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A World of Hurt

Yeah, I think I see. . . . I'm almost sure that the forms I see look exactly like yours. I mean, even with the textures of skin, or the different colors of skin, you can touch someone and you can get a pretty good picture in your mind. I assume that when you see something, you see it right in front of you, but you also take that image and it's in your mind's eye. It's no longer coming from your eyes, it's coming from inside you.

—*Stevie Wonder, 1975*

Being blind, you don't judge books by their covers; you go through things that are entirely insignificant, and you pick out things that are more important. . . . I understand that when you don't hear anything and you hear this very high frequency, that's the sound of the universe.

—*Stevie Wonder, 1973*

There is no “Hardtime, Mississippi,” in Stevie Wonder’s lineage, but there is a Hurtsboro, Alabama, in his blood, which is close enough. In the metaphoric sense, in fact, if Hurtsboro wasn’t a real place it would be one he might well have created in a song. It might go something like, “I got Hurtsboro in my heart but it’s a pain in my ass.” So even though he was never actually in Hurtsboro, Hurtsboro is in him, in its rhythm and its blues and its pain. Such may help explain why a boy born with dead eyes in an urban bathtub ring

called Saginaw, Michigan, could sing a song that begins with the line, “I was born in Little Rock / Had a childhood sweetheart” and make it sound so convincing, like a lick from people who sang the blues named Sonny Boy or Howlin’ or Muddy and couldn’t have nailed it better than Stevie Wonder when he laid down in the same song, “I got empty pockets—y’see I’m a po’ man’s son.”

Well, *that* part was in fact literal, a common denominator in Saginaw and all the ensuing years in downtrodden Detroit. But the real, live hurt of being black and in a place like Little Rock or Mobile or Birmingham or Hurtsboro in the Jim Crow South could only be told secondhand to him, in sorrow and pity, by a hardy woman with the name of Lula Mae.

Hurtsboro is a blip on the map just west of the Alabama-Georgia border. Named for its founder, a land developer unfortunately named Joel Hurt, the town barely exists today; the 2000 census placed its population at not quite three hundred people, its gizzards eaten away by decades of attrition and hopelessness. At its apogee, in the 1940s, it boasted around five thousand inhabitants, few of whom had anything to boast about. One of them was Lula Mae Wright, who was born there in 1930 and grew up in that dust bowl with one general store, one school, and one Baptist church. Nearly all the townfolk were sharecroppers, cotton-pickers who were only differentiated from their slave ancestors by the few dollars they received for working fifteen hours a day under the broiling Alabama sun. The men usually died young, leaving the women to work in the fields, feed large numbers of children, and grow old and stooped in shotgun shacks on tar roads, their salvation found in God, ham and hominy, and the blues they could hear fleetingly through the static of an old burnt-tube radio.

The livin’ wasn’t easy, but they made do, their quiet frustrations and snubbed dreams echoing in the throaty testaments of the Alabama bluesmen, from W. C. Handy to Big Mama Thornton to Wild Child Butler. History informs us that the first blues song to be put onto a vinyl record was called “Crazy Blues,” composed by Mobile native Perry Bradford. In the 1920s and 1930s, the blues rolled through the state as its practitioners rolled out of it on the way to greener pastures up north, or so they thought. Their music stayed put,

the radio belching out slices of life like Cliff Gibson's "Tired of Being Mistreated," Barefoot Bill's "Snigglin' Blues," and Ed Bell's "Mean Conductor Blues."

Lula Mae could only dream of being lucky enough to ride the whistle-stop Ed Bell sang of out of Hurtsboro. Her life was a classic Deep South scramble. Her mother had been a teenager who had given her up to relatives six months after she was born, leaving her only with the surname Wright; her father, a bouncer named Noble Hardaway, didn't even wait for the birth to vanish, hightailing it all the way to East Chicago, Indiana. Lula grew up believing her aunt and uncle, named Wright, were her parents. Only after they died did she learn about Noble, who in the winter of 1943 agreed to take in the daughter he never knew. Lula was put on the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe headed for East Chicago.

She was thirteen then, suddenly with a new surname and a new father, and what she would recall of that journey through the barrier of time and reality was how cold her bones felt when she stepped off the train in Indiana, colder than she could even describe. It would get colder still. Noble Hardaway was by then married and raising two children in a suffocating tenement, surrounded by other southern black emigrants driven to East Chicago by the promise of a steady paycheck from the steel mills. The promise was never quite as bright as they expected; the pay was paltry, lodging cramped, frustration thick in the sooty air. Worse, Noble Hardaway was a snarling, uncouth man and a mean drunk who quit on his newly found daughter after two weeks, sending her to an aunt and her church deacon husband a few miles away to look after her. There, Lula felt some warmth for the first time in the North. Her aunt was a tolerant woman who allowed her to drop out of school to work in a textile factory. She was even permitted to hop the train periodically with her friends for the short ride to the "other" Chicago, the real one, where she once saw Count Basie's orchestra perform in a nightclub. Her aunt's only requirement was, regardless of where Lula was the night before, to be in church on Sunday morning.

Urban life was surely an education in itself. It wasn't long before her aunt caught the good deacon in a very compromising position with another woman, and when she pulled out her pistol, he bolted from bed into the street, stark naked, ducking the shots she fired at him. Fortunately, her aim was bad, but her judgment was worse; she stayed

with him on his vow of probity. Lula herself was not unfamiliar with the wages of sin. An adventurous, restless girl, in 1948 she became impregnated by a man named—of all things—Paul *Hardaway*. The suddenly moral cheatin’ deacon, unable to bear the stigma, threw her out of his home and she roamed from one friend’s couch to another before gathering up enough money to move into a small flat of her own. A few weeks later, she delivered a son, whom she named Milton Hardaway despite the father not having stayed around for the birth. Taking pity on her, another relative, an uncle who lived in Saginaw, took Lula and Milton into his home.

A lumber and mining burg in decline, Saginaw sat forlornly on the bleak tundra one hundred miles to the north of Detroit, double-hammered by the “hawk,” as they called the wicked winter wind, sweeping in from the Saginaw River and the huge expanse of Lake Huron fifteen miles leeward. The town was a relic of the short-lived black renaissance of the 1930s and 1940s when the overflow of the great migration from the South coalesced into a middle-class bourgeois culture, its main line warming the winter nights with hot jazz clubs. Now, though, like the mines, the culture had been stripped to the bone, causing employment to ebb and crime to soar.

One of the chronically unemployed was Calvin Judkins, the first wrong number that Lula Mae Hardaway—a surname that had come to fit her well, as she seemed to do most everything the hardest way—fell for in town. Judkins was a squat man with glasses, pushing fifty, and an unrepentant drunk; Lula would many years later call him a street hustler and craps shooter, and bad at both. But she also admitted she couldn’t resist him. Oh, he was good-looking enough, but that wasn’t it. He just seemed to her not a common punk, especially when he sat down and played piano wherever he could find one. At those times, he was an artist, a man with depth and feelings who could transfer his suffering for life into what his fingers were tapping out on a keyboard. He had something to offer the world, if only he would get serious, clean up, be a man.

The chemistry led them to his bed, early and often. In short order, she was again pregnant, and in mid-1949 came the birth of her second son, Calvin Judkins Jr. Calvin Sr., doing his manly duty, moved Lula and her two boys into his two-room flat, then had a relative stay with the infants for a weekend while he took Lula down to where it was

warmer—balmy Columbus, Ohio—to elope. When they got back, he seemed to be fulfilling Lula's grand dream for him to straighten up and fly right, taking a job in a furniture store and earning the first steady pay in his life.

It didn't last long. Walking the straight and narrow line wasn't what Calvin was about; the lure of the street came calling again. Quitting his job, he took up his old hustling habits—but now with a beyond degenerate twist. Calvin, looking to turn pimping into profit, knew of only one sure shot he could put to work on the street. One day, stinking drunk, he clambered into the house with a “friend,” informing a flabbergasted Lula that he wanted her to “take a ride” with the guy. Before she could even react, he grabbed her arm hard, so hard she knew Calvin meant business—literally. Not knowing which was worse—that he was pimping, or that he was pimping his own wife, and in front of his baby son—she feared, rightly, that she had no real option. As if in a sleepwalk, she followed the john to his car, performed oral sex, and stumbled back in a daze. Pleased, Calvin, clearly unconcerned with any moral issues, nor the depth of his cruelty, reached into his pocket and put five dollars in her palm.

That surreal ritual would play out many more times. Lula, turning herself numb to the humiliation and pain, seemed to justify it by invoking some twisted construction of love, and the responsibility of feeding her children, given that Calvin's handouts were the only money he put into his family. At times she endured beatings, from Calvin, from johns, one of whom nearly broke her jaw with his fist when she gave him some back talk. Eventually, she began to carry a switchblade, just in case. When she found cause to use it, though, it wouldn't be a john but her own husband who would feel the blade.

But first transpired several more years of this sham of a marriage, with both of them living as if nothing were remiss about the pimp-whore sidelight. They even grew the family; late in 1949 Lula conceived once more. However, unlike the first two times, this was an uneasy pregnancy. Her body's immune system might have been weakened from the cold, the beatings, the strain of staying with a man she at times loathed, or by the backroom couplings with other men sanctioned by Calvin. As well, the Saginaw winter was especially brutal that year, and cases of influenza and tuberculosis surged, putting all pregnant women and their unborn at risk.

Lula knew there was something to be concerned about. There was constant pain in her distended belly; some days she could do no more than lie in bed, drawing the wrath of Calvin, who still wanted her out prowling the streets. She felt sick all the time. Then, two months before her due date, contractions began. With not much empathy from Calvin, she got herself on the bus and went to the hospital, where she was placed on a gurney and rolled into the delivery room. Doctors were reluctant to dilate her, trying to give the baby as much time in the womb as they could. For hours she was on her back, given drugs to ease the racking pain. Finally, on the morning of May 13 they began to extract the child.

It was a boy, meager, weedy, just under four pounds, but he was generally healthy, and he was alive, wailing loudly when they slapped his bottom. Lula was barely able to get a look at him as he was whisked away to a ward down the hall where premature babies were placed in incubators. Scotch-taped to the side of his was a sign bearing the name Lula had chosen for him: Steveland Morris. Or was it?

The inscrutable mystery of what name Stevie was born with has begat considerable confusion through the years, and Stevie and Lula would do little to clear it up—or even to get their stories to agree. In the original edition of Lula’s biography, *Blind Faith*, for example, the authors, presumably on Lula’s word, insisted that the birth name was “Stevland Judkins.” In fact, Stevie himself used this nomenclature when he “signed” the liner notes of his epic masterwork *Songs in the Key of Life*. However, in the paperback edition of *Blind Faith* it was changed to the more grammatically plausible “Steveland Judkins.” Despite the “settled law” of the odd spelling, seemingly confirmed by Lula at least in one printing of the book about her, the apparently incorrect “Stevland” became prevalent in numerous reference materials, and can still be found in a large number of chronicles. Further, the surname can alternately be found as Judkins, Hardaway, as well as Morris, which if Stevie can be believed—not always a safe bet—is the one that was pinned to his incubator. He said in a 1973 *Rolling Stone* interview, “Well, Judkins is my father’s name. But it’s crazy to explain it. Morris was on my birth certificate and everything, but Judkins was the father. I took his name when I was in school.”

Given Lula’s tempestuous relationship with Calvin Judkins, and the always impending possibility that she would walk out on him, one

can believe Stevie's take that Lula would have preferred not to saddle the boy with a name she herself used like a curse, through gritted teeth. Yet the cognomen "Morris" has never been properly explained, by either mother or son. In *Blind Faith* it makes a quick entrance and departure, when he signed his Motown contract as "Stevie Morris." "His surname was also legally changed to Morris," the book suggests, "an old family name, as a presumptive strike against any attempt by Judkins to cut in on their sudden good fortune." As for himself, Stevie has never gotten around to doing what Lula neglected to do: say exactly who Morris was. And she went to her grave in 2006 without having explained why Morris was the name on the birth certificate.

The only real question that mattered on that day in May 1950 was whether the infant named Steveland would survive. For days he remained locked in his incubator, clinging to life, a tiny oxygen mask over his face. After she recovered from the harrowing delivery, Lula was taken in a wheelchair to the window of the premature birth ward, where she kept a silent vigil for days, her nose pressed against the Plexiglas watching her son fighting to see the next day.

Sunday was Mother's Day, and Calvin, suddenly fancying himself a family man, brought the two other sons to the hospital to gaze with her at the new addition to the family, coalescing in a tight circle and praying up a storm for him. When Lula was strong enough to go home two days later, he was still incubating, oxygen still being pumped into his lungs. It would be why he lived. And why his eyes died.

Though the Saginaw doctors didn't know it right away, Steveland Morris lost his vision mere hours after coming into the world because of a disease few if any doctors there—or any doctors anywhere—knew existed. It was called retrolental fibroplasia, a term later to be displaced in the medical journals in favor of the equally tongue-twisting retinopathy of prematurity, or ROP. When Stevie Wonder was born, it had been only nine years since the first known diagnosis, yet from 1941 to 1953 a quiet epidemic of ROP spread around the world, seen almost exclusively in affluent countries with advanced health care. The cause and effect, confirmed only in later years, was the well-intentioned and otherwise beneficial flow of supplemental oxygen in those incubation tanks. When breathed in by a premature baby of under thirty-two

weeks and weighing fifteen hundred grams or less, the oxygen can produce an irregular growth of blood vessels in the eye. This in turn may cause scarring of delicate retinal tissue, and possibly cataract growth and retinal detachment.

Most often, this blip will resolve itself quickly, and most cases don't reach the stage where blindness results. But if it reaches the tipping point, it's too late—or was back then. While today “preemies” are monitored closely for signs of ROP, and are often cured with the use of laser treatment, during the epidemic twelve thousand babies suffered its worst-case consequence. One of them was Steveland Judkins.

Over the years, when he has deliberated on the subject of his blindness, it has been brief, matter-of-fact, and shorn of any great emotion. Usually he has abridged the biology by saying, “I have a dislocated nerve on one eye and a cataract on the other,” which “may have happened from being in the incubator too long and receiving too much oxygen,” with the quick and possibly apocryphal addendum, intended as a parable, that there had been a baby girl born the same day who was put in the incubator alongside him. In this telling, the girl had died, rendering him from that day forward “the lucky one.”

That exegesis, the arching lineament of his life, was cast in the ultimate irony: that he would not have lived if not for the oxygen that was the death of his eyes; that the fullness, the completeness, and later the genius of Stevie Wonder arose from what was behind those eyes, in a rearranged nexus of senses and impulses and imagination. But it would take time, and surrender to the defeat of May 13, 1950, before anyone would have the nerve to say Steveland Judkins was born lucky that day.

For Lula Mae Judkins, when the doctors told her he was blind, undeniably and irrevocably, it cut as deeply as a stiletto. That news came after Steveland had been confined to his incubator for a biblical forty days and forty nights. By then they had clearly noticed that the boy, who was healthy in every other way, was not responding to visual stimuli. They had tried everything, but whether they dangled objects in front of his face, made loud noises at varying angles, or shone a penlight into his eyes, he never trained his eyes in any manner, never blinked when he should have.

Lula, who was inconsolable when they delivered their verdict, could not understand how such a thing could have happened. At first

she cried, then begged them to do something, anything. They were doctors, she screamed at them—baby doctors! They were supposed to deal with freak occurrences like this. Then she cursed herself for not being strong enough during the prior months, for allowing him to be born too soon. In her grief and pity for her newborn, there was not a reason under the sun why she should have believed the contrary: that history would one day prove that an American original was born right on time.

They took him home on the fifty-fourth day, to a home life not merely dysfunctional but on the edge of pestilent. Calvin Judkins, fleeing as usual, quickly returned to his boulder ways, letting Lula figure out how to raise a blind boy when she didn't even have enough money to feed and clothe their other two sons. One thing she realized was that to have any money at all she would need to go on walking the street; neither did Calvin have any objection to sharing his wife with any man willing to cough up twenty bucks, not while he had no intention of trying his hand at another job. To him, a third mouth to feed simply meant Lula would have to stay on her back longer.

But he underestimated the fight in her, which may have been dormant but was not buried. One day in 1953, Calvin ordered her out into the bitter night to buy him cigarettes. This demand, oddly enough, struck her as more demeaning than to go out and service other men, and for once she stiffened, telling him to get them himself. Calvin never did tolerate words like that, certainly not from a woman he thought weak, and he slapped her so hard across the face that she buckled to the floor, just feet from where Stevie lay peacefully sleeping. He then picked her up and bodily flung her across the room, where she crashed into a table, her nose spewing blood. The noise woke all the boys, who began squealing a kind of three-part harmony from different corners of the apartment.

Bleeding, her head pounding, the degradation of her life never more obvious, she drew the nerve to stammer that she was going to take the boys and leave his sorry ass. Calvin only smirked, then slapped her yet again. What he didn't anticipate was that Lula, possibly having had premonitions about just such a blowup, had begun to keep her knife under the waistband of her skirt even at home. As he was about

to backhand her a third time, she reached in, grabbed the blade, and aimed it at his throat. He saw the gleaming metal at the last fraction of a second, reflexively raising his arm enough for the knife to slice deeply into the flesh of his forearm, nearly to the bone. Now his own blood began gushing, and seeing it the bully suddenly turned poltroon. Whinnying like a wounded muskrat and believing, rightly, that she was going to finish the job, he turned on his heels and stumbled out the door, a trail of red on the floor and the street.

Even more remarkable than this exhibition of bloody execration was that Calvin actually filed charges against *her*. When word got back to Lula of this, she bundled up the boys and hid out at friends' and relatives' houses for several days. Keeping her on the run, as well, were some bad checks she had passed around town, and the recipients were sure to come looking for her. All things considered, she decided it would be best to leave Saginaw while she could.

It would get stranger still—as it always seemed to. After a week or so, a sniveling Judkins weakened, dropped the charges, and came crawling back. When he found her, he took all the blame for what happened and begged her not to leave. No more able to resist his charms, whatever they were, she too weakened and agreed to take him back. However, the decision wasn't as simple as it seems. Her price was that Calvin would leave town with her and the boys. The dividend was that he knew people in the big city—Detroit—who could find them a place to live there. Lula figured she'd given Saginaw far too much of her life; a change was needed. It would do them all good and keep her out of more trouble.

Their loveless marriage now became one of sheer convenience. Using her continued attention as leverage, she laid down another condition—no more whoring. Promising that those days were over, he dutifully made calls to the Motor City, lining up an apartment for them in the teeming Brewster-Douglass projects on the east side. The complex was right by the bubbling but decaying downtown twin red-light districts called respectively, with bemused irony and perverse pride, Paradise Valley and Black Bottom, both of which were taken to be black Detroit's answer to the pulsating rhythms of Harlem.

To Lula, it all sounded exciting, rather like the excursions she used to make to the similar underbelly of Chicago. In places like these, life was a great swirl, a blur of motion and music. The streets were home

to pimps, hookers, numbers runners, and hustlers of every stripe, and they all ran shoulder to shoulder with well-heeled patrons and hepcat musicians funneling their way into the dozens of jazz and blues clubs that mottled the wide concrete expanse of Hastings Street cutting right down the middle of the Valley and the grid of byways like John R, Beacon, St. Antoine, East Canfield, Russell, Beaubien, Gratiot, and dozens more. Lining this edgy pavement, the neon-burning marquees of clubs, ballrooms, and theaters—many sharing the block with a Baptist church that the preachers hoped would catch stray sinners repenting for the night before—were like seductive arrows pointing the way inside. It didn't really matter which club it was; the names changed constantly, among the most enduring being the Flame Show, the Twenty Grand, the Frolic, the Chesterfield, the Cotton Club, Silver Grill, Jake's Bar, Little Sam's, the Cozy Corner, Club 666, the Garfield Lounge, Broad's Club Zombie, Lee's Sensation, Bizerti Bar, and the only one to endure to this day, the Roostertail. If the booze and the music didn't run out, the joint would be jumpin'.

On this turf, one was apt to run into a Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong once in a while among the local crowd of jazz-blues singers and musicians, who in the 1940s and early 1950s included Delta expatriates Sonny Boy Williamson, Eddie Burns, Washboard Willie, and, most famously, John Lee Hooker, one of the greatest of the electric guitar-playing bluesmen. Music was always in the air, in the mind, on the tongue, and increasingly on the street corner where the kids were crooning an updated blues idiom soon to be codified as doo-wop.

The Judkins family, for all its clefts, all loved music, especially it seemed little "Stevie," who almost from the day they brought him home was banging spoons on pots and pans and singing with his brothers. This was perhaps Calvin's only redeeming quality: frustrated musician that he was, when he did stick around home long enough to interact with his children he would teach them songs and conduct their pot-and-pan symphonies. Before Stevie could walk, Calvin had bought him a cheap set of bongos, which he would play all day in his crib and sleep with at night. Clearly, teddy bears and other common playthings weren't to his liking; things that made noises could be roughly defined as music, on the other hand.

Stevie Wonder years later told *Billboard*, "I got the thirst for wanting to know. 'What is that? What is it made of? I know how it

sounds, but how does it look? Can I touch it? What's a radio? Where are the people? Why do they come out of the radio?"

Not incidentally, Lula, invested with the blues back in Hurtsboro, always had the radio on, tuned to the stations from which came the nectar of her heritage, and her son's future. Music that was beginning to congeal into what was ever more being defined by the term "soul." As it happened, to history's great debt, this rhythmic crossroads coincided with the one faced by Lula Mae. It is not fair or accurate to posit that her course was determined or influenced by anything remotely concerning music. And yet it seems nonetheless something like providence that the more she thought about where she wanted to take her sons, the more the move to Detroit felt right.