

1. Hummingbird

Cousin Trieste stopped combing her hair after Hummingbird nested on her crown. Now she cannot get a comb through her matted locks. I don't think she wants to anymore. She is too busy learning Hummingbird-ese so that when the eggs hatch she can share Hummingbird's secret.

From the time I am seven, I spend summers with Grandma Beulah on Indigo Sound. It is my parents' way of protecting me from the perils of South Town "city" life. I cannot recall my Indigo Sound House visits without seeing Trieste. I heard her speak once. As far as I know, she is mute by choice. The most Trieste will do is hum or nod. Our questions to Trieste are limited to those that require a simple "yes" or "no."

Trieste makes journal entries when thoughts cross her mind. That's how we discovered the hummingbird. Only G. Yardbird Beaumont, III, and Trieste can actually see the nest. The rest of us see a tangled web of matted hair: each strand trying to figure out which turn it should take around the top of Trieste's head. Trieste grooms the edges of her hair but she refuses to comb or brush the top.

"Thank God them blasted birds like snow and rain," Aunt Willie Mae says. "Otherwise, shampooing Trieste's hair would be out of the question." You see the hummingbirds think shampoo suds are snow, and that the rinse water is rain.

“Aunt Willie, why is it that Bird sees Trieste’s nest and nobody else can?” I ask.

“Bird sees everything through Trieste’s eyes,” Willie Mae explains.

“How can he do that? Can you teach me?”

“Child, don’t ask so many questions. Some things are best left unknown.”

Willie Mae is mother’s oldest sister. She is a hairdresser. Aunt Willie dropped out of society when she was widowed. Her husband, Caleb, died shortly after they married, before they had kids. Soon after Caleb died Aunt Willie began working from her home. She moved back to the Indigo Sound House when Trieste’s dad, Kenny-boy Baxter, dumped Trieste on Grandma Beulah and ran off with another woman.

Niah was Trieste’s mother and Grandma’s youngest daughter. Niah died giving birth to my Cousin Trieste.

I spend my summers in the Sound House reading Trieste’s journal and hoping to see the hummingbird’s nest. Grandma Beulah, Aunt Willie Mae, Cousin Trieste and I are alone most of the time. Grandma works as a midwife. She delivered scores of children on the Sound and most of her grandchildren.

Cousin Trieste is the center of life at the Sound House. Grandma Beulah and Aunt Willie are dedicated to each other and Trieste’s welfare. So is G. Yardbird Beaumont, III. Every day G. Yardbird Beaumont, III, comes to collect rent for the Sound House. And every day, after dinner, he leaves empty-handed.

It all started one day when Grandma was a few dollars shy of her rent.

“Why don’t you just keep this and pay me the whole amount?” Bird suggests. “I know you’re good for it.” Bird sniffs loudly and looks toward the kitchen. He is standing in

the front parlor peeking toward the wide archway that separates the parlor from the dining room and adjoining kitchen. “Something smells awfully good, Miss Beulah.”

“Just our simple dinner: steamed vegetables, corn bread, piece of meat, a salad, hunk of cobbler and some coffee. You’re welcome to it,” Grandma offers. Then she turns to me and says, “Baby, set another place for Bird.”

“Oh, I can’t intrude, Ma’am.”

“You are not intruding, Bird. There’s plenty room for one more.” Mama walks through the parlor and into the dining room. She pulls out a side chair and invites Bird to have a seat.

Bird hesitates, then enters the dining room and sits down slowly. “Will Trieste join us?” Bird has always been sweet on Trieste, ever since I can remember.

“Yes, Bird,” Willie Mae butts in sarcastically. “Where else is Trieste going?”

Since that day Bird comes to dinner six days a week under the guise of collecting rent money. On Sundays he dutifully escorts his mother to church. Otherwise he would be at the Sound House.

Grandma stops offering rent money when Aunt Willie convinces her that Bird is eating up his profit.

“Cost a fortune to feed Bird,” Willie Mae often says. “If I were you, Mama, I wouldn’t give him a dime.”

Mama shakes her head. “Willie Mae, I can’t do that! Them Beaumonts’ll put us out. I can’t make it on the street at my age with Trieste.”

“Mama, none of us can make it on the street. Bird won’t put us out of here and risk not seeing Trieste every day. Why don’t you do like rich folks: put the money in escrow,” Willie suggests.

“What would that prove?” Mama asks.

“That’s a fancy way of not paying—”

“Willie Mae, I know what escrow means. What would it prove in my situation? Bird has never wronged me. Why would I wrong him?”

“You wouldn’t be wronging Bird, Mama, you’d be looking out for yourself and earning a little interest in the process. Not too many poor folks get the opportunity God dropped in your lap.

“What’s the use in keeping money in a Mason jar when you can be earning interest? Look at it this way, when Bird asks for the money it’ll be in a secure place.”

Mama seems vaguely interested in Willie’s proposition until a thought turns in her mind. “And what if Bird wants the interest?”

“Then you pay him what the bank paid you.”

“What sense does that—?”

“It makes plenty sense cause there’s a great chance Bird’ll never ask for the rent, let alone interest. You know he doesn’t need the money, Mama. All Bird wants from us is to visit Trieste. You know that, Mama.”

There is a noontime knock at the front door. Mama and Willie change the subject.

“Day, Miss Beulah. Howdy do?” Bird has a habit of opening the door as he knocks.

Aunt Willie locks the door every day at noon so he cannot enter. But Mama always unlocks the door when she hears Bird’s car enter the gravel carport. Car rubber screeching on gravel rock is Bird’s doorbell to Mama’s ear. Before the winds resettle chucking gravel, Mama unlatches the front door.

It is my job to set the table for breakfast, dinner and supper whenever I am at the Sound House. Grandma Beulah sits at the foot of the table opposite my Grandpapa’s hat. Grandma leaves the hat hanging on the chair back, like Papa did. Bird sits opposite Trieste, where he has a

clear view of her. The rest of us fill the remaining chairs.

"Afternoon, Willie Mae. Where's Trieste?" Bird always looks worried when he doesn't see Trieste immediately.

"Calm down, Bird," Aunt Willie snickers. "Trieste is upstairs."

Bird turns his attention upstairs to the water creeping through the pipes. Trieste loves to hear running water, especially in the bathtub. After what is probably an eternity to Bird and no more than a minute to the rest of the world, Bird asks, "You think I should check on Trieste?"

"Bird, if you don't sit down somewhere, I'm liable to forget this is your house," Willie Mae threatens. "I believe you work my nerves for sheer sport."

"How long has she been?—"

"Trieste!" Willie Mae yells upstairs. "Turn off that water and come down for dinner before we have to call the Law on Bird."

G. Yardbird Beaumont, III, is over six feet tall, with palms as large as platters. He is nice looking when he isn't making goofy faces toward Trieste. Bird's father died and left him most of the land and houses on Indigo Sound. That includes our place and every place as far as I can see. "I bet he thinks he owns the ocean too," Willie Mae says.

"Sit on down, Bird." Grandma Beulah orders Bird like he is one of her children. He dutifully obeys. "Bless our food before it gets cold."

"Should we wait for Trieste, Miss Beulah? I heard the water shut off and—"

"Bird, are you going to mind me or you going to let our dinner get cold?"

Bird sits down and bows his head. He half closes his eyes and begins to pray, "Wonderful and gracious God, we thank you. . ."

I always keep my eyes open during prayers. That way I

can see Bird wink at Trieste without Grandma catching him.

“ . . . And heavenly Father—Good googly!—”

When Bird looks up, Trieste is standing in the archway pure and naked, ripe as summer. Smiling like Christmas and humming sweetly.

“Lord, child, what in the world?—” Grandma tries to put her apron around Trieste, as she wiggles away, humming loud as ever.

Bird leaps toward Trieste. “I’ll help you, Miss Beulah. She’s too strong for you to be lifting.”

“I’m not aiming to lift her. I’m aiming to kill her if she don’t march back upstairs and get herself decent. Now I put up with this bird nest foolishness because the doctor thinks Trieste will grow out of it, but—”

“Lord!” Willie throws up her hands. “I am not a bit surprised. What do you expect, trying to raise a touched, overgrown child?” Aunt Willie puts a napkin on her lap to begin eating. She clanks her knife and fork loudly into her dinner plate.

“How can you eat at a time like this?” Mama Beulah’s voice gets real high-pitched when she is excited.

Trieste is humming and spinning so fast no one can catch her. She spins into the china cabinet Papa built for Mama. Dishes and stemware shift, but nothing breaks. Mama and Bird dart after Trieste, through the dining room, into the kitchen and back into the dining room. Trieste’s nakedness does not hinder her speed.

Mama catches Trieste’s wrist and wrestles her into the cushioned window seat in the front parlor. But Mama loses her grip.

Trieste runs through the screened-in back parlor, around the porch swing and dumb cane plants, into the kitchen, and back into the dining room. Bird closes in on

Trieste. Mama is breathing loud and hard as she chases Trieste. Aunt Willie shakes her head in disgust and continues eating.

“Trying to catch Trieste is like trying to hold a greased pig!” Bird yells, his eyes growing in size. Bird grabs Trieste’s arm. “Trieste’s skin is so soft. Smooth as butter: tighter than a hat band.” He finally holds Trieste firmly. Trieste squirms vainly inside Bird’s tight grip. Pressing her to his chest, Bird sits down in Papa’s dining chair. Papa’s hat sways in the mad scuffle. “Lord, please forgive me, Jesus, but you did yourself proud with Trieste.”

Bird smells Trieste’s neck slowly, with his eyes closed. His mouth breaks into the broadest grin. His nostrils inhale Trieste’s scent as Bird wraps his legs around her ankles. Trieste settles a moment then tries to break free. She finally resettles on Bird’s lap. Her eyes dart. Her chest heaves and Trieste hums softer.

Aunt Willie Mae flashes a look at Mama. “Should’ve known Bird would catch her,” Willie mumbled with a mouthful of food parked in one cheek.

Mama silences Aunt Willie with a sideways glance, “I’ll take her now, Bird.” Grandma pulls a housedress on Trieste with one big gesture. “Child, you’ve got to stop running my pressure up like this. I don’t have much—”

“Mama, you’re wasting your breath.”

Bird is still gaping when Mama leads Trieste to her chair. Once Trieste is seated Mama forces a spoon in her hand. “Stop humming, Child, and eat.” Mama sits down heavily. She catches her breath. She mops her brow and begins eating her tepid dinner.

Trieste hums absently, swings her legs and makes faint attempts to eat. Willie Mae flashes occasional glares at Mama, and then toward Trieste. Mama ignores Willie.

After dinner Bird stands and says what he always says.

“Miss Beulah, I want to talk with you about a serious matter.”

“What is it today, Bird?”

“Miss Beulah, may I have Trieste’s hand in marriage?”

“Bird, you know this child is simple. Why do you—”

“Miss Beulah, you know I will never love any-one like I love Tries—”

Mama is still recovering from chasing after Trieste. “All right, Bird, you can marry her.”

“Mama, have you lost your—”

“Now you know you’re pretty far behind in your rent, Miss Beulah. I’ve put other folks out for much smaller debts. I’ve carried you—what!”

“You heard me, Bird. I’m tired. I’ve been trying to raise this child the best I know how. You come in here every day. I see how you look at my baby, day after day, year after year. It takes a good man to see past Trieste’s shortcomings. I do believe you’re that man, Bird.”

“You mean it, Miss Beulah?”

“I mean it. I’m sick and tired of you begging me, Bird. You’ve been begging after Trieste for three years now. I’m tired. I’m tired of weekly doctor visits and writing in journals. I’m just tired! I’m tired of raising a grown child.”

“Miss Beulah, I love you for this. I won’t let you down.” Bird rushes to Mama, hugging and kissing at her. Mama shoos him away with both hands.

Trieste is still humming her seamless tune.

Willie shakes her head at Mama. “I don’t believe it. Lord, these hummingbirds are driving all of us mad! And Mama is in the front seat—”

“Willie Mae, I’m tired of your mouth. Shut up and—”

“Miss Beulah, when can—can I bother you to set a date—I mean is it alright if we get married right off—I mean if—”

“Now I have to think a spell, Bird. A wedding is a big to-do for a woman, especially her baby’s wedding. Besides you got to give your folks time to get used to the idea.”

Aunt Willie Mae laughs and shakes her head at Mama and Bird. Trieste has not stopped humming. Her fragile tune seems endless. Bird appears as innocent as Trieste. He gazes at Trieste as he speaks to Mama.

“Can we talk about it some more tomorrow?”

“That’ll be all right, I guess,” Mama says.

“May I kiss my wife, Miss Beulah?”

“Mama, I don’t think he should kiss her without a ring and a wedding date. And I don’t think you should let them get married unless Trieste will say ‘I do.’ Think how embarrassing it’ll be if the bride starts humming when the preacher asks if she’ll take Bird.”

“Good night, Bird.”

“Night, Miss Beulah.”

Mama had spoken.

News travels fast in small towns. This news is no different. One by one all the neighbors call on Mama.

“You think folks would have the decency to call before they just drop in on an old woman,” Mama complains. Yet she loves the attention. Each visitor is given Mama’s unyielding focus. Mama brags about how Bird’s been courting Trieste for three years. How Bird calls on Trieste daily. How Bird begs shamelessly for Trieste’s hand in marriage, until Mama gives in just to get rid of him. Mama beams with pride when she recounts the “courting tale.”

Aunt Willie Mae is not so easily impressed. “Considering circumstances, I don’t see how you feel decency is in order, Mama.”

“Willie Mae, won’t you ever let me run my own house?”

“Mama, you know she’s not wife material. She won’t

even cook. Did you think about that?"

"Yes I did . . ."

I find Trieste's first journal in the attic. Page one is in Mama's handwriting. It is mature, light and cursive.

I got this book because the doctor feels Trieste will write what she wants to say. Dear Lord, please let the doctor be right. I can't lose another child before I join you and Papa. Father, please let me walk in the shadow of Your strength. -Mama Beulah Meeks, February 8, Year 1.

Page two is in Trieste's hand. Her youthful printing contrasts Mama's cursive writing.

**Me like little. They are secret Weeds, nests cat Tails.
Little like me. Tail cats are Nests. Weeds are secrets.
Humming bees have hair. Horses have humming-birds
like me.**

Every night Mama writes in Trieste's journal. The doctor says it will help matters. Each week Mama takes Trieste to see the doctor. The doctor writes in Trieste's book because Mama insists that it helps her.

Page seven is in the doctor's formal hand.

I am fascinated by Trieste's entries and the insight I gain from them. Each week brings new adventures for Trieste and her family.φ

By the time of the engagement I am twelve. Bird is thirty-five. Trieste is nineteen and I have been reading her journals for five years.

“If push comes to shove Bird can hire a maid. He can afford it,” Mama says emphatically as we prepare dinner.

“Mama, what self-respecting maid will put up with Trieste running through the house naked and all the loud humming and chirping? Not to mention all the dirt and twigs and dead insects she puts in her hair. Mama, I do believe you have lost it right along with Trieste.”

“As long as I have breath and strength in my body, I will see after my child like I did you, before you got so high and mighty, Miss Willie Mae.” Mama unlocks the door when she hears Bird’s car tires rustle the gravel.

This time when Bird enters we are in place, ready for him to bless the food. The door opens and Mrs. G. Yardbird Beaumont, Jr. enters with her only child. Mama and Aunt Willie stand to greet her.

“Day, Miss Beaumont. Wish I had known you were coming.” Mama presses at her apron and tucks her hair. “We would’ve fixed up some—Baby, set another plate for Miss Beaumont.”

Mrs. Beaumont is very tastefully dressed. Her pastel suit is the same color as her stockings and pumps. Each strand of hair is obediently pressed into her chignon. A pastel patent leather pocket book is pursed with a tortoise bone latch.

Despite the summer heat, Mrs. Beaumont’s delicate hands are covered in lacy gloves. Her hazel eyes are shaded with sunglasses that frame her perfectly oval face. She removes her glasses and surveys our modest rooms.

When I can stop staring at Mrs. Beaumont, I get up to set another place.

“That won’t be necessary. I cannot stay long, Beulah.

Just long enough to straighten out this mess.”

“Mother, please—” Bird doesn’t look so tall when he begs his mother.

“Beau, this is a woman’s affair. Must I keep reminding you—where was I, Beulah?” Mrs. Beaumont fans her lacy handkerchief which is saturated with enough perfume for all the pulses on The Sound.

“Baby, get Miss Beaumont a glass of tea with lots of crushed ice.”

“Yes Ma’am.” I rush to and from the kitchen, hoping not to miss anything.

“Now Beulah, you know I am good to all my tenants. Beau is overly nice to you because—well, he likes you and your family. So did my late husband: God rest his soul.”

Willie Mae bursts into loud and boisterous laughter, despite glares from Mama and Mrs. Beaumont. For the first time in my life, Bird stares at someone else—his mother—defying Trieste’s presence.

“My son asked me to come and explain this situation to you. Sometimes my son makes snap judgments. He’s young and not experienced in worldly matters. Well it seems that he made a mistake—”

“Mother, this is not why I asked you to come here.”

“Beau, please do mind your manners when grown folks are talking.”

“Mother—”

Mrs. Beaumont lifts her hanky to silence Bird. “Beulah, I hope you realize we face a delicate and extreme matter. Inasmuch, we must take extreme and delicate measures.” Mrs. Beaumont opens her purse and takes out a crisp business envelope for Mama.

Mama opens the envelope. Bird rushes to see the contents. Slowly Mama reads the documents without her reading glasses. Bird looks over her shoulder. Mama sits

and takes a long swallow of tea. “My baby is not for sale, Miss Beaumont.”

“Mother, how could you! How could you?”

“Willie Mae, please open the door. Our guests are leaving now.”

“Beulah, if you think you can put me out of my own house, you’re crazier than Trieste.”

Bird, Mama, Willie and I gasp. Across the table, Willie comforts Trieste’s hand. “Don’t pay her any mind, Trieste.” Hard as she tries, Aunt Willie cannot erase the collective gasp, or Mrs. Beaumont’s mean-spirited name-calling.

Trieste tears herself away from the dinner table. She charges toward Mrs. Beaumont. She puts her face so close to Mrs. Beaumont’s you couldn’t breathe between them.

Mrs. Beaumont steps back but Trieste’s stare holds her. Trieste’s fists are clinched at her side. Her breathing grows heavy. Her ramrod posture is steady.

“I like it in you, Trieste, but she’s not worth it,” Aunt Willie Mae advises as she walks up to Trieste’s side.

A single tear streams down Trieste’s cheek.

Mrs. Beaumont breaks the stare that she and Trieste share. Bird grabs Mrs. Beaumont’s arm.

Trieste looks sorrowfully around the front rooms and runs upstairs.

“See what you’ve done, Mother? If you have hurt my wife, I will disown you. Even in the least way, I swear you’ll regret it the rest of your life.” Bird runs after Trieste.

Mama finally speaks. “I guess Mister said his peace, Mrs. Beaumont.”

Mrs. Beaumont recovers. “Beulah, you know I don’t scare easily. I’ll be back when you’ve had time to think things over. That state hospital would make a nice home for Trieste. She needs 24-hour supervision . . .

“Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money for you. I know

money takes getting used to. Take your time. But don't take too long . . .

"Thank you for the tea. Good day, Beulah."

Mrs. Beaumont dons her sunglasses, collects herself and leaves.

Willie Mae slams the door and locks it. I run to the window. I watch Mrs. Beaumont open her parasol and prance out of sight. "She's walking," I report to Mama and Willie, "Under a white lace umbrella—with the whole world in her pocket."

"Let the rich bitch walk."

It is dark out when Trieste and Bird come downstairs. A few times Mama asks me to go up and check on them. I was going back and forth between the front rooms, the bedroom Trieste and I share, and the journals in the attic. Mama and Willie Mae are still seated at the table. Uneaten dinner dries up and sticks to the plates while Mama and Willie talk. Wonder. Try to sort things out together.

From the keyhole I see Bird holding Trieste on his lap. They sit in the big rocking chair near an open window. Winds blow a steady breeze, parting sheer floral curtains. The afternoon sun lights their faces. Trieste whines. Bird's whispers calm her. He pets Trieste and kisses her face. When Trieste hums, Bird hums harmony. They fall asleep in each other's arms.

Bird is the first to awaken. He watches Trieste sleep, careful not to stir too much. Bird kisses her hand then holds it against his cheek. Trieste awakens, stretching her arms and back slowly. She and Bird smile at each other.

When Trieste and Bird stand, I run down-stairs to update Mama and Willie.

Bird and Trieste return to the dining table. They are barely seated when Bird announces, "Miss Beulah, I asked

Trieste to marry me and she said, ‘Yes.’”

“You didn’t ask her in front of me, so how can it count?”

Bird takes Trieste’s hand and says, “Trieste will you please tell your Grandma you want to marry me?”

Mama, Trieste, Bird, Willie and I stare at each other until Trieste finally nods “Yes.”

Mama cries, “Lord, why can’t I be happy for my baby?”

“It’ll be alright, Mama.” Bird hugs Mama. “Is it okay for me to call you *Mama*?”

“If you know what I know, your—Miss Beaumont better not hear it.”

“Don’t worry about her, Mama.” Bird takes the biggest ring from his pocket and puts it on Trieste’s finger. Later I find out it’s a two-carat diamond set in a platinum band: real top shelf, according to Aunt Willie.

Mama and Aunt Willie Mae admire the ring. It looks good on Trieste, and fits her perfectly. We take turns hugging and congratulating Bird and Trieste. Since he has never kissed Trieste in front of Mama, Bird asks permission.

“Mama, may I kiss my wife now?”

“That’s between you and your wife, Bird.”

Bird kisses Trieste respectfully—not like he had done when he and Trieste were alone. Bird holds Trieste forever, standing in Grandma Beulah’s kitchen. Trieste hugs Bird like she is a grown woman experienced with hugging men. With the corners of her apron, Mama dabs tears from her eyes. Willie Mae and I look at them and listen to Mama’s snuffles.

[end of excerpt © 2003 regina harris baiocchi]