Emerald City
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This is Oya's corner. The pin-striped young executives and sleek-pumped clerk-typists, the lacquered-hair punk boys and bleached blondes with safety pins dangling from multi-holed earlobes, the frantic-eyed woman on the corner shouting obscenities, and the old-timers rambling past new high-rise fantasy hotels — all belong to Oya even though she's the only one who knows it.

Oya sits on this corner 365 days of the year, in front of the new McDonald's, with everything she needs bundled inside two plastic bags by her side. Most people pretend they don't even see Oya sitting there like a Buddha under that old green Salvation Army blanket.

Sometimes Oya's eyes look red and wild, but she won't say anything to anybody. Other times her eyes are flat, black and still as midnight outside the mission, and she talks up a furious wind.

She tells them about her family — her uncle who was a cowboy, her grandfather who fought in the Civil War, her mother who sang dirges and blues songs on the Chitlin Circuit, and her daddy who wouldn't "take no stuff from nobody," which is why they say some people got together and broke his back.
“Oh yeah, Oya be tellin' them folks an earful if they'd ever stop to listen, but she don't pay em no mind. Just keeps right on talkin', keeps right on tellin' it.”

One day when Oya's eyes were flat and black and she was in a preaching mood, I walked down Third & Pike, passed her as if I didn't know her. Actually I didn't. But Oya turned her eyes on me and I could feel her looking at me and I knew I couldn't just walk past this woman without saying something. So I said, “Hello.”

Oya looked at me with those flat black eyes and motioned for me to take a seat by her.

Now, usually I'm afraid of folks who sit on the sidewalks downtown and look as if they've never held a job or have no place to go, but something about her eyes made me sit.

I felt foolish. I felt my face growing warm and wondered what people walking by must think of me sitting on the street next to this woman who looked as if she had nowhere to go. But after sitting there for a few minutes, it seemed as if they didn't think more or less of me than when I was walking down the street. No one paid any attention to us. That bothered me. What if I really needed help or something? What if I couldn't talk, could only sit on that street?

“Don't pay them fools no mind, daughter. They wouldn't know Moses if he walked down Pike Street and split the Nordstrom Building right down the middle. You from round here?”

I nodded my head.

“I thought so. You look like one of them folks what's been up here all they lives, kinda soft-lookin' like you ain't never known no hard work.”

I immediately took offense because I could feel the inevitable speech coming on: “There ain't no real black people in Seattle.”

“Calm down, daughter, I don't mean to hurt your feelings. It's just a fact, that's all. You folks up here too cushy, too soft. Can't help it. It's the rainwater does it to you, all that water can't help but make a body soggy and spineless.”

I made a move to get up.

“Now wait a minute, just wait a minute. Let me show you somethin.”

She reached in her pocket and pulled out a crumpled newspaper clipping. It held a picture of a grim-faced young woman and a caption that read:

“DOMESTIC TO SERVE TIME IN PRISON FOR NEAR-MURDER.”

“That's me in that picture. Now ain't that somethin’?”

Sure is, I thought and wondered how in the world I would get away from this woman before she hurt me.

“They fools put me in the jail for protectin my dreams. Humph, they the only dreams I got, so naturally I'm gonna protect em. Nobody else gonna do it for me, is they?”

“But how could somebody put you in jail for protectin your dreams? That paper said you almost killed somebody.”

I didn't want to seem combative but I didn't know exactly what this lady was talking about and I was feeling pretty uneasy after she'd almost insulted me then showed me evidence she'd been in jail for near-murder, no less.

“Now, I know you folks up here don't know much bout the importance of a body's dreams, but where I come from dreams was all we had. Seemed like a body got holt of a dream or a dream got holt of a body and wouldn't turn you loose. My dreams what got me through so many days of nothin', specially when it seemed like the only thing the future had to give was more of the same nothin', day after day.”

She stopped abruptly and stared into space. I kept wondering what kind of dream would have forced her to try to kill somebody.

“Ain't nothin' wrong with cleanin' other folks' homes to make a livin'. Nothin' wrong with it at all. My mama had to do it and her mama had to do it at one time or another, so it didn't bother me none when it turned out I was gonna hafta do it too, least for a while. But my dream told me
I wasn't gonna wash and scrub and shine behind other folks the rest of my life. Jobs like that was just temporary, you know what I mean? I nodded my head.

"Look at my hands. You never woulda known I danced in one of them fancy colored nightclubs and wore silk evenin' gloves. Was in a sorority. Went to Xavier University."

As she reminisced, I looked at her hands. They looked rough and wide, like hands that had seen hard labor. I wondered if prison had caused them to look that way.

Oya's eyes pierced into mine. She seemed to know what I was thinking. She cackled.

"Daughter, they'd hafta put more than a prison on me to break my spirit. Don't you know it takes more than bars and beefy guards to break a fightin' woman's spirit?"

She cackled some more.

"Uh Uh. Wouldn't never break me, and they damn sure tried. I spent fifteen years in that hellhole. Fifteen years of my precious life, all for a dreamkiller."

I looked at her and asked, "But what did you do? What did they try to do to your dreams?"

Oya leaned over to me and whispered, "I was gonna get into the space program. I was gonna be a astronaut and fly out into the universe, past all them stars. I was gonna meet up with some folks none of us never seen before, and be ambassador of goodwill; not like the fools bein' sent out there now thinkin' they own the universe. I was gonna be a real ambassador of goodwill and then that woman I scrubbed floors for had the nerve to tell me no black maid was ever gonna be a astronaut. Well, I could feel all the broken dreams of my mama and my grandmama and her mama swell up and start pulsin' in my blood memory. I hauled off and beat that fool over the head with the mop I had in my hands till I couldn't raise up my arms no more. The chantin' of my people's broken dreams died down and I looked and there was that dreamkiller in a mess of blood all over the clean floor I'd just scrubbed. And they turned round and put me in jail and never did say nothin' bout that old dreamkiller. Just like my dreams never mattered. Like I didn't have no dreams. Like all I could ever think bout doin' was cleanin' up after nasty white folks for the rest of my life."

"Humph!" She snorted, and I almost eased to my feet so I could run if I had the cause to.

"You got any dreams, daughter?" Oya asked with a gleam in her eye.

I knew I better tell her yes, so I did.

"Well I don't care if you is from up here, you better fight for your dreams!"

Slowly, I reached out and held one of her rough hands. Then I asked, "But was your dream worth going to prison for all them years?"

Oya looked at me for a long, long time.

"I'm still gonna make it past all them stars," she said as she freed her hand and motioned for me to get to getting.

"Right now, this street b'longs to me and don't nobody mess with me or my dreams!" She was still shouting as I walked toward Pine Street.
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STRATEGIC READING/LISTENING
- Read aloud / in silence
- Read alone
- Read with a friend / in a group
- Look up words
- Guess their meaning
- Listen only
- Listen first, read afterwards
- Listen while you read
- Get all the details
- Get the big picture

What happened?
Find the answers in the story.
1 What happened to Oya's father?
2 Is the narrator (the person telling the story) male or female? How do you know?
3 What are the reactions of people passing when the narrator sits down next to Oya?
4 After sitting down, why does the narrator make a move to get up and go?
5 How does the narrator find out about Oya's past?
6 What was Oya's dream?
7 How did Oya end up in prison?

Reading between the lines
Analyse the story and make interpretations. Be prepared to motivate your answers.
1 What does the narrator feel when saying, "I knew I couldn't just walk past this woman without saying something"?
2 Oya says, "They wouldn't know Moses if he walked down Pike Street and split the Nordstrom Building right down the middle." What does she mean?
3 Why does Oya say, "You look like one of them folks what's been up here all they lives, kinda soft-lookin' like you ain't never knewed no hard work"?

What do they mean?
Explain, translate or find a synonym for the highlighted words and phrases. Use these strategies to help you:
- Does the word remind you of a word in Swedish or any other language?
- Are there any clues in the text that can help you?
- What sort of word is it (e.g. noun, verb, adjective, adverb)?

WORDS
1 The pin-striped young executives [...] all belong to Oya...
2 ... the frantic-eyed woman on the corner shouting obscenities ...
3 ... I could feel the inevitable speech coming on: "There ain't no real black people in Seattle."
4 ... all that water can't help but make a body soggy and spineless.
5 She reached in her pocket and pulled out a crumpled newspaper clipping.
6 It held a picture of a grim-faced young woman and a caption that read: "DOMESTIC TO SERVE TIME ..."
7 I didn't want to seem combative but I didn't know exactly what this lady was talking about ...
8 ... I was feeling pretty uneasy after she'd almost insulted me ....
9 ... blood all over the clean floor I'd just scrubbed.
10 "You got any dreams, daughter?" Oya asked with a gleam in her eye.

PHRASES
1 Now ain't that somethin?
2 I immediately took offense because I could feel the inevitable speech coming on ...
3 I made a move to get up.
4 "DOMESTIC TO SERVE TIME IN PRISON FOR NEAR MURDER."
5 ... wondered how in the world I would get away from this woman ...
6 ... a dream got hoist of a body and wouldn't turn you loose.
7 ... they'd hafa put more than a prison on me to break my spirit.
8 ... that woman I scrubbed floors for had the nerve to tell me no black maid was ever ...
9 ... I almost eased to my feet so I could run ...