BLIND PEOPLE got a hummin jones if you notice. Which is understandable completely once you been around one and notice what no eyes will force you into to see people, and you get past the first time, which seems to come out of nowhere, and it's like you in church again with fat-chest ladies and old gents gruntin a hum low in the throat to whatever the preacher be saying. Shakey Bee bottom lip all swole up with Sweet Peach and me explainin how come the sweet-potato bread was a dollar-quarter this time stead of dollar regular and he say uh hunh he understand, then he break into this thizzin kind of hum which is quiet, but fierce some just the same, if you ain't ready for it. Which I wasn't. But I got used to it and the onliest time I had to say somethin bout it was when he was playin checkers on the stoop one time and he commenst to hummin quite churchy seem to me. So I says, "Look here Shakey Bee, I can't beat you and Jesus too." He stop.

So that's how come I asked My Man Bovanne to dance. He ain't my man mind you, just a nice ole gent from the block that we all know cause he fixes things and the kids like him. Or used to fore Black Power got hold their minds and mess em around till they can't be civil to ole folks. So we at this
benefit for my niece’s cousin who’s runnin’ for somethin’ with this Black party somethin’ or other behind her. And I press up close to dance with Bovanne who blind and I’m hummin’ and he hummin’, chest to chest like talkin’. Not jammin’ my breasts into the man. Wasn’t bout tits. Was bout vibrations. And he dug it and asked me what color dress I had on and how my hair was fixed and how I was doin’ without a man, not nosy but nice-like, and who was at this affair and was the canapé’s dainty-stingy or healthy enough to get hold of proper. Comfy and cheery is what I’m tryin’ to get across. Touch talkin’ like the heel of the hand on the tambourine or on a drum.

But right away Joe Lee come up on us and frown for dancin’ so close to the man. My own son who knows what kind of warm I am about; and don’t grown men call me long distance and in the middle of the night for a little Mama comfort? But he frown. Which ain’t right since Bovanne can’t see and defend himself. Just a nice old man who fixes toasters and busted irons and bicycles and things and changes the lock on my door when my men friends get messy. Nice man. Which is not why they invited him. Grass roots you see. Me and Sister Taylor and the woman who does heads at Mamies and the man from the barber shop, we all there on account of we grass roots. And I ain’t never been souther than Brooklyn Battery and no more country than the window box on my fire escape. And just yesterday my kids tellin’ me to take them countryfied rags off my head and be cool. And now can’t get Black enough to suit ‘em. So everybody passin’ sayin’ My Man Bovanne. Big deal, keep steppin’ and don’t even stop a minute to get the man a drink or one of them cute sandwiches or tell him what’s goin’ on. And him standin’ there with a smile ready case someone do speak he want to be ready. So that’s how come I pull him on the dance floor and we dance squeezy past the tables and chairs and all them coats and people standin’ round up in each other face talkin’ bout this and that but got no use for this blind man who mostly fixed skates and scooters for all these folks when they was just kids. So I’m pressed up close and we touch talkin’ with the hum. And here come my daughter cuttin’ her eye at me like she do when she tell me about my “apolitical” self like I got hoof and mouf disease and there ain’t no hope at all. And I don’t pay her no mind and just look up in Bovanne shadow face and tell him his stomach like a drum and he laugh. Laugh real loud. And here come my youngest, Task, with a tap on my elbow like he the third grade monitor and I’m cuttin’ up on the line to assembly.

“I was just talkin’ on the drums,” I explained when they hauled me into the kitchen. I figured drums was my best defense. They can get ready for drums what with all this heritage business. And Bovanne stomach just like that drum Task give me when he come back from Africa. You just touch it and it hum thizzm, thizzm. So I stuck to the drum story. “Just drummin’ that’s all.”

“Mama, what are you talkin’ about?”

“She had too much to drink,” say Elo to Task cause she don’t hardly say nuthin’ to me direct no more since that ugly argument about my wigs.

“Look here Mama,” say Task, the gentle one. “We just tryin’ to pull your coat. You were makin’ a spectacle of yourself out there dancing like that.”

“Dancin’ like what?”

Task run a hand over his left ear like his father for the world and his father before that.

“Like a bitch in heat,” say Elo.

“Well uhh, I was goin’ to say like one of them sex-starved ladies gettin’ on in years and not too discriminating. Know what I mean?”

I don’t answer cause I’ll cry. Terrible thing when your own children talk to you like that. Pullin’ me out the party and hustlin’ me into some stranger’s kitchen in the back of a
bar just like the damn police. And ain’t like I’m old old. I can still wear me some sleeveless dresses without the meat hangin off my arm. And I keep up with some thangs through my kids. Who ain’t kids no more. To hear them tell it. So I don’t say nuthin.

"Dancin with that tom," say Elo to Joe Lee, who leanin on the folks’ freezer. "His feet can smell a cracker a mile away and go into their shuffle number post haste. And them eyes. He could be a little considerate and put on some shades. Who wants to look into them blown-out fuses that—"

"Is this what they call the generation gap?" I say.

"Generation gap," spits Elo, like I suggested castor oil and fricassee possum in the milk-shakes or somethin. "That’s a white concept for a white phenomenon. There’s no generation gap among Black people. We are a col—"

"Yeh, well never mind," says Joe Lee. "The point is Mama . . . well, it’s pride. You embarrass yourself and us too dancin like that."

"I wasn’t shame." Then nobody say nuthin. Them standin there in they pretty clothes with drinks in they hands and gangin up on me, and me in the third-degree chair and nary a olive to my name. Felt just like the police got hold to me.

"First of all," Task say, holdin up his hand and tickin off the offenses, "the dress. Now that dress is too short, Mama, and too low-cut for a woman your age. And Tamu’s going to make a speech tonight to kick off the campaign and will be introducin you and expecting you to organize the council of elders—"

"Me? Did’nt nobody ask me nuthin. You mean Nisi? She change her name?"

"Well, Norton was supposed to tell you about it. Nisi wants to introduce you and then encourage the older folks to form a Council of the Elders to act as an advisory—"

"And you going to be standing there with your boobs out and that wig on your head and that hem up to your ass. And people’ll say, 'Ain’t that the horny bitch that was grindin with the blind dude?’"

"Elo, be cool a minute," say Task, gettin to the next finger. "And then there’s the drinkin. Mama, you know you can’t drink cause next thing you know you be laughin loud and carryin on," and he grab another finger for the loudness.

"And then there’s the dancin. You been tattooed on the man for four records straight and slow draggin even on the fast numbers. How you think that look for a woman your age?"

"What’s my age?"

"What?"

"I’m axin you all a simple question. You keep talkin bout what’s proper for a woman my age. How old am I anyhow?"

And Joe Lee slams his eyes shut and squinches up his face to figure. And Task run a hand over his ear and stare into his glass like the ice cubes goin calculate for him. And Elo just starin at the top of my head like she goin rip the wig off any minute now.

"Is your hair braided up under that thing? If so, why don’t you take it off? You always did do a neat cornroll."

"Uh huh," cause I’m thinkin how she couldn’t undo her hair fast enough talking bout cornroll so countrified. None of which was the subject. "How old, I say?"

"Sixtee-one or—"

"You a damn lie Joe Lee Peoples."

"And that’s another thing," say Task on the fingers.

"You know what you all can kiss," I say, gettin up and brushin the wrinkles out my lap.

"Oh, Mama," Elo say, puttin a hand on my shoulder like she hasn’t done since she left home and the hand landin light and not sure it supposed to be there. Which hurt me to my heart. Cause this was the child in our happiness fore Mr. Peoples die. And I carried that child strapped to my chest till she was nearly two. We was close is what I’m tryin to tell you. Cause it was more me in the child than the others. And even
after Task it was the girlchild I covered in the night and wept over for no reason at all less it was she was a chub-chub like me and not very pretty, but a warm child. And how did things get to this, that she can't put a sure hand on me and say Mama we love you and care about you and you entitled to enjoy yourself cause you a good woman?

"And then there's Reverend Trent," say Task, glancin from left to right like they hatchin a plot and just now lettin me in on it. "You were suppose to be talking with him tonight, Mama, about giving us his basement for campaign headquarters and—"

"Didn't nobody tell me nuthin. If grass roots mean you kept in the dark I can't use it. I really can't. And Reven Trent a fool anyway the way he tore into the widow man up there on Edgecomb cause he wouldn't take in three of them foster children and the woman not even comfy in the ground yet and the man's mind messed up and—"

"Look here," say Task. "What we need is a family conference so we can get all this stuff cleared up and laid out on the table. In the meantime I think we better get back into the other room and tend to business. And in the meantime, Mama, see if you can't get to Reverend Trent and—"

"You want me to belly rub with the Reven, that it?"

"Oh damn," Elo say and go through the swingin door.

"We'll talk about all this at dinner. How's tomorrow night, Joe Lee?" While Joe Lee being self-important I'm wonderin who's doin the cookin and how come no body ax me if I'm free and do I get a corsage and things like that. Then Joe nod that it's O.K. and he go through the swingin door and just a little hubbub come from through the other room. Then Task smile his smile, lookin just like his daddy and he leave. And it just me in this stranger's kitchen, which was a mess I wouldn't never let my kitchen look like. Poison you just to look at the pots. Then the door swing the other way and it's My Man Bovanne standin there sayin Miss Hazel but lookin at the deep fry and then at the steam table, and most surprised when I come up on him from the other direction and take him on out of there. Pass the folks pushin up towards the stage where Nisi and some other people settin and ready to talk, and folks gettin to the last of the sandwiches and the booze fore they settle down in one spot and listen serious. And I'm thinkin bout tellin Bovanne what a lovely long dress Nisi got on and the earrings and her hair piled up in a cone and the people bout to hear how we all gettin screwed and gotta form our own party and everybody there listenin and lookin. But instead I just haul the man on out of there, and Joe Lee and his wife look at me like I'm terrible, but they ain't said boo to the man yet. Cause he blind and old and don't nobody there need him since they grown up and don't need they skates fixed no more.

"Where we goin, Miss Hazel?" Him knowin all the time.

"First we gonna buy you some dark sunglasses. Then you comin with me to the supermarket so I can pick up tomorrow's dinner, which is goin to be a grand thing proper and you invited. Then we goin to my house."

"That be fine. I surely would like to rest my feet." Bein cute, but you got to let men play out they little show, blind or not. So he chat on bout how tired he is and how he appreciate me takin him in hand this way. And I'm thinkin I'll have him change the lock on my door first thing. Then I'll give the man a nice warm bath with jasmine leaves in the water and a little Epsom salt on the sponge to do his back. And then a good rubdown with rose water and olive oil. Then a cup of lemon tea with a taste in it. And a little talcum, some of that fancy stuff Nisi mother sent over last Christmas. And then a massage, a good face massage round the forehead which is the worryin part. Cause you got to take care of the older folks. And let them know they still needed to run the mimeo machine and keep the spark plugs clean and fix the mailboxes for folks who might help us get the breakfast program goin,
and the school for the little kids and the campaign and all. Cause old folks is the nation. That what Nisi was sayin and I mean to do my part.

"I imagine you are a very pretty woman, Miss Hazel."

"I surely am," I say just like the hussy my daughter always say I was.