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# **HOLLER, CHILD**

**S T O R I E S**

# **LATOYA WATKINS**

**A U T H O R   O F   P E R I S H**

ALSO BY LATOYA WATKINS

*Perish*

# HOLLER, CHILD

*stories*



LATOYA WATKINS





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*For Mom, Wal, and Shay: a tree and her first fruits. Let us always remember ourselves.*

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# THE MOTHER



*For the Only Son*

The visits done died down a little bit now. When it first happened, a week ago, all kind of reporters was camped out in my yard. Some still come. The rustlers, like this one sitting in front of me. They still asking bout Hawk. Bout how he come to call hisself the Messiah. Bout who his daddy is, but I ain't got nothing for them.

I look out the window I keep my chair pulled up next to. Ain't no sun, just cold and still. Banjo lift his head up when he see my eyes on him, but it don't take him long to let it fall back on his paws. He done got his rope a little tangled up. Can't move too much with it like that, but he can breathe and lay down. He all right. I'll go out and work out the knot when I can—when this gal leave.

It's cold out there, but I ain't too worried bout Banjo. He got natural insulation. I'm the one cold and I'm on the inside—supposed to be on the inside, cause I'm a person. I ain't got no insulation, though. This old house ain't got none neither. The window is rickety and wood-framed. Whole house is. Whole house ain't no thicker—no stronger than a big old piece of plywood. Ain't nothing to separate me from the cold wind outside but the glass and the pane.

This gal sitting there shivering like white folk ain't used to the cold. Everybody—even me—know white folks is makers of the cold. And this one here white as the snow on the ground out there. Ain't no whole lot of snow; not enough to stick, to keep these wandering folks like her out my face. I wonder if the snow reached Abilene fore Hawk and his white folks left life

for good. Fore he crucified hisself and took all them other people with him. Wonder if he left this world clean.

“Trees outside my window naked all the time,” I say, and I pretend in my mind I was raised here and not on Thirty-Fourth. Just pretend I been on the East Side all along. On the East Side, where good-time whoring didn’t never catch, even if being strung out on drugs did. Where snow come to cover up the dirt in places where grass don’t never grow like icing covering up chocolate cake or brownies or anything dark and sweet. The East Side. Where you be happy poor and don’t try to pretend you can fuck your way out. I just pretend in my mind I was brought up poor and wasn’t never no whore.

“Ma’am?” the girl say, like I done confused her. Lines come up on her forehead. Make all them big freckles look like they shifting. Like she got skin like a sow. Skin that got a life of its own and move and breathe and filthy. She run her hand through her stringy red hair. White-folk hair. I pray to Jesus she don’t leave none of it in my carpet.

“Some folks see green in the summer. But come this time of year, everybody trees look like them out yonder.” I nod my head at the window. I want to make sure she get a good look at the naked, flimsy trees out there. “Like they naked. Like they poor,” I say after a while.

“Oh. Yes,” she say, nodding her head and letting her eyes open real wide like she recognize something I just said. She lift up her head a little bit to look past me—to look out my window. “But won’t you let the dog in? He’s so small for the cold.” I don’t say nothing, but she say something else. “Joshua’s father, Ms. Hawkins. I asked about him. Remember?”

I sigh real loud. I want her to know that what she asking me to talk bout don’t come easy. I’d rather tell her my momma was a junkie whore just like her momma, and the little two-room shanty the government help me rent now would’ve been a mansion in the sky for either one of them. I want to tell her I was fourteen and pregnant when Butch Ugewe come to the Hitching Post and saved me. Made me his. A honest woman. I want to finally tell somebody—anybody—how Momma ain’t put up no fight. How all Butch had to do was



offer her a little bit of under-the-table money and she let him take me. But I can't.

I shrug my shoulders. "Everything different when you traveling through places," I say, thinking bout where I grewed up and how pretty everything looked on the outside. How the womens that lived in Ms. Beaseley's whorehouse on Thirty-Fourth was poor and throwed out by the world, but couldn't nobody tell it by looking at them on the outside. Men couldn't even see the ruin of the place they was in once they got past Ms. Beaseley's nice lawn and long country porch. The painted up women with twice-douched snatches covered up all the ugly they was pushing theyselves into.

I move my eyes away from the window and put them on the girl. She got a long bird face and her teeth stick out a little too far for her tiny mouth. I can tell by the way the sides of her mouth drooping down, she ain't used to being in a place like mine. I don't want to make her feel more uncomfortable, so I don't say nothing bout the pregnant-looking roach crawling slow up the wood-paneled wall behind her head.

"I reckon peoples be just like them trees, you see?" Her face blank. I can tell she don't see. "Everybody got a season to go through being ugly and naked." I laugh a little bit.

"Yes, ma'am," she say. Then she sigh and let her eyes roll halfway round in the sockets. "We all have problems, but can we—"

"That enough heat on you?" I ask. "Can't never keep this old lean-to warm. That enough heat on you—" I stop myself from calling her "miss." I want to spank the back of my own hand. She younger than me. Probably by bout twenty years or more. Still, I want to make sure the old electric heater sitting on the cracked and splintered floor, humming near her feet, is doing what it's supposed to do. Sometimes it blow cold air instead of heat. I want to make sure it ain't freezing her.

She look confused bout my question. Them lines in her head get deeper and she start shaking her foot a little. She want her story for the paper. Want to find out if I think my son was God like them folks that was following behind him in Abilene.

Last time I saw him, Hawk told me he was the *real* son of God, and Jesus was a scud. Told me he was the truth, and me and the rest of the world best believe it. Dust storm was swirling outside like it was the end of things that day. He walked into my life after more than twenty years, and all I could wonder was how he found me. Walked in and spread his arms like a giant black bird and said, “Woman, you are the mother of *I Am*.”

I shake my head. “Hawk was always a good boy. Always. After Butch died, he helped me raise hisself for as long as he could. He did everything he could to make sure we was taken care of. Hawk wasn’t but nine, but he sure learned to do what he had to do.”

Hawk asked me bout his daddy when he was still a little boy. I told him it was Butch, and Butch denied it right in his face. Later on, after Butch was dead and my legs was back to welcoming mens all night long, I told him bout Mary and Jesus and me and hisself. Tucked him into bed and he looked up at me like I was something. Everything was still in the house that night. No tricks, no Butch, no drugs. And I wanted him to be still and special and good, so I told him the same story I heard as a girl. Same story the preacher shouted over the pulpit some Sundays when Ms. Beaseley would drag every whore in the house down to Good Shepherd’s Baptist Church. Cept I made him the star. *Truth is you dropped right out the sun to my arms*, I told him. *I was just a girl. Ain’t know nothing bout mens and babies. You special, Hawk. You special. God your daddy. You special.* I wanted him to be normal. I ain’t want him to be no whore son. Folks would’ve judged him for what I was.

When Hawk first died, the papers and stuff ain’t bother with me too much. Reckon wasn’t really no way for them to know who I was. I hadn’t been his momma since I gave him up. But after his body went missing from the morgue last week, all kind of stuff done printed in the paper. Newspapers coming to get my story—to know bout Hawk and me and how everything happened. Some of them say I can make money and be rich, but I want to be where I am. I want to be happy poor. I tried most of my life to fuck myself rich. I don’t want to pretend. I’m gone be where I’m at.

Fore his body went missing, it was all scandal. It was a story printed in the paper bout him messing with a little girl up there in Abilene. Say he was

charged with aggravated sexual assault on a child cause he used some kind of doctor instrument to see if the little girl had some kind of cancer in her woman part. Paper say he was doctoring them Abilene folks and ain't have the right training. Had his own community—own world out there. He was God and made soap and growed food, and them folks gave him everything they had so he could have more than they did. Hawk got thirty years in prison that I ain't never know bout for doctoring on that little girl. Least that's what the paper say. Called it some kind of rape or something. Say he made all them folks kill theyselves so he wouldn't have to do his time.

Now, though, since they can't figure out what done happened to his body, they printing stuff bout proving who he really was, eyewitness accounts of his miracles, and the search for his real daddy. I can't tell them nothing. I don't know what to think. All I know is I don't talk to the big ones. I only let them small-timers come through my door. They don't come promising nothing. They just want to hear me.

The lady look at the pad she been writing on. “Yes, but Butch Ugewe wasn't his biological father, right?”

I try to dig back to stuff I remember from church and Ms. Beaseley talking. She was like some kind a madame preacher. Always saying the world need whores so the good Lord can have folks to save.

I finally smack my lips and say, “Shoot. Baby, you gone have to forgive me. *Bonanza* bout to happen.” I get up slow cause my body don't move the way it used to. I cross over her legs and say scuse me, making my way to the TV. I push the button on the thing and it make a loud popping noise that make the girl jump a little bit. “Ain't no need to be afraid, chile,” I say, making my way back over her legs. “Things old round here. We all got our tics.”

She sigh. “Yes, but Butch Ugewe—”

“You a God-fearing woman, umm . . . What's your name again, baby?” I ask and wait for her to tell me for the third time.

She look at me like she don't know what to say. Then she say, “Rhoda. Rhoda Pearson, and I was raised Catholic.” She kind of tilt her head up a little, like Catholic is better than regular God-fearing.

“Oh,” I say, and I don’t know what else to say cause I don’t know much bout them Catholics. “Y’all go by the Bible?”

She nod her head and shrug her shoulders at the same time. Her lips is straight across like a line drawed on a stick-figure face. Like she don’t know what that got to do with anything—her religion.

I think bout my last conversation with Hawk. He talked bout earthly fathers and his heavenly one. “Well, you know in one them books, Matthew, I think, when everybody get to begetting somebody else?” She nod her head. “Well, Hawk told me that ain’t had nothing to do with Jesus momma. That’s all bout Joseph. The stepdaddy.”

“That’s right. The genealogy in that book *is* Joseph’s,” she say, nodding her head. She interested in what I got to say now.

“Well, if that Jesus, the one you and half the world *think* was the Messiah, and his disciples ain’t care nothing about who was and wasn’t his real daddy, why we always trying to prove DNA and mess today?”

She laugh a little and then sigh. She sit the pad down on her lap and look at the old TV I got sitting on top the big floor model. *Bonanza* going and she act like she into it.

• • •

This one chubby. She got brown hair and I know it’s shedding soon as she walk in. Got strings of it all over her shirt, and it don’t look healthy at all. She holding her little notepad close to her chest like it got secrets about the world in it. When she sit down on the couch, the plastic I keep it covered with sound like it’s screaming. She look around the room until she land her eyes on me. Look like she trying to place the dates on my old-time furniture.

“It ain’t antique,” I say. “Just old. Stuff ain’t nobody else want no more.”

She smile and nod her head. I sit down in my rocking chair next to the window.

“I hated to hear about your son’s death, Ms. Hawkins,” she say. I wave her words away with my hand. She keep going. “I hate for any mother to lose

her child. I'm a mother myself, Ms. Hawkins," she say, grabbing at her breast with her chubby hand. "Miscarried four times before my son was born. I know what it's like to lose a child." Her eyes look sad like she want me to be sad with her. She looking at me hard. I wave my hand at her again.

"I hadn't seen a hair on Hawk head in years fore I saw them surrounding his place on the news. I loved him. Mommas always love they boys. But Hawk been gone from me longer than two weeks."

"I take it you all weren't close," she say, looking at me from the corners of her eyes like she done found out something important or I done gave the best gossip of the day.

And I think on it for a minute. The last time I saw him, I cooked for him. Smothered pork chops, collards, sweet potatoes, and hot water cornbread. It was the first time I had cooked for him since fore drugs took hold of me. Fore I lost him—fore they took him. He wouldn't eat the pork chops. Said they don't do that at the House of Joshua. Said they don't do a lot of other things. They don't bathe with regular bath soap. They make theirs out of lye. Said pork chops and real soap is grounds for excommunication.

He brought a white man to my house that day. Short, stocky something. His skin was bout as pale as the off-white paint on my wall and he was bald at the top but had his hair swooped over like he wanted to hide it. I wanted to tell him his head was slick as a table even with that hair swooped over, but I had seen too many white, bald, swooped heads to let my tongue go like that. He didn't never open his wide rubber lips—not the whole time he was here. Just stood there like some kind of little person bodyguard.

Hawk told me I looked good. Said he could see clean in my spirit, and I ain't apologize to him bout leaving him to be with myself. For never coming to get him when them white folks took him from me. I ain't tell him I was sorry for letting him go out into the world eleven years old and full of my lies. I ain't apologize bout nothing.

Apologize for what? Hawk ain't end up so bad. Turned out better than he would've if I wouldn't have messed up. Foster family what got him, kept him. Made him go to school. Made him stick with it. He went to school for theology. Found hissself in there, he said. Sat at my table and tossed words I

ain't understand around, like a empty grocery bag blowing in a dust storm. Seeing him that day with his fun-sized driver and bodyguard and being served by them white folks like he was sweet Jesus hisself made me feel good bout saving him from being a whore son.

Sat at my table and told me he found his daddy. I wanted to find out who he found. Wanted to know who his daddy was myself. All his life I had tried to look for signs in his body. Something to tell me which one of them mens had made me have him. Looked at his height. Even that day, his tall body swayed when he walked through my front door. He had to bend—kind of fold hisself just to get through. His eyes was like two light chestnuts, but his skin was dark as pure brass. He was a big, muscular man. Look like he could crush you without trying.

Hawk stretched out his hands like he was bout to be pent up on a cross and asked me in his thunder voice, *Woman, would thou like to be saved? Set free?* Then he told me his story bout being my savior—savior to all mens and womens. Savior of the world. Told me he had a place for me in paradise. Told me he wanted me to come to Abilene.

• • •

“We was close enough,” I finally say to Chubby. She write on her pad.

“What was he like as a boy, Ms. Hawkins?” she ask, smiling. I see some green stuff in her teeth and it make me smile too. I don't say nothing bout it. Just sit there smiling back at her.

I shrug my shoulders. “Hawk was taken from me early on, but all his time with me, them first eleven years, he was a regular boy. Wanted what regular little boys want. Went where regular little boys went—”

“I know, I know, but he had to be different in some kind of way, Ms. Hawkins. There must have been something significant about him. He led all of those people in Abilene. Most of them followed him for more than twenty years, and a lot of people say they saw him perform miracles. People died for him, Ms. Hawkins,” she say, holding her hands out in front of herself, letting

them shake a little like she having a fit. She finally drop them back down to her lap and sigh.

“Was he anything like his father, ma’am?” she ask.

I look at her long and hard. She just a little younger than me. Look like she probably in her forties or something. Got a round pie face like a trick used to come see me when I was still a little girl. He didn’t never seem to mind my young naked bottom on the nasty bare mattress. I always imagined him going back home to nice clean sheets. Leaving me dirty and ruined and spilling over with his seeds. Now I imagine him as her daddy.

I let myself smile. “You from here, young lady?” I ask. And she look like she don’t want to answer, but she do.

She nod her head and smile. “Been away most of my adult life, though. Never wanted to write for the *Avalanche*. Too small. Everything about this place is small,” she say, looking around my den. “Alas, I am here. The winding roads of life, huh?”

Her eyes land on the only picture hanging on the wall. The eight-by-ten frame is crooked and dusty. I haven’t touched it in years. She got questions in her eyes. The black woman in the picture smiling with her hand halfway covering her mouth, and a white man touching—look like a soft touch—the side of her face and looking at her with love in his eyes. A dark image in the background blurred out of focus, but it look like a child playing or something. “May I?” she ask, pointing at the picture, standing up like she gone walk toward it.

“Gone,” I say. “If it tickle your fancy.” I turn my head and look out the window. Banjo resting on his paws, tied up to the tree. I think about maybe putting a blanket out there so he won’t have to lay on top of the snow. He old and tired and ain’t barked to complain bout being tied up. Tied up to that tree is all Banjo know, though.

“Oh, it’s the photo that came with the frame,” she say out loud, and then she laugh a little bit and start making her way back to the couch. “So is he? Is—or *was*—your son anything like his father?”

“You anything like *your* father?” I ask. Her eyes get wide and she look down at her hand.

“I suppose I used to be. He’s nothing like himself these days. Alzheimer’s. He . . .” She trail off and sniff. “He dies some every day.” She look sad and I feel kind of sorry bout pushing her, but I know her kind. She want her story. She’ll cry to get it.

“Guess we all got a little bit of our daddies in us. If we dig deep enough, we find that. Hawk ain’t no different. He was his father’s son.”

“Who was his father, Ms. Hawkins? If you don’t mind my asking.” She add the last part on kind of quick.

I shake my head cause now I can’t get the picture of my old trick out of my head. I see him on top of me, with Alzheimer’s. He drooling on my face and calling me a strange name.

“I was Hawk daddy after Butch was gone. After I was gone, he had a foster daddy. I’m sure he had pieces of all us in him,” I say.

“Yeah, but I meant . . .” she say and just stop talking. She tilt her head to the side and smile. “Yeah.”

. . .

Hawk told me that Jesus was a scud and his disciples was tricked. Told me I couldn’t get to heaven if I didn’t go through him. Called hissself the “Great Mediator.” Called God El Shaddai; said El Shaddai told him I was pure as a virgin, so he choosed me. Said that white man, who name was Troy, was the one true disciple of the one true Messiah. I laughed at him and that white man that day.

*Woman, my family are those who do the will of my father, he said that day, looking at me all serious. All real men, like this one, he said, pointing at Troy. Woman, these men have cast their homes, their businesses, and their people aside. Everything to follow the one true Messiah.* He was nodding his head and poking his lips out like he used to do when he was young—when he in trouble and wanted to cry his way out.

I asked, *You mean for me to believe you Jesus hissself, Hawk?*



He just shook his head. *I mean for you to believe I am Joshua the Messiah. Jesus was a scud. We—my Father and I—we chose you from the beginning. I mean—we mean*, he said, pointing to Troy and up toward the ceiling, *for you to believe the truth. To carry it. To live it.*

• • •

This one is a homely-looking thing. Look like a baby—a mutt baby. She mixed. Black and white, I think. She ain't got no pen and pad, but she done brought a official-looking white woman with her. Woman look like she FBI or something. Got a real straight face and a long thick body. Something like a giant or a angel or something out of this world. Coal-black hair pulled back in a bun. It look wet. I want to thank her for at least tying it up fore coming here. But her face—the way the bones in her cheeks all high and tight—make it look like she can't smile if she want to, like she evil and mean, and I don't want to say nothing to her. She ain't the one here for the story, though. I can tell by her empty eyes. It's the young'un—the mutt want the story.

She look bout fifteen—a tall fifteen. Look like white trash with drops of black up in her. Hair that dirty blond a lot of mutts born with, and it's long and stringy and thin for her kind. She don't look right with the FBI lady. Make me think bout Hawk and the last time he was here with his tiny bodyguard. They looked lopsided just like these two. Cept with them it was they builds. These two gals is lopsided in other ways. They lopsided in what they got. One get to be all white and one don't. Anybody can look at them and see that.

The young'un look like she belong here—here on the East Side with the poor black folks. Look like one of us, so out of all the wonderers that been in here asking bout my boy, I offer her a cup of water. I don't want to offer her FBI agent nothing, but I gone head and do it. The young'un say yes, but, just like I knew she would, FBI say no. She looking around like she expecting to see a roach or something, and I kind of want to tell her that they usually don't go to crawling till ain't nobody looking for them or when I turn the lights off

for bed. I want to tell her they like bedbugs, cept they don't want my blood. They want the crumbs I drop that been dropped down to me.

She look at the young'un and nod her head toward me, and the young'un open her mouth and say, "We aren't really supposed to be here. Ms. Gertrude risked her fostering to bring me."

FBI—Gertrude—reach out her hand and let it slide from the top of the girl head all the way down to her shoulders, and I hope she don't leave no hair on my couch. "It is really not a problem, Chloe," she say, and I realize she ain't no original American. Sound like she from somewhere hard and cold like Germany or Russia. I had a trick that had been to both places and his body always felt like ice pops. He was hard and rough and I couldn't never do nothing good for him. "You have been through so much already. I only want to help." Then she do something that surprise me. She spread her lips and smile like it hurt.

The young'un smile back at her fore she look back at me. "I need you to tell about Joshua Hawkins. They printed your name in the paper, and Ms. Gertrude—she's my foster mother since everything happened—"

"Maybe you should tell her what happened, child," Gertrude say.

The girl ignore her and say, "I'm Chloe Hawkins, ma'am. Joshua was my father." She say her words with a straight face, like I'm posed to know. Like I been expecting her or something. But Hawk ain't say nothing bout no kids when he come here three years ago. Ain't say nothing bout no wife either. Matter of fact, Hawk ain't really say nothing bout hisself as a person. He only talked bout hisself as God. I look at her skin and know she carrying somebody blackness. She tall like Hawk and her eyes sit big in her head like his.

"Oh," is all I can say. I don't feel nothing like I think a grandmother would. I don't feel nothing like wrapping her up and warming her from the world. I want to, though. Want to feel how I forgot to feel with Hawk. Want to want to go bake a tray of cookies or a pie or something like that. But I don't. Just sit here and wait for her mouth to guide me.

"I had twelve brothers and sisters," she say, letting her eyes drop to her lap. "They're all gone now. Died with my father and mothers. I was with

Gertrude. They placed me there after . . .” Her words just stop.

She look down at her hands and start bending her fingers back like she want to pop them or something. She look back up and her eyes shining different cause they got tears in them. She sniff and sigh, and I know.

“You her, ain’t you?” I ask, looking in her eyes. They chestnuts like Hawk’s. They just like his. His eyes was the first thing I noticed when I slid him out my snatch like shit. They was brown and nutty and I knowed nothing that beautiful didn’t come from me. I wanted to pop them out and save them—hold them close to my heart. I loved his eyes. They was always his very best thing. They was always the thing I wanted to save from seeing the whore in me.

“You the one he got in trouble bout touching,” I say. “You my grandbaby?” I ask.

She nod her head and sniff hard. The water in her eyes start to spill on out, and Gertrude rub her back. “I know he wasn’t certified or anything, but he would never hurt me. Not the way they say. He was a good doctor. All he ever—”

“It is okay, Chloe,” Gertrude say, spitting a little on the last letter of each word she say. “Remember what the doctor says. Do not make excuses for him. The only way to face it—”

“Stop it, Ms. Gertrude,” she say loud enough to cause the lady’s eyes to get wide but still soft enough to not be disrespectful. “Just stop it.”

Gertrude nod her head and look at me. Chloe look at me too. “They took me from home after the whole thing got out. After the mole leaked it. They took me and now I don’t have a home anymore.”

“Yes, you do, Chloe. You are with Gertrude,” Gertrude say real fast and sloppy like she got to hurry and get it out. Like if she don’t hurry up Chloe won’t understand that she want to be there for her.

“I know,” Chloe say real soft. “But I want my family. I want them to rest in peace and not lies,” she say, the words spilling out her mouth like fire ants from a stepped-on nest. “I want to follow the truth. I believe my father was him—the Messiah. He lives. I don’t care what people say. How they want him to look. He—”

“Okay, Chloe. Okay,” Gertrude say, nodding her head.

Chloe smile and rest her back in my couch. She trying to get comfortable and I want to tell her that the springs poking out ain’t gone let her. I want to tell her that I had that old couch since Hawk was a little boy. I done fucked and come on that couch. I done shot up and throwed up on that couch, but I don’t say nothing. I let her try to find her place in it.

“Please, ma’am,” she say without looking at me. She looking at her hands in her lap. “My father was the son of El Shaddai. I know that. But there have to be witnesses in the world. I’m a witness. But you have to tell them—tell them who his father was,” she say, looking up at me. Her eyes filling up like a glass under the faucet. “Tell all these folks so they can finally know. Tell them so they can be saved too.”

I think bout Hawk and El Shaddai and God and this little half-something gal sitting in front of me. She want the story—acting like she need it. And Hawk was a good boy, and his story was really the only thing he ever asked me for. Wanted his daddy. Wanted to know the truth bout hisself, and I ain’t had no way of knowing myself. He went on out and made his own truth, and I ain’t got half a right to take that away from him.

All them skinned knees and unfixed lunches and bullies and growling stomachs and me high or on my back or not there flash fore my eyes. And his last visit do too. The one where he brought the white man with him. How he left with tears in his eyes cause I laughed when he asked me to come follow him in Abilene. How his lips quivered like they did when he was six months old and bout to cry. How he was asking me to be the momma of God cause I had told him when he was little I was. How I struck a match to my cigarette and laughed in his face. I see it all, and I know Hawk wasn’t never confused. He knowed I was a junkie whore and ain’t know who his daddy was, but he wanted me to be something else. He wanted me to be what I said I was.

He went out and made me the momma of God. I laugh a little, thinking bout people following an old junkie whore, bowing to her like she pure and righteous and clean. Like she the momma of God. I look in Chloe lonely, lied-to eyes, and I wonder if Hawk would’ve done that exam on her if I told him his momma was a whore when he was little. Wonder if he would’ve been