

Lola sniffed once, then twice, and then touched her hair. Ruth winced. "Is something burning?" Lola asked.

"No, I've unplugged everything. And please, don't touch your—"

Lola shot up, and ran to the kitchen, her pumps stabbing the floor in quick stomps. She opened her oven, unleashing a billow of smoke into the house. "Shit, shit, shit!"

Ruth peeked out of the corner to see a black hump in a tin baking pan. As Lola picked up the pan and dumped it in the sink, the door opened, and a tall black man walked into the foyer. Lola whirled to the direction of the man, covering the burnt cake in the sink with her back. Ruth did nothing but stare.

"Who are you?" The man took his gloves off to reveal large, veiny hands.

"Charles! You're home early. This is Ruth Moore. She owns In Good Hands." Lola didn't move from the sink. Smoke still danced in the air, whispering to Ruth's eyes.

“She can speak for herself, can’t she?” Charles stepped slowly into the dining room, placing his coat on the chairs. The tablecloth moved slightly.

“I was just on my way out.” Ruth began to gather her stuff, though she felt a twinge in her chest telling her to not leave Lola alone. She reminded herself that her client’s hair was done. She was paid. Anything else was none of her concern.

Charles looked around, and took a strong, loud whiff. “Did you burn my wife’s hair?”

“No!” Ruth was so offended she said it before she could think of the word’s consequences. That “no I didn’t burn your wife’s hair” really meant “yes she burnt the cake and your parents won’t have dessert after dinner”. Ruth turned to look at Lola, and her fists were clenched around the handle of the oven, her eyes squeezed shut. Her chest rose and fell with heavy breathing, like her body and soul was bracing for something.

“Have a nice night.” Ruth couldn’t bear to look at Lola any longer. She walked the rest of the way home, hoping to get the embarrassment and the funk out of her stomach. Charles’ veiny hands had somehow found their way around her neck, constricting not just her words but also her thoughts. She couldn’t talk to Ma about it; it would get too didactic. Ma wouldn’t listen. She couldn’t tell Yvette, oh Yvette would listen just to tell the whole salon. But Ruth didn’t listen either. All she did was see, and she ran away.



Secrets are one of the hardest things to keep, and Ruth was no stranger to the burning sensation private information had on your tongue, that made it so hard to keep your lips shut so when you had what seemed to be a divine opportunity to let the words free, they came spilling

out all at once. Ruth wasn't even sure what the secret was, but she decided it was worth keeping anyway.

The salon had been bustling all day, still smoky with hairspray. It was the last day the salon was open before the New Year, and almost every woman with at least four inches of hair had come in. It was noisy and the gossip had grown to be rambunctious, so Ruth stayed quiet, keeping her comments to a minimum. She was closing up when the door's bell jingled.

Lola had an emerald green trench coat on and a matching fur pillbox hat. Her gloves were a crystalline white, clamped around a black jenny bag. Her neck was completely covered by a tight ribbon. She looked around for Ruth, and when she spotted her, she was sat in Ruth's chair before she could even say a word.

"Mrs. Battle, I don't remember us having an appointment."

Ruth didn't tell Ma about the second house call, and she scratched out Lola's appointment from the planner in the salon. A secret was easier to keep if no one knew you had anything to hide in the first place.

"I know, I know. I just been feeling so bad about you making all these house calls. I thought I'd just come to you for once." Lola plied the gloves from her hands but left the ribbon on.

"I was just about to close—"

"Please." Lola unraveled the ribbon's knot carefully, wincing as the fabric slid across her neck. Ruth watched as one, two, five, six lines showed themselves on Lola's skin. One, medium sized pink circle rested in the middle of her throat.

Ruth inhaled, her hands on auto pilot to Lola's shoulders. Lola looked down, her ears and the back of her neck turning the subtle red it could on her black skin. Ruth saw a single tear drop

stain the white gloves. She shook her head, cupped Lola's chin in her hands, and moved her head up until they were both looking at each other in the mirror. Lola being beautiful was a thought Ruth had pushed out her mind before, but now she felt even more ashamed about her desire.

"Lola, I'm not sure what you expect me to do here."

"I'm not quite sure either." Lola chuckled, tugging at the ends of her ribbon. "I think I moreso came here for some company."

"How long he been doing this to you?" Ruth took the closest stylist chair and sat next to Lola, feeling the familiar twinge.

"I couldn't even tell you."

"You don't got family you could go to? Why you stay with him?"

"You married Ruth?" Lola turned the chair and looked at her, her eyes glossy and tired.

Ruth shook her head and covered her hands. "My ma sure wish I was."

"You not the type of woman to be loved by a man." Ruth held her breath, shocked that Lola would say anything of the sort. That she even knew what kind of woman Ruth was. Lola, aware of Ruth's offense, simply smiled and took her hand.

"I don't know what you mean." Ruth snatched her hand away, stood and straightened out her clothes. She thought she would do no more house calls; Ruth could keep a secret but she wasn't sure if Lola would.

Lola stood up in front of Ruth, grabbing her hand once again. Her eyes were dry now, her mouth slightly ajar with hope to put something in it. Ruth felt frozen under her gaze, her mind not thinking to push Lola away or even close the blinds of the salon. Soon enough Ruth was swaddled in Lola's embrace, her back dipping underneath Lola's arm. Ruth held the collar of the

trench coat, careful to avoid Lola's bruised neck. The kiss felt like a necessary evil, something bad that freed the both of them.

Lola straightened Ruth out and let go of her, wiping her mouth with her hand. She put her gloves back on and tied the ribbon sloppily around her neck all while Ruth watched quietly. Lola stared back, took a five dollar bill out of her purse and stuffed it in Ruth's hand. The shopkeeper's bell rang, and Lola was gone.

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