

Tar Tar.

WASHING WINDOWS proved cathartic for Codell, the opportunity of a new day filling him with energetic desire. He was at the corner market when it opened and left it ten minutes later with liquid Future floor wax and a bag of apples. Behind his tenement, Victor the homeless, looking for breakfast, peeked into the dumpster.

“Victor,” Codell said, handing him an apple. “You need a balanced diet.”

“Thanks, man. An apple a day. Nature’s toothbrush. I owe you.” Victor eyed the floor wax.

“My floor looks like crap,” Codell said.

“When did you start to care,” Victor harrumphed. “Stuff like that don’ change nuthin.”

“It’s going to heal my sick old floor.”

A rat sniffed its way around the corner of the building and stopped. “One of my buddies,” Victor said.

“Ever hear of the bone of invisibility?” Codell asked.

“The what?”

“The bone of invisibility. My uncle used to say, rats have a bone of invisibility that protects them, keeps them from being seen. If you have it, you can be invisible. I tried to find it when I was a kid. I boiled a dead rat.”

“Did it work?”

“Worked to get my hide tanned.”

“That’s the problem,” Victor said. “People tell us everythin’ in the world and we believe it. Fact is, if you think you know what’s goin’ on, you probably full of shit.

“Talk abou’ a tan,” Victor went on, “look.” He took off his black beanie cap and inclined his head toward Codell. On the crown of his head, rising through his thinning hair, was a walnut-size, blue-black disfigurement where his scalp curdled up and bled.

“What the hell!” Codell said. “That’s nasty.”

“I don’ know,” Victor said sheepishly. “I though’ it was sunburn.” Codell described it to him. Victor’s face contorted.

“I’m fucked,” Victor diagnosed. “It’s cancer.”

“Cancer? You didn’t hit your head on something?”

“No, it’s cancer. Skin cancer. I know it.” Victor hung his head and gaped at his feet.

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In his fourth-floor efficiency apartment, Codell pushed his furniture into the alcove of his apartment that served as a bedroom. His floor was dull, brown linoleum. Fresh morning light illuminated its every blemish. He swept the floor, opened the Future, got down on his hands and knees, and sponged the wax into the linoleum. The dingy surface hungrily absorbed the wax and transformed the floor from faded brown to a lustrous dark chocolate.

Codell munched an apple while the wax dried. His desk and chairs, nicked and worn, begged to be polished. What could he use on them? Daylight diffused over his

apartment walls, uneven beige plaster, cracked and smudged like a filthy floor-to-ceiling canvas. A breeze blew in from his broken window. That damned super still hadn't replaced it; he would have to get on him. After he helped Victor somehow. He had to stop the bleeding and treat the cancer, if that's what it was.

Where was that stuff his mother had given him? You could use it for anything, she said. He scrounged in the junk drawer of his dresser. At the bottom was a red tube. Blem! That's what it was. He fished it out along with a small jar of black shoe polish. Wouldn't the Blem work better with the polish to thicken it?

He got a paper bowl and a spoon, scooped a clump of shoe polish into the bowl, and oozed in a matching glob of Blem. He tried to stir them together, but they were too dense for stirring. He squirted in a shot of Future, and mixed. The lemon scent was refreshing. A little more Future, a little more mixing . . . the concoction morphed into a dark balm. But it was missing something to make it stickier. From the dresser drawer he fetched his Shoe Goo, squeezed it liberally into the bowl, and blended it all into a stiff paste. That would stick to Victor's head and pull the cancer out, stop the unstoppable right in its black tracks.

Codell, bowl and spoon in hand, jumped down the stairs two at a time and found Victor on the stoop of the abandoned building next door. His palms were braced flat on the top step to balance himself. The summer breeze picked up, shifting Victor's thinning tawny hair like a field of wheat ready for threshing.

“I got a treatment for your head.” Codell held out the bowl for Victor’s inspection. I made it.”

“I’m not eatin’ that shit.”

“It’s not to eat. It’s to put on the bad spot.”

“It looks like tar.”

“At least try it.”

Victor threw a blanket of apathy over his skepticism. “What’s it matter, go ahead.”

“Not me. *You* have to put it on. I don’t want to touch that thing.”

Victor daintily dipped his index finger in the salve and gingerly touched the top of his head. His hair stuck to his finger. He yanked his finger away, and the hair came with it.

“Damn!”

“You missed the spot,” Codell said.

Victor wiped his finger on the thin fabric of his shirt. His finger stuck and when he pulled it back, his shirt ripped.

“Put more on,” Codell directed. Victor thrust two fingers into the paste. Codell guided his hand over the bleeding blotch, where his fingers hesitated, stopped, and hovered. “Go on,” said Codell. “What are you waiting for?” He pressed Victor’s fingers with two of his own, which promptly and blackly stuck to Victor’s. Codell jerked his hand up, taking Victor’s fingers, and more, with it.

"You're ripping my hair out!"

"Hurry up, it's hardening! You need to get this on. Use more."

"Use more? How about THIS." Victor spooned all four of his fingers, dove them like a miniature back hoe to the bottom of the bowl, raised and pivoted his hand over his head, and smashed the glop on the crown of his head with enough force to squash a cockroach. When he lifted his hand, the black goop remained on his fingers along with another sheaf of hair. He winced.

"Hold it right there," Codell said. He took the spoon and scraped the adhering pâté into a pile on Victor's pate. "There." Codell tried to put the spoon into the paper bowl, but it stuck to his hand. Folding the bowl like a piece of New York pizza with his free hand and using it like a pot holder, he pulled the spoon loose and tossed the bowl, with spoon, over the side of the porch. With no place to wipe his hands, he held his hands out in the warm wind, fingers extended and flayed like he was drying his fingernails. Victor wiped his hands on his shirt; again his fingers stuck and the shirt ripped. The top of his head wore what looked like a dollop of black mashed potatoes.

"Leave it on overnight," said Codell. "Put a paper towel or something over it first. Tomorrow morning, peel it off. The whole cancer will come off with it. Your head's gonna be smooth as a baby's bottom."

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"You have to believe that you believe," Codell said. "You're going to be cured. That recipe is gonna make me rich."

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The floor wax in Codell's apartment had dried. It had refurbished beautifully, exquisitely, slick and satiny, just like he had hoped. There was always hope, and where one person has hope, someone else has opportunity.

That night, clouds boiled up into a thunderstorm and dropped fat pearls of water onto the paper bowl. A rat, invisible, twitched at the hardened residue. That's all the farther this tale goes. You better run along, now.

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Inspired in part by Joel Chandler Harris, "Tar-Baby."