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This Man Country

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JCKABI001

A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award
of the degree of

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

This collection of short stories explores how ordinary individuals in extraordinary situations negotiate issues of race, gender, sexuality, and longing for home. Set in New York, the Caribbean, and South Africa, they reflect the history and culture of Caribbean immigrants and their children. These stories are meant to entertain and shed light on routinely unexplored areas of human experience: those of women, girls, homosexuals, immigrants, and working class people. The title, This Man Country, refers to how Caribbean people in my grandparents' generation thought of America as "this man country," a place where they would stay temporarily to connect with their children, make money, escape from their lives at home, among other reasons.

“Home is where your navel string is buried.”

-- An old-time West Indian saying

“Home is between your teeth.”

-- Maya Angelou

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Fever

Grief scrapes at my skin

She never

“Be a big girl!”

wanted to touch much

except to disinfect or bandage

-- June Jordan, “Ghaflah”

I wanted to stay forever small, to always feel Mommy’s brown hands stretching to unkink my hair. I was willing to suffer, take a hit of shampoo in my eyes, for the thrill of Mommy’s nimble fingers lathering soap on my body. I wanted Sunday night to lengthen with the sounds of Trinidadians fighting next door and Mommy singing with Jamaican rockers songs on the radio. I wanted to hear DJ Prince Calunda growl that he loved “all Caribbean massive from head down to shoe’s ground” and see my mother’s breasts shake with her laughter at his forced Bajan accent.

That Sunday, Mommy inspected me after my bath. I stood in the tub with the water draining and my Don King afro standing at attention, wanting this part to be over quick. It didn’t take her long to see the pock marks creeping up my arms, to grab my wrists and frown. My heart soared as I imagined our all-day play date, where she would play the mother and I would play her lovesick child. Mommy would sing like Julie Andrews in the *Sound of Music*; she’d read to me from the stories she’d written featuring me. I assumed a commanding voice, said that I’d have to stay home so I didn’t get the other kids sick.

Mommy grabbed me by puffs of nappy hair. Rage pushed through her throat and made itself known. “But what is this? You really talking to me like you is a big woman, telling me when I should go to work and when I must stay home?” she said.

My head hit the spigot as she pounded me with the back of her hand. I dove for cover in the few drops of water that covered the bathtub. She pulled the short hairs at the nape of my neck and demanded, “You big enough to earn your own keep yet?”

Her breath, heavy with pigeon peas and rice, seized the air. I took the easy way out, used my Cheshire cat grin to ease the coldness from her eyes. Softening, she wrapped me in a towel to shield me from the September breeze drafting through the bathroom window. “But these Americans does take this chickenpox thing too seriously. It’ll be our little secret. Just don’t go running your mouth to your friends at school, y’hear?” I nodded, buried my head in the familiar curry stain in her nightgown where I felt safe.

The next morning, my fourth-grade teacher Ms. Nodaros held up my pocked arm in a victory dance against my mother. She knocked the words through her nose, proclaiming the start of my quarantine: “Class, Cassandra Wyre will be leaving us for two weeks as she recovers from the chickenpox.” Ms. Nodaros had scores to settle. The month before, Roy Jenkins, the Vaseline-smearred Jehovah’s Witness, had provoked me. He had been taunting me with talk of Jehovah and damnation all year. I had been wanting to tell him to “Shut the fuck up!” for weeks. I couldn’t stop myself when those words finally rolled out of my mouth. Like a game-show host offering a consolation prize to a sore loser, Ms. Nodaros asked me to come on down to the front of the room for my punishment: an afternoon spent writing ‘I will not say curse words in class...’ The next day, Mommy stormed our classroom and threatened to kick Ms.

Nodaros where the sun don't shine. Ms. Nodaros quivered in her gray pumps, before rising to all five feet of herself and sputtering, "I think it's time for you to leave."

I saw Ms. Nodaros' spine straighten with spite when she asked the long-haired, green-eyed twins, Saqueeta and Najoya, to escort me to the school office. I waited there for hours, my brow burning with fever. Every half hour, the school secretary, Ms. Freidman, called my mother at work. I smiled each time my mother's answering machine at work intoned, "You have reached the voice of Ms. Yvette Cunningham. I'm sorry I'm not available to take your call but. . ." When the lunch bell rang, I was still clutching my math textbook and wondering when someone might rescue me from the school office. After feeling my burning forehead, Ms. Friedman finally called my father. I didn't want to speak to him but was relieved when she said he was on his way.

Daddy arrived just before the bell for last period rang, wearing a silk tie that squeezed itself around his thick neck. He asked Ms. Friedman if my mother was on her way before he looked at me and asked: "Cassandra, are you really sick?" He stepped into the circle of heat that surrounded me, pulled back when my fever hit him. His heavy fingertips barely grazed my forehead. He sighed, put my small book bag on his back before escorting me to his brand-new champagne-colored car. We rode in silence, my throat choked by the smell of new car leather and the strong trace of my stepmother, Nadine's, gardenia perfume.

When we got to the apartment he shared with my Nadine, Daddy settled me on the living-room couch. I noticed his subversive shrine to me peeking out from one of the end tables. There I was at five years old riding on Daddy's shoulders at the West-Indian Day parade, my shirt soaked in tears at the man playing mas as the devil. In another picture, me and Daddy grinned on the beach in Barbados as I held a piece of

shark bigger than my head at the market. I reached for a picture of Mommy, Daddy, and me at my christening and marveled at Daddy's boldness. Above my head, though, there was no confusion about whose house this was. Pictures of Auntie Nadine, as she insisted I call her, from her teaching days in Jamaica lined the walls. Nadine's eyes pierced me from the wedding picture with my father taken just six months before. I felt her gaze and grew warmer under the blankets where I was sweating out my fever.

I woke up around seven o'clock with a dry mouth. I started dragging myself to the kitchen in search of water, but stopped when I heard Daddy whispering on the phone. He reddened as he put a pot of water to boil on the stove, his stomach pushing past the white t-shirt he'd stripped down to. I watched the bite mark on his left shoulder move up and down as he rifled through a tin of Ovaltine biscuits: there was Mommy's mark on him. He talked to his new wife on the phone, his voice dropping as he admitted that he didn't know "when her mother would come for her." I imagined Nadine on the other end, working the hospital switchboard, asking Daddy in a strained voice when I'd be going home, then switching the line to tell a patient's loved one to hold for bad news.

Nadine clicked into the apartment on shit-brown pumps around nine o'clock, long after her shift as a receptionist at Kings County Hospital had ended. She looked at me swaddled in her good sheets, at my father, and then back at me. Daddy tugged at his too-small t-shirt and mumbled an apology for not being able to get in touch with my mother all night. As the silence between Daddy and Nadine settled, I felt Nadine's overly lotioned limp hands slip Vicks onto my chest and in my nose. She worked with the officiousness of a nurse, without love. A touch that stung. She laid a slick hand on my forehead, shook her head as she fetched my weekend visit pyjamas

and helped me change out of my school clothes. Later, when she thought I was asleep, Nadine whispered to my father: “Six months we married and this woman already think I must mind her children when she don’t feel like it?” I retreated under the covers, humming the rockers tunes my mother sang to me on Sunday nights. My breath caught in my throat as I remembered Mommy’s lonely voice moaning, “Night nurse, only you alone can quench this here thirst.”

Sirens shattered my sleep just before midnight. The cops banged on our door, asked in their booming TV voices if we knew the whereabouts of one Cassandra Wyre. Nadine paced the apartment with her bony arms crossed over her chest while I stuffed my feet into my penny loafers, not waiting for her to give me another cue to leave. Daddy asked in a quiet voice whether or not Mommy planned to press charges. Officer Braithwaite raised his eyebrows in a knowing way as he and Daddy shared the open secret about my mother’s madness: “Can’t be sure. She did say something about kidnapping.”

I hated the cop for putting Mommy’s business out there. But right then, I wanted to be friendly with anybody other than these play parents. I needed to push past my stepmother’s lifeless hands moving over my body’s unfamiliar terrain. I wanted to erase the sting of the icy apology my father muttered when his wife arrived home, finally, and found me still there. I latched myself to the police officer and held on, tugging at his walkie-talkie, singing him songs from my school play, asking questions about his gun. I needed him to like me.

I rode home in the cop car, sirens blaring like me and Officer Braithwaite agreed on. I wanted this to be my ride. To give my mother a taste of her own madness. We raced through traffic lights and sang jingles from the Caribbean radio

station, me and Officer Braithwaite: “Ms. Jamaica should not only be pretty/but also intelligent and witty.”

As we rolled onto President Street, I heard my friends from the building pounding the pavement with their double-dutch acrobatics. Everybody in Brooklyn was out that night, trying to escape the body-swelling Indian summer heat. They turned to see whose business would sprawl out onto the sidewalk when the car door opened. I sprang from the car with my head held high, fiddled with the house keys hanging from a chain around my neck to keep my hands busy. Before we even stepped off the elevator, I could smell black-eyed peas stewing on the stove and hear “Night Nurse” drifting from Apt. 3I. Mommy greeted me at the door, a cocktail of brandy and milk in one hand and a bottle of calamine lotion in the other. She was singing our song.

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Birds of Flight

Sweating in the four o'clock heat that most Antiguans slept in, Glenroy perched on his sewing bench, his back cooled by the mas camp's wood walls. The round thimble squeezed his thumb, hardened and overgrown after years of sewing and taxi-driving and beating heads in the prison yard where he worked as assistant warden. The discomfort of the metal squeezing his bulbous finger kept him awake when the fatigue from three jobs, five kids, and an extended family that stretched all the way from Falmouth and up English Harbour to his shanty house down Fibrey, tempted him with sleep. Somehow his family always wanted something—money for school fees, some dried fish to put in a barrel for their relatives in Dominica, a letter smuggled inside the prison to an ex-lover. On his sewing bench, Glenroy weighed requests from his family members, dreamed up punishments for his boys who couldn't seem to stay out of trouble, made plans for getting ahead. On this day, a Friday, he quieted his mind, let the motion of his fingers pressed against metal and fabric lift the weight of his responsibilities.

Glenroy's head was usually filled to bursting with bits and pieces of conversation gleaned from his taxi's clients—tourists arriving at the brand-new V.C. Bird International Airport and the soldiers who made nightly excursions from the American base on the island to the bars in town. His ears rung most days with the thought of money. He was always the first to quote some new commercialist wisdom stolen from his customers, reminding his five boys that if they wanted to get ahead they had to “gird up their loins” and know the difference between what had “redeeming value” and what didn't. And so the future Glenroy imagined – a little piece of land and a house, a shop in the back where he could tailor full-time, a fleet of

taxi run by his eldest child – made the present bearable. With new housing schemes going up where bush stood before and big talk on the radio about “economic development,” Glenroy knew that he had to find ways to use his hands to make a place for himself and his family.

Just a few months before, Glenroy and a couple of his taxi-driver friends who traded dreams while they cooled out between customers had played audience to Patrick Bailey, the ringleader of their crew. Bailey was fresh from his mistress’ house in a pink seersucker suit and fedora that betrayed no traces of the shanty town he drove his taxi from each morning. His tongue was burning with a story.

Bailey leaned in real close to the men, talking low as if one of the brothers at St. Joseph’s could come by any moment to bust up their good time. Bailey whispered: “So is three days gone since I hear this big news down at the Ministry of Culture.”

Morlan, the skeptic, kissed his teeth. “But what is this? I still smelling that woman perfume on you and all you could talk about is some hogwash government story?”

The men sneered. Bailey pressed on. “Morlan, you must learn how to stay out of grown-people business. Anyway, I hear boss saying into his telephone while I waiting to take his wife up Market Street that times changing for Antigua. No red-mouth dependence on pineapples and thing. Is a new day dawning.”

Morlan pricked him again: “But all we want to hear about is whether the dawn catch you with that new red gal you seeing or not. If I was holding on to that thick piece of flesh, you couldn’t hear me chatting bout no government story. . .”

Bailey made a slight move to confront Morlan but decided to go on with his story instead: “Is not joke I giving all you this morning. This is serious business. Boss

say carnival coming to Antigua. Say all kinda people from Trinidad done assess the potential and carnival going live this year self.”

Glenroy, dollar signs running through his head as always, wanted Bailey to cut to the chase. “And what this have to do with all we taxi-drivers? Either they make us paint our taxis so they shine or they coming with some stupid jacket and tie business ‘in the interest of uniformity.’ What you saying in truth?”

Bailey, encouraged by Glenroy whose words were infrequent but weighty, continued. “What I am saying is that we have an opportunity to put our minds together and come up with a plan to cash in. We can’t let this thing pass us by and we walk away with two long hands crying ain’t know and never see.”

Just then, Glenroy caught sight of his client for the day, Mrs. Beausejour, coming out of Shouls department store, her slender brown fingers propped dramatically to shield her fair face from the sun. He put out his cigarette with the pointed toe of his freshly polished shoe and bid them goodbye. His brain was stewing, digesting what Bailey had said.

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Bailey spun that story the first week in January. Unlike much of the rubbish that flew out of his mouth, what Bailey said about Antigua’s first carnival in 1956, was true. And so it was that Glenroy found himself simmering and sewing in the late July heat, grateful for the breeze that drifted in off of the green-gray water a stone’s throw away from his house. He found it suddenly quiet and wondered if he could really be sitting on Nevis Street just behind the haunted lodge and the beer bars. He

thought to himself that the bad boys down Fibrey must be resting up before their Friday night rabbleroxing.

The stress of the last few months of organizing his rag-tag friends and family into a legitimate mas camp for Antigua's first carnival had worn on Glenroy. He was thinner now than when they all embarked on this adventure, his knock-knees more prominent and his usually crisp dungarees frayed at the hems. His wife, Iris, blamed it on the blistering pace at which he moved between his three jobs, the mas camp, and home. But they both knew that the money shaved from his meagre earnings for the mas camp – for feathers, sequins, flimsy metal he manipulated into colourful masterpieces – had the whole family eating more than their usual share of air chips and nothing pie.

Thread and needle, thimble and pattern, calmed Glenroy as he created the carnival costumes that dwarfed the makeshift ten foot by twelve foot room – the Dreamyard – he'd attached to the house. A perfectionist, he had to pull his eyes away from the mistakes only he could catch—the eagle costume whose chest seemed slightly asymmetrical, the brassieres for the parrot section that were each missing one gold bead. He focused instead on putting the finishing touches on the last costume for his Birds of Flight troupe, a blue jay for his youngest boy, Lionel, the one who was always trailing behind him, volunteering to wash his taxi with the older boys even though his five-year-old face could barely see into the car's windows. Lionel got most of his father's attention because Glenroy was convinced he had tailor's hands. Lionel had narrow palms, fingers that calloused easily and moved nimbly in the most delicate of fabrics, a sixth sense for knowing what was wrong with a hem or inseam just by feeling its stitches. Glenroy retreated into his thoughts, remembering the day

his father first sat him atop his tailoring table and had him open his palms for inspection.

“Now see here boy, is what you make with your hands that make all the difference between those who catch hell in this world and those who make a little piece of heaven for themselves. Treat them well, teach them things, and they will give you all you dream of.”

That day, Glenroy had felt truly accepted by his father, held for a moment by his father’s love. Now, he felt a special affection for Lionel, his little assistant who would stay up well past his bedtime and against his mother’s protests, holding beads and crochet needles for Glenroy, asking endless questions. He remembered clearly the day that Lionel had pointed to the picture of a manx shearwater bird – “puffinus puffinus” according to the textbook on exotic birds he’d borrowed from the library in town – and said, “Daddy, that’s who I want you to make me.” And so Lionel walked around the house for two whole months in support of his case to lead the Birds of Flight in Antigua’s first carnival and mas camp competition. He assembled two pieces of finger-painted blue cardboard to make an improvised headdress, eyes wide open as he watched his father make the real thing.

Glenroy was gluing the last of the indigo blue feathers onto Lionel’s headdress when he heard the call from his oldest boy, Fritz.

“Daddy!” he moaned.

“Daddy, come quick!” Fritz yelled again. His choir robe and khaki school pants flapped as he ran the twenty paces from the dockyard where his brothers stood paralyzed, to the house. He burst into the mas camp, dislodged the Dreamyard sign that swung over its shaky doorframe.

“Daddy, come, come! Lionel out in the water and he can’t swim,” he panted.

Glenroy almost swallowed the thin silver needle that he held between his teeth and lips. He jumped off of the sewing bench, throwing the feathers, linen, thread bolts and sewing machine on the floor. Fritz would always remember that sight, the bright colours blending with the sun that blinded his brothers out on the pier, and that sound – the sewing machine groaning onto the floor, the boom it made as it hit the dirt and spilled its insides.

Within seconds, Glenroy was in the water. He followed Fritz's pointing forefinger to see the water just beyond the orange cones. Time sped up and slowed down at once. Glenroy's head pounded and his back muscles ached as he tried to fight the current that pushed his body towards the bottom of the sea. And then the pain hit. His lungs broke under the strain and his shoulders gave up the good fight. Blinding pain transported Glenroy to other afternoons when this same sea had lifted him. Memories of Sunday afternoon picnics with fried bakes and salt fish, sweet doucana wrapped in foil, cricket games with his boys flooded back. This is what he was dreaming of when Bailey pulled him to the rocky dockyard pier where he lay, unconscious.

When he came to, Glenroy saw his four other boys standing above him – Carlton, Pat, Vincent, and Fritz – and felt keenly Lionel's absence. He could only ask "But, where Lionel?"

No one spoke.

Bailey finally shooed the boys away, told Fritz to call their mother from where she was visiting with Ms. Bea down the road. Bailey cradled Glenroy's neck, held him down as he fought to get back in the water.

"You can't go back in there man. Current almost knock you dead when you went in there just now. Lionel gone man. He gone."

Glenroy stayed quiet, his chest flooded with sea water. He looked back at the trail of indigo blue feathers tracing his path from the house to the water's edge and realized that something had shifted.

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Glenroy walked through the next weeks in a daze, his hands moving deftly through costume fittings and the last alterations. Would-be revelers entered the Dreamyard one at a time. They left quickly after a well-meant “So sorry to hear bout your son, man” or “Shame such a beautiful boy gone so young” – words that remained suspended in the air where Glenroy left them. Glenroy worked day and night, lost himself in the world of the creatures – flamingoes, seagulls, doves – that populated his shop. His eyes would often close with his hand clutching a piece of fabric and his foot on the sewing machine pedal. And he would wake up each morning, surprised at the grief that still sat itself right atop his chest like the duppies his mother used to whisper to him about. He pushed down the pain with more work – more clients, more costumes made, developing a cold eye that looked at the mas troupe as he expected the judges would.

And so it was a surprise that two weeks after Lionel's funeral – where Glenroy didn't shed not even one tear – Glenroy started up talk about carnival. His boys, accustomed to the sullen shuffle that had overcome their father, were surprised to hear him speak. After listening attentively to his rambling, they could only make out his excitement about the parade of the mas troupes up Market Street, past police station on Newgate Street, and right onto the stage in Carnival City. Finally, Glenroy stopped. His excited tone didn't match the silence around him.

“But what is this? Why all you looking at your feet like it’s a dirge I asking you to dance to?” Glenroy exclaimed. Bits of gold and silver glitter stuck to the sweat on his forehead and forearms. The boys tried not to laugh at his body glinting in the morning sun.

Glenroy grabbed his youngest, Carlton, playfully. “But aren’t you supposed to be Antigua’s first Junior Calypsonian?”

Carlton, enjoying his father’s attention, but a little frightened by the sudden change, squeaked, “Yes! It starts on Tuesday at Grammar School and I’m planning to be right up there till the competition finishes Sunday night.”

“Well, act like it then. Turn on the radio and come out back with your brothers. I want to show all you something.”

Carlton did as he was told, filed obediently with his mother and brothers to the Dreamyard. They sighed in unison, as if a jumby had come down and stolen their breath one time.

“But Glenroy, this is too much,” Iris moaned. She was looking at the same sight that transfixed everyone: Lionel’s blue jay costume expanded well beyond its original proportions, brilliant with blue and white feathers, sequins, gold grommets, wings that spanned the entire length of the Dreamyard.

“It’s no way they can beat us with this costume. That is a show-stopper right there.”

And so it was. Antigua’s first carnival saw clerks, taxi-drivers, housewives, tailors, and carpenters transformed into a flock of flamingos, doves, and seagulls, following the direction of the head blue jay, Glenroy. Carnival City rocked with applause from its three tiers as Glenroy’s troupe flew across the stage, triumphant.

Peas and Rice

Luanda wants me to go to Spelman. I visit her at Howard and she can tell from the way I turn up my nose at her sorority sisters with their dyed and fried hair, that Georgia Avenue would eat me up. She knows that I do not want to fight a losing battle against designer clothes, pedigree, fineness. She knows that there is a black and conscious set at Spelman that I might fit into if I am lucky, that will forgive my kinky hair and extra weight as signs of my strong black womanhood. At the very least, she expects that being around all those black folks might cure me of the whiteness she thinks I am in danger of embracing.

We are children of working-class West Indian parents, a nurse and a bank manager. We have a house in the wannabe suburbs of Flatbush now. But she is better at putting on black bourgeoisie airs than me. With perfect skin several shades lighter than a brown paper bag, a waist not much wider than her neck's width, and black politics that display her intelligence without danger of giving offence, Luanda is leagues ahead of me on the road to acceptance.

At 17, I am fat with nappy hair that I threaten to dreadlock every time my mother tries to bribe me into getting a perm. My skin is a soft honey brown, brick red when I return from summer vacations to Antigua, and my only saving grace. I have pictures of me rocking an 'I'm not fat, I'm fluffy' tee-shirt, my long pudgy legs mountainous beneath my nightgown. My mother keeps insisting that I have such a pretty face, would be such a pretty girl if I just lost the baby fat. I hold on to the things that make me more than worthless, count them on one hand: intelligence, wittiness, light skin.

When I am nine, my Aunt Fiona looks at the fried drumstick I am strangling with a greasy fist and checks my designs on the ice cream cake my parents have bought for my birthday party. She asks if I'm not scared of dying of a heart attack from eating too much, if I am not ashamed of my big belly. I tell her that I would not mind dying fat and happy.

Sunday dinner is a battleground, me against the family, our knives and forks sharpened, mouths watering for a taste of my mother's Jamaican peas and rice, cooked down in coconut milk and spiced with a hot green pepper that sits like a king atop the rice dish, rescued from the pot right before it bursts.

Once a month, Luanda joins the fray, home from college where her classes are extracurricular activities she aces without much effort. I am glad when she is home, don't even take to heart the song she learned at her first homecoming game, sung in unison with the other proud black college students and alumni at various stages of inebriation: "I'm so glad I go to Howard U. And not a white school. Oh, Glory Hallelujah, I'm so glad." She hums this song whenever she hears me launch into my stories about my white friend, Sam, who lives on Park Avenue with her misfit gay and filmmaker brothers, socialite mother, and alcoholic dad.

Luanda, with her black power antics and disdain for my mother's peas and rice—for most West Indian food, actually—distracts attention from me, delays the usual conversation about when I'm going to do something about my weight. Mom chides me when Luanda's at the table, asks when I will bring one of my white friends home so she can meet this Sam I am always talking about and whose house I am always begging to spend the night at (the answer from my paranoid Caribbean parents is always no). She wonders out loud what she did in a past life to deserve one

daughter who doesn't eat West Indian food and another that loves white people so much she seems to be forgetting that she is black.

And then there is Rodney, my cousin with all the Jamaican pride who talks in a forced pan-Caribbean accent that makes him sound like he's trying to sell beef patties to white people in Kansas. And Daddy, who says stoic grace over our meals or sometimes asks me, his most reverent child, to stand in for him. And my Aunt Hyacinth, Rodney's mother. She is thin and red-boned with curly hair dyed a deep auburn that makes her look more Puerto Rican than anything else. Her thinness is a grating bone in my side, a reminder of how fat I am, how bad I look next to her, an aunt thirty years my senior with better-looking legs.

My Sunday night dinner usually starts when everyone is taking a pre-dinner nap and I am supposed to be finishing my homework before setting the table. Instead, I am digging my hand into the backside of a roasted chicken cooling on the stove or a pot of curry goat, still bubbling, the sides of the pot sweating. Or feeling around for the best piece of flesh in a pot of souse Daddy has cooked because he misses home. Cooking pig feet reminds him of long treks up to English Harbour to bring his grandfather food to cure his Saturday morning hangovers. I suck in the food's love and memories before everyone else comes downstairs, the cool of air conditioning rippling my home clothes if it's summer or huddled near the heater in a corner of the dining room if it is winter. My father is cheap with heat, reminds us that we are not in Flatbush anymore where all the apartments were tropical year-round, the windows flung open even in the dead cold of February so that we could sleep through the night.

I eat in secret, quickly and quietly.

Upstairs hums with the sounds of tone deaf Christian choirs singing on family radio and Daddy and Aunt Hyacinth's ruminations about the good old days back

home. Mom snores as she sleeps away one of her two free weekends a month away from the hospital. My sister Luanda and cousin Rodney argue about whether Kwanzaa is a holiday that black people should celebrate, debate whether Tribe Called Quest can still be considered an underground rap group given their commercial success.

It is three o'clock exactly, two hours after we have all stumbled in from the tedious Anglican service at St. Matthew's in our old neighbourhood. Hands wiped of tell tale curry stains and rice grains, I make my way downstairs to the basement, to the bathroom I claim as my own. We have just bought the house and are still absorbing the shock of transitioning from paying rent to keeping up with mortgage payments a year later, when my visits to the downstairs bathroom begin. The basement is dark, with low ceilings, the boiler churning heat just an arm's length away from the toilet that I kneel before.

Just before it is time to set the table, I purge all the day's meals: the eggplant, ackee and saltfish we eat for breakfast every Sunday morning, the peppermint sweets the acolytes eat to compete with the overpowering aroma of frankincense, the stolen bits of Sunday's dinner that I spirit from the pots cooling on the stove, the candy bars stuffed into my secret place in my panty drawer. I place a long, stubby middle finger down my throat to start the procession of Sunday's meals and it all comes up. My head aches with the pressure of the vomit and my stomach heaves but I revel in this private pain, praise myself that at least my fingers are fat enough that I never have to stick them down my throat more than once.

Upstairs, I emerge from the basement with a flushed face, from the pressure of bringing soda and beer bottles upstairs for dinner, I say. They do not know what I have been doing downstairs, have been so consumed in their activity and conversation

that no one takes notice of my changed appearance. No one comments on why my teeth are freshly brushed, even at this late point in the afternoon.

At Sandton, the prep school that I take a train, two buses and almost two hours to get to from Brooklyn each morning, I am known as the black Cassandra. This moniker distinguishes me from my fairer but no less dorky counterpart, Cassandra Friedman, child of a plastic surgeon and dermatologist whose homely countenance and high water acid wash jeans are a cruel cosmic joke given her parents' dashing good looks. In my first three years at Sandton, I manage to make few friends, an outsider to the white kids for hailing from the planet of Brooklyn and an oddity to the black kids who are too cool to understand my freakish appetite for sci-fi paperbacks and the amount of time I spend at church under my father's thumb as an acolyte, president of the Youth guild, general kiss-ass. Even the black kids at church resent me, find my silence unnerving and my piety judgmental. They make fun of the polo shirts and khakis I wear to our after school meetings, view me as a stooge planted by the church authorities.

During the first month of my senior year, I spend much of my time in between classes scoping out the only single-person toilet at Sandton, located conveniently across the hall from my tall blue locker. Under the pretense of changing my clothes for gym one Friday afternoon, I repeat my Sunday ritual there and find that flushes one after the other mask my gagging throat and the sound of my breakfast, lunch, and snacks hitting toilet water. Success, I think. I start to pack a toothbrush and travel-sized toothpaste stolen from my father in my backpack, repeat this ritual at three o'clock everyday when everyone's rush to get home or to sports distracts attention.

By the end of October of my senior year, I am working on college applications, have decided to apply early to a small liberal arts college in New

England against my sister's and father's wishes. Luanda objects on the grounds of isolation and the dangers of losing touch with my black identity. She insists that the whitening process is already starting with the fading of my Brooklyn accent and creepy prep school turns of phrase. She asks me to count every time I use the word 'like' in a sentence or add a question mark or 'you know?' I am self-conscious at first, find myself trying to get back my black girl from the hood persona. But then I realize that I'd never mastered that either, being a geek and fat kid who wasn't allowed to play with the kids on our block anyway.

Daddy's rolls his eyes and kisses his teeth when he sees the price tag on my expensive education, protests that after all the money he's pumped into my private school tuition, I could at least apply to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton. No one's even heard of this school that I keep telling him is one of the top ranked liberal arts colleges in the nation. What will his friends at the bank or at church or his lodge think of his child going to a no-name school? He is not impressed by my protests that "the people who matter" (read: the rich white people I go to school with) will know.

My mother does not have an opinion about my college choice. She insists that I must lose weight if I want boys to talk to me. This is her way of getting me ready for college, where she is confident I could meet my future husband.

By November of my senior year, I have contracted a stomach flu that lands me in bed for three weeks. Home bound, most of what I eat I throw up within a couple hours, revel in this legitimate opportunity to purge every day. I am mostly delusional but make some half-hearted attempts to read the work my teachers have sent home to me by mail since I have no friends that would visit and bring me assignments. By Thanksgiving, I am twenty pounds thinner than when I started senior year. Mom, still disappointed by the mop of kinky hair crowning my head, is at least happy that I look

more acceptable, better in my clothes, seems all too eager to accept the changes that sickness has wrought on my body. She attributes my new 'slimness' to my joining the track team at the beginning of the year – my desperate attempt to look well-rounded and get into college. She doesn't know that I am actually the manager for the track team and only run warm up laps during the indoor track season, that I am mysteriously absent when warm up consists of the two mile run around the Central Park reservoir.

At Christmas, I stand for a picture with my arm around my Aunt Hyacinth's waist, my legs looking longer and thinner than hers now without the accompanying pounds. We both smile wide, me with my mouth closed over my teeth. She blushes when her son Rodney remarks that we look like we could be sisters now. I devour the Christmas feast of peas and rice, oxtail stew, roasted chicken, curry goat, and candied yams. Everyone remarks on how thin I am. My heart races faster now when I purge, my headaches following me from the bathroom and hanging around sometimes for hours afterwards. I burst a blood vessel just beneath my eye one Sunday a couple weeks after Christmas. I lie, blame it on hitting my head against the toilet while looking for a lost contact lens. Everyone believes me.

By the spring of senior year, my teeth have begun to turn yellow, the bile rotting my molars first. They will not submit to the whitening regime that my toothpaste company guarantees will work. In the pictures from Easter dinner with Aunt Hyacinth, the camera captures my wide smile. I am clearly pleased with myself.

At school, I have become visible for the first time, no longer just the black Cassandra who is good at French and always reading some obscure science fiction title at the black table in the lunch room. Slim in the boot-cut jeans that have just become fashionable that year, I am invited to a holiday party hosted by Jack & Jill,

the society for upper middle class black children and their less fortunate friends. I shop with my mother for an outfit in the mall just a few blocks from our house. Seeing me for the first time with my breasts not obscured by my usual paunch, my mother becomes aware of my sexuality. She chooses a baggy top and skirt that falls just below my knees. I let her choose for me and change into an outfit stolen from Luanda's closet once I have reached my date's house.

I am awkward when we first arrive at the party, held in the atrium of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, unsure of what to do when my date, Gavin, reaches around my waist and leads me to a dimly lit back stairwell where kissing couples line the steps. With my eighteenth birthday five days away, I have never been kissed before. I melt with pleasure when his lips touch mine. But, I decline when he talks about going all the way. I know that this is what my mother warned me about.

By May, graduation is just around the corner. I have a date for the prom, choose one of the four black guys in my graduating class to hang onto and take pictures with for the night. My head spins with the whirlwind of graduation and birthday parties that spring. I buy new dresses and shoes with the graduation money that my parents give me. I am thin now and so our original plans to have my dresses made by my mother's Panamanian seamstress who calls me "chunquita" change. I buy dresses in the junior sections of the department stores, my dress size miraculously in the single digits by now.

I am bingeing more, amazed by the quantities of food my body can consume and expend. I spend the whole week that my parents are away watching the cricket test match in Barbados eating donuts and sweets and tacos from the 7-eleven around the corner. I quickly go through the two hundred dollars my parents entrust me with and start stealing from their emergency stash in my father's desk drawer. My parents

arrive home to find me searching for an explanation for the missing cash. I hold my breath as they unpack their bags but no one mentions the money until months later, when I am away at school and pretend not to know what they are talking about.

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At nineteen, I am one of the best and brightest in my college's freshman class. The clam chowder and lobster served in the dining halls have me mourning my Mom's home cooking and salty plantain chips from Brooklyn's corner bodegas. Instead of gorging on peas and rice, polouri, fish cakes, and curry goat, my weapons of choice are sweets and chips and pizza. My teeth are a wretched yellow colour. My heart has started racing more these days.

My roommate calls an ambulance when she finds me on the bathroom floor clutching my chest, saliva running down my cheek, a familiar stench rising from the toilet bowl.

When my parents are asked if they knew that their youngest daughter suffered from bulimia, they say that they never knew. At the hospital, my parents, sister Luanda, cousin Rodney, and Aunt Hyacinth gather around my wasted body, bow their heads as my father prays for my swift recovery. After the prayer, they whisper loudly in their Caribbean way, talk about me as if the tubes piped in and out of my orifices have made me deaf. Everyone blames it on the white schools I went to, argues about what they would have done if they knew. Luanda says that if I had gone to Spelman, none of this would have ever happened.

Tallahawah

Tracey would always come to the bus stop on Monday mornings with presents for me. A piece of jerk pork from Boston Beach. A slice of rum cake her Granny made for her birthday, wrapped in wax paper. Her prized twin jade marbles, enveloped in red velvet her aunt had cut from the rolls of fabric behind the counter in her chop shop.

Tracey's skin smelled of lavender and rose water that she bathed in every night, washing away the tinny smell of carbolic soap that she lathered with before her bath. I only knew the smell of brown soap and the occasional dash of Old Spice my father would slap on my cheeks when he shaved in the morning. Tracey's skin, cloaked in these scents that betrayed exclusively feminine care and touch, was a gift. I'd stand next to her as we waited on the country bus that would take us to town, knowing just how to stand so that the wind would carry her smell to me until the bus came. I preferred her scent to the higglers' whose armpits were dripping already in the morning heat.

Tracey knew I never had any beautiful things to spare, except maybe a ginger or peppermint sweetie snatched from my mother's church pocketbook. Or, one day, a set of translucent marbles I'd found lying beneath the bus stop bench. Her eyes got big as she took in the bubbles that glinted inside the marbles' skin.

"But, where you find these?" Tracey asked.

"I found them yesterday, when I was waiting on the bus." I replied.

"You sure, Tallawah?" she asked again.

"I swear on my grandmother's grave," I said, crossing my heart.

Standing at my full height just under four feet, I knew I would grow up to be small, like the Marsh side of my family. My great-grandfather Samuel Marsh had used his frame to get jobs working in the sugar mills, where it was an asset to be little. Mommy, whose tiny round face just peeked above the counter of the shop where she sold perfume to tourists biding time until they left Antigua, said that I should never let anyone make me feel badly because of my size. And, so my nickname, 'Tallawah,' as in 'me likkle but me tallawah.' As in, I'm small, but don't underestimate me.

Treasures given freely, Tracey's offerings poured out of her skirt pockets, slowly but surely, my Monday morning anticipation never deflated. Sometimes she would wave to me, gift in hand, when she saw me come around the mountain's bend to the roadside bus stop. Other times she'd reveal it on the bus as it hugged the hills and made its way into town. Once, she waited all the way until after the bell for last classes had rung and we were making our way home. Not a Monday passed when she didn't let me know that she had spent a painful Sunday apart from me thinking about how to please me.

We would disappear into the bush on bright Saturday afternoons, play our favourite game of looking for new game in the jungle. The goats and mongooses that appeared under the dense forest's canopy of fig tree and palm tree leaves were our lions and leopards. With a stick standing in as our play-play machete, I told Tracey to hold on to my waist and follow me, the leader of our expeditions. The enormous rubber tree was a sentry at the centre of the forest, pushed back for what seemed like miles from Fig Tree Drive. Back there, we got so lost that we couldn't hear the cars lurching up the steep hills around us, or hear tourists proclaim just how unspoiled our island was.

Our jungle's oversized branches were perfect seats for our bony bodies. We would lean back into the coconut trees' arms, drinking cool drinks from Tracey's Granny's shop just up the road from my house. Afterwards, we rinsed our bottles in the stream so we could return them clean. Neither of us wanted to risk a tongue lashing from Granny, who we called Mama Bird because of her affinity for the aging PM, Papa Bird.

Before we left our hideaway, I would re-braid the four plaits in Tracey's hair. Tracey took out the leaves and twigs that had taken root in my matted hair, teasing me about "the peas and corn that could plant in my hair middle." My hair stayed nappy despite my mother's strenuous attempts to tame it. Tracey's hair was easy, long and thick and wavy, shiny from the coconut and castor oils Mama Bird rubbed into her scalp every night after her bath. I would take extra time plaiting her hair, my small hands luxuriating in her hair's delicate, crinkly texture and the smell it left on my hands.

She would say to me: "But, Tallawah, you not finished plaiting those four plaits yet? I know you small, but your hands not broken."

"You know how I like to play in your coolie hair. Hold still nuh, so you can get a style," I'd say.

I would spend the last minutes before the sun touched the top of the trees losing myself in Tracey's lavender, rose water, coconut oil scent. Tracey would fall asleep with her head in my lap, awakened at last by the kiss I planted on her forehead to let her know I was finished.

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“Tracey Ann!,” Mama Bird called from the wooden steps in front of her chop shop.

Tracey and I stayed quiet under the house, where we were visiting the new pups my dog, Princess, had just had. Just last week Tracey had said that Princess was a stupid name for a dog. I almost bowed to her wisdom because she was a year older, but then I remembered just how long it had taken our puppy (almost two years) to actually respond to that name, and decided to keep it. Now, with the six brown and white pups opening their eyes occasionally to the light that inched its way through the concrete blocks, Tracey had softened.

“Mama Bird calling you, Tracey. You don’t want her to come down here looking for you,” I said.

“I know. I’m going just now. But I want to see the dresser Uncle Noble is making me,” Tracey said.

Tracey and I crept past the chickens taking afternoon naps under the house to the shed in our backyard where my father, Noble, had his carpentry shop. Daddy had learned his trade from his great-grand father, Neville, Antigua’s first black carpenter. Men would come all over the island to Liberta looking for their first rocking chair or crib or couch to put in the houses they had proudly built with their own two hands. The Carpenter family’s style was delicately carved, detailed work on mahogany wood, with strong curves. Brown wood for brown people, the elder Neville proclaimed. My father kept the family trade going strong with his initials, N.C. for Noble Carpenter, engraved in a corner of every piece.

“Tracey Ann! Don’t make me come down these steps looking for you. The Lord better be with you when I find you. Hmmp.”

Mama Bird was ambling slowly towards the shed behind my house, her lame right leg hitched up under her as she leaned precariously on the mahogany walking stick. Doves peeked out from various angles on the walking stick. It was a gift my father had given her once her husband had passed on from gout and left the shop in her name. We thought that the stick gave Mama Bird special powers because the doves on it could see our wickedness before she could. We had felt it on our behinds more than once when Mama Bird found our hands rummaging through a tin of sweeties or playing some ribald game with our uniforms on. When we heard the wooden click of Mama Bird's walking stick get closer to the house, me and Tracey shuffled inside the workshop for hiding spots, whispered to Daddy not to blow our cover.

Inside his shop, Daddy was smoking his after-dinner cigarette and putting a new finish on Tracey's dresser, three drawers with gold handles and a vanity mirror to top it. The shadows of other works in progress – stools, dining room tables, high-backed chairs, bed frames and bed heads – moved as the oil lamps swung in the breeze from the open front door. Daddy stood up to greet Mama Bird.

“But what did I do in a past life that one of heaven's angels should come down to talk to me herself?” Daddy yelled from inside the shop.

Tracey and I stood with our backs against the wall. Our tee shirts gathered dust from the wood shavings. Mama Bird stopped to consider the three steep steps that led to Daddy's workshop.

“Noble, your mouth so sweet I wonder how it is all your teeth don't rot and fall out your head already. Oh, Guide, where are these two children?” Mama Bird said, heaving as she took the steps one at a time.

“It’s a miracle that my God give me another day to behold your face again.
How you doing Mama Bird?” Daddy asked.

“Not too bad. Can’t complain.”

Eyeing us beneath a vanity table, Mama Bird’s breath caught in her throat.
“But look me dying trial. I swear these two going to frighten me half to death one day,” Mama Bird cried.

“Well before you leave this earth, come take a look at Tracey’s dresser. Just waiting for the finish to dry. She should have it in time for her trip to see the Queen this summer,” Daddy said.

“Well you know I don’t trust what dog say until I feel dog bite, you know,”
Mama Bird said.

It was only May and yet Tracey was already counting down the days until she would go to England to be with her father. He had left Antigua for England eight years before and we thought he had disappeared forever until Tracey had a letter from him last year. Deeply in love with the father who she knew only from photographs and the stories her grandmother pieced together, Tracey was overjoyed. She let all of us know how special she was, how her father had sent for her. And sure enough, by April Tracey had a one-way ticket to England and all the airs attending someone soon to blow the small island.

Despite my envy I was happy for her. We spent our last few months together visiting my father everyday, trying to help him by sweeping up wood shavings or blowing hot air on pieces whose finishes were waiting to dry. Tracey loved my father like her own, relished in the moments when he would call her his little angel, or stop by the chop shop to “see how his little lady was doing.”

Tracey would go on about my father on our Saturday trips into the bush. “But what do you think my father would be like? You think he’ll be sweet like Uncle Noble?”

“I don’t know. He look handsome from the pictures.”

“Yes, that’s right. Granny says I have his nose. And his mouth.”

“Well, I’m sure he’ll be nice. And it sounds like he has a good job so you’ll live nice in London. Wait, oh God Tracey, you must promise you going to write when you get to England.”

“Of course I will.”

“I want to hear all about the stores and the streets and the double-decker buses and the white people. Tracey, promise me you will send me something to let me know what it’s like in London?”

We crossed our hearts and hoped to die, promised that nothing would break our friendship apart.

Tracey’s father sent a letter around the first of July, just before Tracey was to leave for England. He’d just lost his job at Air Jamaica, he said, and didn’t think it would be a good time to take on a child. Mama Bird knew the truth, that he had remarried in England to a woman who didn’t want to raise another woman’s child. She told Tracey not to mind, that her Granny still loved her, but Tracey’s face dropped when she heard the news. Silence replaced Tracey’s boasting. Her long face seemed so permanent that I could hardly remember the afternoons she spent telling

me who would drive her to the airport and what dress she would wear, how she worried that her white patent leather shoes would get scuffed on the plane.

The same day that school holidays began, Tracey went to spend the summer holidays in Dominica with her aunt. The white lace travelling dress she was to wear on the plane to England was wrapped in tissue paper and secured in the bottom drawer of the dresser my father had made for her. I didn't say anything encouraging or untrue like my mother did about how one day her father would send for her again.

Tracey brought me back a wooden bird she'd found at the airport in Dominica with my favourite saying emblazoned on it: "me likkle but me tallawah." She handed it over in what seemed like a forced visit to my house, three days after she came back on the ferry. Tracey mumbled questions about how was your holiday and your family and playing mas in carnival. And then she shoved her gift into my open hands without the usual playfulness that accompanied her gift-giving. Leaner than she had been before she left Antigua, Tracey's body cast an long fidgeting shadow in the front door of my house before she made an excuse to go back to Mama Bird's shop.

After Tracey came back from Dominica, we sat for the Common Entrance Exam. We had the highest passes in Liberta and we both ended up at Christ the King School in town. I was proud to wear the pink shirts and grey uniform skirts that marked us as Convent girls. But nothing seemed to shake the sadness Tracey had picked up in Dominica. The first Monday of school, Tracey showed up without any presents for me weighing down her uniform skirt pockets and I knew the distance that had settled between us.

In the first few weeks of school, Tracey kept her distance from me, charming all the new girls who she met and liked with pretty ribbons from Mama Bird's shop and cool drinks during breaks. At the bus stop, they shared the same bench with

Tracey or sat on her lap, their ribbons hanging from the ends of their cane rows as proof of her favour. “Tracey,” they would say, “is how you get your hair to lie so flat?” With the British twang she’d picked up from one of her cousins visiting from England the summer before, Tracey would coolly reply about some new hair food her father sent her from England, and that she would get some for them one day.

Soon me and Tracey were on different bus schedules all together, me leaving early for choir practice and staying late for extra lessons after school. Tracey stayed late every day now for swimming practice with the girls who stayed in town, sometimes even spending the night out by one of her friends in town when they had a swim meet early in the morning. I only saw Tracey on those rare Saturday mornings and Sunday afternoons when she worked behind the counter of Mama Bird’s shop, dishing out molasses and weighing brown sugar with obvious disdain for the country people who were her customers.

One day I asked Mama Bird for Tracey, who I at least used to get a cold hello from when I did my mother’s Saturday grocery shopping. Mama Bird told me that Tracey’s screw face had chased away customers, who didn’t want to be talked down to by a Convent girl with all her big words. One arm leaning on the clean wood counter and the other hand planted firmly on her walking stick, Mama Bird looked at me as if I might have the answer to how Tracey had grown so quickly away from everybody, including me.

“But all you used to get on so good. Is what happen, Tallawah? She vex with you?” Mama Bird asked.

“I ain’t know what happen to Tracey, Mama Bird. Is like when we in town she don’t even see me. So, I don’t see her any more,” I said.

“Oh, don’t let that one trouble you. Ever since her father left for England, that girl has not been right. What I am going to do, dear heart?” Mama Bird said.

I shrugged my shoulders and walked out of the shop with my mother’s parcels of cassava and hard bread weighing down my arms. I turned back at the last moment, was surprised to see Tracey’s lanky frame taking up most of the doorway in her grandmother’s shop. We exchanged a tense greeting before I trotted down the road to my house I’d walked so many times before.

Tracey said fewer and fewer words to me until, by the beginning of sixth form, our greeting had devolved into a head nod. Tracey showed up at school less often until finally, to no one’s surprise except Mama Bird’s, Tracey dropped out of school altogether. She settled for bare passes on her CXC exams when everyone knew that you needed at least your A levels to even work as a bank teller in town. I carried on with school, determined to make something out of myself, unsure of exactly what I wanted to do besides leave the small island I’d grown up on, even if it was just to go study at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica or Trinidad. I studied for my A level exams well into the night, reading and writing late at night until the exams came in May. I studied on weekends, before school, quit choir and anything that wasn’t related to school. At church, I prayed for high marks. I was single-minded.

At the end of the May, the A levels exams I had spent every year since primary school waiting for finally came. I wrote six subjects, ranging from French to Physics, and was determined to get a high pass in every single one. My mother and father, who’d been putting in extra hours doing sewing and carpentry work at night to keep up with my school fees, uniforms, books, and extra lessons, said a special prayer for me at St. Andrew’s during the week before exams. I wanted to make them proud,

so at least they could hear my name on the radio when they announced who had come first in each subject at Convent.

The exams were draining ordeals that dragged out over several days with essays, oral exams, lab practicals. I did my best, tried to focus and remember all the information I'd crammed into my brain for so many months. When I finally made it to my last exam, French Literature, I suddenly felt myself hit by stomach cramps and felt blood trickling down past my panties to form a wet spot on my uniform skirt. I excused myself to the instructor and went to the bathroom where I changed into my gym clothes.

I knew I couldn't take the rest of my exam. I made my way to the bus stop where I waited in the sun for almost an hour before the one that would take me up Fig Tree Drive finally arrived. I sat in a front seat near the driver, holding my stomach stitched in pain while the open landscape gave way to dense fig tress, the jungle Tracey and I had played in so many years ago.

When I saw our freshly painted yellow house up on its concrete blocks, I was relieved and scared. I wondered what my mother would say when she found me at home. At least I'd be able to cry for a few hours before both my parents were home and asking me questions, I thought. I hoped that I would feel as sick as I did then so that they would feel sorry for me.

I was so caught up in planning my pity party and excuses that I didn't see my father's car parked outside the house. Or Tracey's black flip flops on our veranda.

From the back bedroom where I cried into my pillow with a hot water bottle propped on my stomach, I could smell last night's dinner heating up on the kitchen stove. And then voices, a woman's and man's, in the back gallery where my mother

and father would drink their tea after dinner on the matching chair set my father had made for them. I walked outside, slowly.

And then I saw them. Tracey's leg hitched up on the standpipe where my mother drew water for my baths and our laundry. My father giving Tracey instructions to undress, to first take off her white lace brassiere and then her white panties. I stood there, silently shaking, numb.

Finally, Tracey, who always said that she could feel a duppy miles away and talk to the ghosts who stole sugar from Mama's Bird's shop in the night, spoke. Without even turning around to see me in my pink shirt and grey skirt and walnut coloured skin gone pale, Tracey said:

"Tallawah, is you?"

University of Cape Town

You in South Africa

The first time your cousin tells you that the black people in Soweto will chop your insides and eat you for dinner, you frown. Now, five years later, you understand the bad black African stories passed down by grandmothers and mothers and aunties scared of their own blackness, fairytales written in the bad old days. Now you know that they were talking about the TV Africans they knew from the soapies and Shaka Zulu, ones who consult witch doctors and eat people and drink blood.

When you first come to South Africa, you do not know what it means to be coloured. The tour your cousin takes through Khayelitsha to show you how much better they live than the blacks makes sense now. He is not an African, your cousin says. You thought then that from the other side of the picture frame all Africans look the same.

You think logically, wonder if there could really be something to feel superior about in Mitchell's Plain. Is it the indoor plumbing that really makes a difference? When you see the new government houses expected to rain down on the black townships next year like much-anticipated manna, you understand. The rows of outhouses and the communal toilets that dot the new black promised land pale in comparison to the relative luxury in Mitchell's Plain: a living room, water that runs hot and cold from pipes in the kitchen, a small bathroom with a bath and a shower.

You remember the two bedrooms, how you slept in the small one dotted with your cousin Johan's trophies from his dancing days at the Galaxy. Your frame creaked on the thin mattress and you couldn't sleep the first few nights for tales of the gangs on the Cape Flats who raped young girls and flouted the law. Even the January

heat that pounded Tafelsig couldn't put you to sleep. The imam's call from the mosque in the morning's first light found you still seeking sleep.

Today, from the comfort of your bachelor flat in Sea Point in a building your friends back home say looks like the projects with a view, you know that it is water—clean, hot and cold, and always available—that separates you from the them your cousins were repulsed by and the them you have trained your eyes to avoid. Today, a Sunday, you read the newspaper in bed with your lover. You both talk passionately about the insanity of houses built with only one room for six people. You debate about the shape and feel of the new South Africa, about how its contours have been airbrushed, not shifted. She says that the transition in ninety-four was a negotiated settlement, not a revolution. And you agree, say that real manna feeds the people, doesn't cut the people's mouths.

You are in love and you think, like the naïve and hopeless romantic you can sometimes be, that love can conquer all. There is nothing in your past to suggest that this is true. You are in fact the proof that love cannot fill the gaps created by circumstances and dreams flying off in different directions. You are the last child born before your parents give up on trying to make it work for the children. But you believe in love anyway. You remind yourself of the exceptions, the old people who hold hands and fight the same arguments they have been fighting for decades, the young people who cross continents to be with each other. At twenty-five, it is important that you have things to believe in.

You have fallen in love with a coloured woman. You think your affection will erase the tensions around who you both are and what your American-ness represents. You do not want to admit that similar politics cannot stand in for disparate experiences. Your lover hides her soft hair under a doek, convinced it makes her look

like the Xhosa woman from the Eastern Cape she thinks she was in a past life. You grow a huge Afro because it makes you look like the Black Panthers you associate with revolution. You do not admit that you are growing your hair because the Xhosa barbers at the taxi rank in town laughed at your American accent when you first went to ask their prices. You are both in denial.

You cringe when your lover speaks Afrikaans to her mother on the phone. You remind yourself of what you've learned, that the language was developed by Asian and African slaves who flavoured the flat Dutch spoken by their masters. But like any progressive tourist, you have been to the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, read *Kaffir Boy*, are convinced you have a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between struggle, language, and apartheid. And so your ears hurt when she speaks Afrikaans to arrange a meeting spot for drinks, or to lie to street kids about not having any spare change, or to tell her mother that she plans to learn how to make roti when she gets married.

Your lover's mother tongue is foreign to your Brooklyn ear. You wonder if you can ever truly love her if you do not speak her first language. The answer matters a little or a lot, depending on how you take the truth that you will never learn Afrikaans. You don't even like saying that you are gatvol, even when you are just trying to make a joke.

She asks you if you wouldn't mind coming to Beacon Valley for dinner one Sunday to meet her family, who keep asking about her American boyfriend. You know that there is no way to say no. And so you offer a level-headed yes, already imagining that you might run into your cousins who live in Tafelsig. You hope that her family will say nothing about the colour of your skin or the texture of your hair.

You do not want them to ask you if you've ever met a famous rapper or basketball player or what you think about South Africa, so far.

When you start dating, just weeks after you come to Cape Town from New York on a year-long photographic assignment, you are wary at first. You remind yourself that a year is not long enough to really get to know someone. That you have family and friends and responsibilities in New York that you can not escape in Cape Town. That love always distracts you from your real work. That your black friends will not hide their disdain when they hear you are dating a coloured woman. And yet here you are, waking up every morning in her arms, anticipating her phone calls and text messages, asking her about her day at the NGO where she works, cooking her dinner and entertaining her.

You have been in Cape Town for four months and still have not called your cousins yet. Every time you are just about to pick up the phone, a new memory assaults you. The day before you go to Sunday lunch with Nazeema, you have one palm on the receiver and have just finished dialling the digits when you remember how they said you were almost light enough to be one of them. You took offence because at home you were light enough to be said to have pretty skin and good hair, a designation that made you desirable. Here your nappy hair marks you as different, possibly black African. You brag to your friends that black people on the taxis and at the supermarket mistake you for Xhosa, are thrown off by your American accent they think is a particularly effective Model C student performance. You don't tell your friends this, but you don't really believe that being mistaken for a black South African is anything to be proud about.

At Nazeema's house, the family speaks stilted English to accommodate your ignorance of Afrikaans between delicate bites of a four-course meal. Nazeema's

mother and aunties and cousins whisper in the kitchen about the black boy Nazeema has brought home. Nazeema sits with her father and uncles and you in the sitting room sipping cool drinks that seem to appear out of nowhere. They grill you about what you are doing in Cape Town, their mouths turning into interested and then disturbed circles when you say that you are a photographer, an artist. Nazeema anticipates their questions about your intentions towards her, insists you are just a friend. As the relief washes across the faces of the aunties and the uncles and the cousins, you know that Nazeema has crossed a line from which there is no return.

Now you are friends. This transition is marked by Nazeema's gentle removal of her things from your apartment, the long silences between her phone calls to check in on how you and your project are going. You accept all the reasons why you could never be the one, swallow your desire to be loved and to love her. And settle for the solitude and obsession with your work that have driven you so far in your career.

Seven months into your year in Cape Town, your shoots of black women in the new South Africa take shape. By then you have been inside flats in Tokai, taken shots from the roofs of shacks in Guguletu, let your lens roam over the gaunt bodies of girls in Sea Point who prey on tourists whose hearts haven't callused to the suffering they see here yet. You are exhausted by the constant journey between rich and poor, privileged and destitute. You proclaim that South Africa's story can not be told by statistics, but by real people's stories, which you claim to be collecting with your camera. At bars on Long Street, you talk to your friends about the impact black women's suffering has had on your understanding of your privilege as a man, as an American, as a product of middle-class upbringing. You keep telling yourself and everyone else that the work you do is important.

Eight months into your stay in Cape Town, the friend who gave you much-needed respite from your sojourn in Mitchell's Plain five years ago asks for the fourth time when you will go to see cousins. You have comforted yourself with lame excuses about their address having changed and the phone number you have on file not working. You know that this is a sham.

On a cold August morning, after finishing your last shoot in Crossroads with three generations of domestic workers, you take a walk through the fog on Beach Road. You wipe the moisture from your cell phone and dial the number, thinking that the five rand of air time on your phone will spare you any extended explanations. On the other line, a male voice picks up the line. Johan is not working, he says, and needs to pay off the costs of his mother's funeral. You remember his mother, who had loved your grandmother from afar through Christmas letters, phone cards, and hand-made sweaters, who was politely at hospital the last time you were in Tafelsig. You felt her presence everywhere, even thought you saw her ghost late one night when you found the change in time zone and your paranoia—borrowed from rich South Africans and tourists—denying you sleep. She sat at her piano, a small child at her side, their brown hands practicing scales. Her larger, tender hands, led his along the black and white keys.

And now she is dead. But you only have three more rand to feel badly about it, to tell Johan that you will come visit him this weekend. You know that you, the American cousin, the successful artist, will be expected to account for your absence, to offer help to the family. You curse yourself for refusing the perfume and "I Love New York" tee-shirts that your mother wanted you to bring as gifts. But then you know that what is being demanded of you now is more than trinket.

Nazeema offers to go with you to Mitchell's Plain, as a friend. She has been spending more time at the office writing proposals and talking with her clients well into the night, which is why she doesn't call more often, she says. You decline her offer, tell her that this is a trip you must make by yourself.

The taxi ride to Mitchell's Plain from your flat in Sea Point takes forever. Just as you think that you will never get there or that you are lost, you are on top of the matchbox sized house where you paced inside five years ago, afraid to go outside for fear of the bullets that would catch you, the innocent bystander. Fear only seems to accompany you in Cape Town. You hesitate before ringing the bell, remember how easily you seemed to forget the drug dealer that turned up dead on the doorstep of your Brooklyn brownstone the day before you left for South Africa. Danger here speaks a different language, you think.

The house is smaller than you remember it, old white paint stuck in ungainly clumps to the stucco. Inside, the old piano is covered by an old sheet and topped with arum lilies that have been dead for a long time. Johan seems genuinely happy to see you, shakes your hand like the mechanic you remember him to be. Your eyes focus on a picture of Johan's grandfather, the ancestor that connects you. You notice for the first time that you and Johan and your ancestor all share the same nose. You notice the difference between Johan's hair, wavy and sticking to his forehead in the heat generated by the teapot, and yours, a tight round shadow bouncing on the grimy grey walls.

You sit down for a cup of rooibos tea in the bare sitting room and notice your cousin struggling with the biscuits and tea bags. You think to ask about his girlfriend who served you both the last time you were here. His knees push against the small coffee table as he leans in to tell you so that his girlfriend, Janine, died in a car

accident when she was driving Johan's mother to her last piano lesson. You look at the white vest stretched taut over his fat belly. You recognize the smell seeping from the couches and his skin as the rank of alcohol.

You remember your uncle back in Antigua who shares the same nose as you and Johan and your father and the ancestor who has brought you all together. The uncle whose drinking would start from first thing in the morning until he fell into bed at night. You remember too the silence around his determined suicide, the way no one wanted to admit he was drinking himself to death one bottle of high proof rum at a time.

You piece together that Johan stopped going to work a week after his mother and girlfriend died. That two weeks later he stopped getting into his car. That three weeks after that he stopped walking further than the shop two doors down where the Abrahams sold liquor out of their back door. And that one week ago you called.

You have nothing more to offer Johan than some small talk and a few hundred rand. You make up lies about having to get back to the dark room as a pretence for your escape. You are relieved that Johan only thanks you for stopping by, that he doesn't call you on your cowardice.

You realize that what separates you from Johan is not curly hair or light skin or small nose, but the fact that you have choices and he does not. You forgive yourself for being happy that you are not him.

Nazeema cannot forgive that you spend your last few weeks in Cape Town avoiding Johan's calls, pretending to be busy. You remind her that you are just friends and say that if she ever comes to New York, maybe you can hang out some time. She knows that for you this casual offer is your way of saying that she may never see you again. And for this, she resents you.

You ride to the airport in a taxi by yourself, try to ignore the squatter camps that dot the landscape between Cape Town's suburbs and your mobility. But this stretch of road is engraved on your memory. You remember how the arriving airplanes once rattled many cream biscuits on the special plates your hosts in Khayelitsha only used for company.

You no longer believe that the work you have done is important. You do not respect your American editor's praise of your style, courage, and piercing gaze into South African life because he has never been here. He couldn't know what you know now, that suffering can not be battled only with an open camera lens. That just seeing people suffer does not necessarily lead you to helping them.

You half-heartedly engage in a conversation with your taxi driver, who brags that he used to live in District Six. His daughters, he tells you, were the first coloured students to matriculate at the school of hotel management in town. He brags that now they run a business in Woodstock, a restaurant famous for its ciabatta sandwiches that Nazeema loves. No matter what people say about coloured people, he insists, they have done a lot for South Africa.

In the mirror, as the morning's shadows give way to the sun rising over Table Mountain, you glimpse the kinky hairs that curl tightly all over your head. You wonder whether, if your hair could hold a loose curl, Nazeema could have loved you.

Beauty Can Bite

Before she had fallen into disrepair and been visited upon by that spiteful thing called age, Ms. Priss was a big fish on a small island, a trend-setter and an arbiter of style, Antigua's own pioneer supermodel. Women came to her shop just down the road from Fort James beach to be fixed, to walk in one way and walk out with a dress or party shawl or blouse that made them think their husbands might love them in the way they had when they were courting. These new clothes, they thought, would bring back Rowan and Trevor and Glenville to their doors, panting with the same desire that latched them to their girlfriends in town now. This desire for transformation the women brought to Ms. Priss was just one step above the desperation that led them to the obeah woman in the middle of the night. The obeah woman, Clemie, had her offices set up just catty-corner to Ms. Priss' Dreamyard Design Shop; they would make bets on when Mrs. Richardson or Mrs. Cunningham would be crossing over to use one person's services and not the other, the critical line that separated a fixer-upper special from someone who needed 'the works.' Ms. Priss sold comfort, gossip, the well-placed suck-teeth or 'shame', and the possibility of change on an island where everything and everyone pretty much stayed the same. Day in and day out women dreamed themselves anew in the Dreamyard.

Farnsworth, Ms. Priss' curious boy child, was called Fonsy from the moment everyone knew the kind of man he would grow up to be. He knew colours like fuschia and mauve and taupe well before he entered first form at St. Stephen's Primary School. His eye for color, a distinct ability to separate what looked gauzy from well-placed flair, made Fonsy the perfect choice for his mother's fashion consultant. And so it was that Fonsy spent most Saturday nights after Ms. Priss'

clients had gone home gazing up at his mother from a brocaded ottoman. She fussed with her hair and nails, spritzed perfume under her breasts, used corsets and girdles to push and pull flesh that sagged more as she aged. Fonsy pressed pieces of organza and shantung against his mother's cocoa skin, measured it against the face she was putting on that night and made hard choices.

It was always the same date, the slobbering hovel of a man Fonsy saw wagging a wrinkled finger at him from Antigua's only television channel. When the Prime Minister would appear on television, his head drooped down almost to his lap, Ms. Priss would rise from her chair with allegiance and gleam at her man. National pride, she called it. Fonsy tolerated these moments, knowing that their special bond—the dolls Mummy made him and the skirts she let him hem and wear—depended on him keeping his mother's secret.

In their pink cottage behind the Dreamyard, Ms. Priss didn't feel like the whore that women on Market Street whispered that she was. She felt beautiful, adored by the man whose power on the island, solidified over almost forty-five years of rule, was absolute. PM's dotting attention and expensive trinkets from his trips all over the world stood in for the legitimacy PM would never give her. Ms. Priss learned to revel in good moments, knowing that wanting more was dangerous. Fonsy would treasure those good times, sharing the full-length gilded mirror with his mother as she dressed in the silk kimonos PM brought her from Japan or sprayed pungent perfumes straight from Paris department stores on his wrists.

Fonsy and Ms. Priss were making their way home from the market one bright Saturday morning when they ran into PM doing a meet and greet. Despite all the scandals in the newspapers about impropriety and possible outside children, there was PM pounding flesh with his only daughter, Candide Beausejour, in tow to prove that

he was a family man. He was perched just outside of Carnival City near the roundabout when he caught sight of Ms. Priss and her son, a white blur in the horizon in their matching Saturday suits. Ms. Priss was radiant in a white gingham dress with a belt tied smartly around her thin waist, white gloves, and a white handkerchief at the ready to wipe away the cold from her son's eyes or to clean a paw-paw for Fonsy. She saw PM too, and broke into a sneezing fit as they passed the throng of reporters and lookers-on.

In a spasm of magnanimity, PM strolled over to Fonsy and Ms. Priss, announcing to the crowd that they were in the presence of Antigua's premier women's clothing designer and her son, whose high pass on last year's common entrance exams was commendable. Mother and son blushed, bitten by PM's charm that made you Fonsy feel cheap afterwards, after he'd stopped smiling. The picture, which would appear in the Antigua Sun the next day, featured PM with his arms around Fonsy and Ms. Priss. The caption read "father of the nation extols accomplishments by ordinary Antiguans."

Fonsy looked up from his freshly polished going out shoes to see his own smile reflected back at him from Candide's face. Fonsy was in love with Candide when he saw her for the first time, a typical uppity red girl dressed in all white with matching shoes from the States—too good for Bata on Nevis street—and a white bonnet to protect her red skin from turning black. Fonsy and Candide stood, each entranced by their mirror image: green eyes, unruly eyelashes, upturned noses, brick-red hair and skin, and cinnamon freckles on both cheeks. Neither PM nor Ms. Priss said anything, just let the recognition spread across both children's faces before PM was dragged away to another photo opportunity at the top of Newgate Street.

Candide, always insufferably polite, turned to say goodbye to the “Mrs. Potter” and “Farnsworth Potter” she’d been introduced to. Fonsy yelled to his new friend: “Mummy’s name is Ms. Priss!” The crowd roared with one belly-busting laugh.

One of the higglers from Liberta couldn’t resist temptation. “But what is this? It’s like this sissy and his sister meet for a holiday up Newgate Street. And the whoring mother pose off in front cathedral with she white gloves and she white belt tying she waist. Well, devil know that white only wear on the top clothes.”

That Saturday morning, Fonsy knew that the striking beauty and grace that he shared with Candide and his mother made a girl desirable but a boy vulnerable. Mother and son shoved off towards home. The Lesser Antilles’ sun bore holes through the protective shield Ms. Priss had carried for her son. Only silence could bear the weight of its absence.

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Before they met after Sunday school for their first lunch date of pineapple upside down cake and milk, Fonsy spent weeks begging his mother to see Candide again. He spent the Saturday night before Candide arrived ironing his play clothes for the encounter and sweeping the backyard where his mother would set out their sweets. That Sunday, Fonsy squinted as the BMW with government plates and tinted windows pulled up outside the Dreamyard on E.A. Stephens Street. Fonsy took in Candide’s street clothes—an elegant but casual tunic with khaki shorts—and the fall fashion issue of *Vogue* stuffed under her right arm, and loved her instantly.

Candy and Fonsy were inseparable after their first play date. Born just three days apart under the sign of Gemini in the same year, they created a world of high fashion, love, and intrigue which no one else could penetrate. Every year they looked more like each other, their hair burning scarlet in the summers, their body hair blonde. It was only when Candy finally started growing breasts the summer they turned fifteen that they had to face the world outside that marked the differences between them. And, even then, they were flip sides of the same coin.

PM thought the friendship was good for his daughter, who had been sullen and withdrawn since her mother had retreated behind a wall of silence in protest to PM's infidelity. Candy, as her father called her, loved Fonsy like a brother, fiercely and tenderly. She didn't allow anybody to call him a faggot or bastard or pansy; she would place her hands akimbo on her bony hips, rise to her six feet and say, "Anyway you treat me, you must treat Fonsy. I don't go anywhere he's not invited." And they would listen, everybody from the girls at Princess Margaret School that resented him for being so good looking and a faggot to the boys who couldn't figure out if they wanted to fuck Fonsy or beat him up. Who could refuse the nation's first daughter? Besides, on this colour-struck island Fonsy and Candy's green eyes, pink lips, and coolie hair made them special, protected them.

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When Ms. Priss finally began to succumb to a sickness she and the most polite Antiguans called cancer, she checked into Antigua General Hospital, where Candide expressed her gratitude for Ms. Priss' mothering through long afternoon visits and trips into town for the small things that made her happy: a finger of plantains, a fresh

bouquet of tulips, swatches of velvet and lace from the Syrian fabric store on Market Street. Those years spent with Fonsy and Ms. Priss and the colourful women who inhabited the Dreamyard made Candide feel more human and less like the proverbial daughter of the nation. In the Dreamyard, Candide learned from the women and Fonsy that it was all right to laugh, play, dream, holler, love the sound of your own voice.

At the end of Ms. Priss' life, Candide cared for Ms. Priss as she'd never been able to care for her own mother, who'd taken her life just the year before in a final attempt to be seen by her husband and heard by her child. Where she had tiptoed around her mother's silence, Candide served Ms. Priss with affection and tenderness. Where PM had offered Ms. Priss expensive trinkets and, occasionally, his time, Candide offered love.

In the isolation ward of the hospital, Candide cleaned the lesions that sprouted all over Ms. Priss' body and nodded knowingly as pneumonia consumed her brain. Ms. Priss' sentences shortened until she grunted only nonsensical phrases about moonlight and fashion, her wasted body's headlights the hazel eyes that had been gorgeous so long ago. Candide would touch Ms. Priss and start, seeing her mother's face reflected in her high cheekbones and the small beauty mark that sat just at the tip of her bony cheek. She marveled that men always chose lovers who looked like the wives they scorned for their legitimacy and predictability. And then she remembered what her other half looked like, what it felt like that first day to feel such love and wonder for her reflection.

At 22, Fonsy was familiar enough with the ladies who frequented his mother's shop to run it in her absence. He spent long days sewing dresses for weddings and fetes, fixing hems on work uniforms, and letting out the uniform skirts of Mrs.

Braithwaite's teenage girls, who always seemed to grow a size or three between school's opening in August and closing in June. Fonsy spent his evenings with Candide, whose job it was to bring his love to his mother and report back on her health. He claimed he was too busy to see his mother and didn't have transport to get to the hospital anyway. And so he would stop by for a quick hello, always accompanied by Candide, after Sunday mass.

"Mummy, it's me, Fonsy," Fonsy once whispered loudly, some months before his mother's death.

"Oh, my dear sweet boy. How you keeping? Weren't you just here this morning?" Ms. Priss said.

"No, I went to church with Candide and now we're just here to say hello and see how it's going with you," he said.

"All right. Well you know I'm always longing to see you," she said.

"Ms. Priss, Daddy sends his love to you, says he's sorry that he can't make it to see you because he's off on business in China," Candide said.

"Well, that's nice of him, I suppose. Listen here, children, have I told you already that Candide's Daddy is your Daddy?"

And this is how it would start and end, every Sunday, Ms. Priss insisting on the truth on her deathbed that she had denied in life.

"I was a ringer in my days, you know. And, if the committee had been different, I would have ended up on the Ms. Universe stage. Candy, why you never go into them kind of things? You're such a pretty girl, except you does hide your legs with all these pants suits and baggy shirts. Beauty is wasted on the young, you know," Ms. Priss would reminisce.

“Ms. Priss, you know I never get into all that kinda thing that you into. I admire it, but my heart not set that way,” Cadndide said.

“And I always thought that you two are such nice young people and they don’t make them like all you these days. You all woulda done been married already if things weren’t the way they are,” Ms. Priss said.

But they were as they were.

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The day of the funeral, Candide and Fonsy were two of four witnesses in the only Methodist church on the island that would give last rites to the nation’s first mistress. The twins flanked the priest to make a show for the only congregation member, Cutie, a neighbour with buck teeth and an eternally outstretched hand. Ms. Priss would suck her teeth when she saw her coming but always offered Cutie a cup of sugar, some mangoes that just dropped from the tree, or an odd job and a smile. Here Cutie was, finally, the only witness who showed gratitude for the beauty Ms. Priss had given the world around her. Her tribute to Ms. Priss: “Here lies a woman who gave and gave more.”

Fonsy, stone-faced at the funeral and the cemetery, broke down in the privacy of the Dreamyard. His eyes opened wide to release the grief he’d been holding back. At last he touched his mother’s things. He tried on her silk blouses, pulled the Gucci and Yves St. Laurent dresses around his waist and sobbed into their zippers and hidden pockets. As he slipped into his mother’s second skin, he saw his mother’s collarbone reflected in the mirror and saw the aunty man everyone saw when they saw

him. His rouged cheeks, waxed chest pushing against a lavender chiffon dress disgusted him.

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It took Fonsy months to exchange his mourning black attire for the fiery oranges and reds that he'd preferred before his mother's passing. On the island where almost nothing ever changed, the landscape of Fonsy's life had transformed dramatically. Where before Fonsy had enjoyed the stories that the Dreamyard customers exchanged about tacky weddings and ungrateful children that didn't send any money back home even though they were working in the States, now Fonsy grew more and more disdainful of the women's chatter until it started to show. Fonsy could no longer be heard interjecting their stories with a suck-teeth or "God spare life." Instead, Fonsy would curtly ask the women how they wanted their skirts tailored or if he should leave the waist in their Christmas frocks slightly loose for their holiday weight. Although the women knew that Fonsy was grieving, as the months after Ms. Priss' death passed, the women found it increasingly difficult to fit their dreams into the Dreamyard. Fonsy's grief crowded them out.

By the time news of PM's extended stay in a private clinic reached Fonsy, almost no women wore out the rusted pink gate in front of the Dreamyard. Anybody in their right head knew what news would be coming next. And so Fonsy wasn't surprised when Candide came into the Dreamyard late one Friday night with a long face and a heavy heart. Fonsy was sewing another set of black pants trimmed with white cuffs for himself when she sat down on the bed they had shared as children.

"Fonsy, come sit next to me," Candide said.

“Whatever bad news you have you can tell me from right there. These pants giving me trouble all day and they want to finish,” Fonsy replied.

“Fonsy, I’m getting married,” Candide said.

“What happened to all your dreams, girl? What happened to moving to New York and seeing what the world has to offer? Why you giving up all that for this old man?” Fonsy replied. There was no venom in his voice, but that same sadness that weighed Candide down.

“I just want to make Daddy happy,” Candide whispered.

“By marrying some boring man who your father’s yes-men pick for you? Who is he anyway?” Fonsy asked.

“Edricks. The police commissioner.”

“Not the same Keith Edricks that I see down Carnival City last Saturday and the Saturday before that? Your father don’t know that is one big aunty man?,” Fonsy said.

“Maybe it’ll be easier,” Candide said.

“Oh guide, help this child saying that maybe if her husband is an aunty man it might free her from some wifely duties. Well, at least we know we won’t have to sew any maternity clothes for you.” Fonsy came to sit down next to his sister on the bed.

“Fonsy, you not easy.”

“Neither you. But you just say the word and I’ll help you. What colour scheme are you thinking about for your bridal party?”

And so the planning began for Candide’s wedding. For the first time since the women stopped putting in their clothes orders with Fonsy, the Dreamyard bustled with activity. Fonsy hired assistants to help him measure the twenty-person bridal

party and sew everything from cumber bunds to shawls. Everything except for Candide's wedding dress, veil, and train, which Fonsy insisted on making himself.

Fonsy never asked why, as the wedding date neared, no invitation arrived for him at the Dreamyard. And so it was that Fonsy's sister married a man whose profile he only knew from dark nights at Carnival City, whose other vital statistics he guessed from Edricks' pants' length and his waist's circumference.

The wedding went off without a hitch. Hundreds of guests danced into the night at the Royal Antiguan, cooled themselves in the perfect September weather everyone thought unusual for the middle of hurricane season. PM looked on from his wheelchair. He didn't notice the absence of his son because Fonsy's presence was everywhere, from the coral red of the bridesmaid's dresses to the kimono-style wedding dress that Candide wore with the grace Fonsy knew she would.

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Just days after Candide and Edricks were married, the weather gave and Hurricane Gilbert consumed Antigua. Unlike the minor hurricanes that had hit Antigua in previous years, this one tore off rooftops and flooded houses. The pictures of PM's daughter's wedding which graced all the newspapers' front pages were replaced by photos of the hurricane's damage. Journalists debated about whether the island could recover in time for the next tourism season, wondered aloud what the island could accomplish given the failing health of its prime minister.

In the wake of Gilbert, traffic to the Dreamyard ground to halt. All of Antigua was eating canned pork and beans sent from America and nobody was thinking about clothes for a fête or a wedding. Fonsy lived off the small bank account his mother

had saved up for these kinds of emergencies until it ran out and he found that all his prayers were producing no new customers. He couldn't eat organza, after all.

Fonsy took off one Saturday night down Fort Road, walking in the direction of town, trying not to admit to himself that he knew where he was headed. He distracted himself by counting the lights of the mosquito burners and kerosene lamps that burned in the shacks lining the road towards town. He took in the pervasive smell of rotting mould, heard the buzz of termites taking up residence in houses destroyed by the hurricane. Other people's misery crowded his head, so much so that Fonsy could take his mind off of his own. A block away from the roundabout near Carnival City, Fonsy stopped dead in his tracks, thinking he saw Candide's husband, Edricks. He froze, but moved off again quickly. He walked over to the side gate nearest to the prison wall and dragged his key across the gate once, a signal to the gatekeeper.

The gate opened and Fonsy entered hesitantly, adjusting his eyes to the Christmas lights strung around the picnic tables and benches. He walked with purpose once he saw the rows of men looking out from beneath the stadium bleachers, cigarette smoke rising in clouds above their heads. Fonsy put a red handkerchief in his back jeans pocket, advertising which side of the market he stood that night. He stood in the shadows beneath the largest mango tree in the courtyard, waiting. Soon, he felt a sweaty palm on the small of his back and rum breath on his neck, pushing him towards the bleachers.

It happened all at once, before he could demand a price. Once the man had picked a spot on a dirty mattress beneath the stadium bleachers, he unzipped his own pants and stuffed his dick into Fonsy's face. Fonsy swallowed him on genuflected knees, arms behind his back and without contact, the way that some johns liked it. This one was a thruster, Fonsy thought as the man pounded himself down Fonsy's

throat, almost choking him. As he reached his climax, the man expanded in Fonsy's mouth so he couldn't breathe. Nervous, Fonsy clamped his teeth on the man's dick as he came. He moaned in pain and grabbed Fonsy around his neck, before throwing him on the ground and pounding him with his fists and nightstick. From the ground Fonsy could see the policeman's khaki uniform getting splotted with mud and almost pitied him, wondering what story he might tell his wife about his dirty slacks. Finally, the stranger put one boot on Fonsy's neck and made him beg for his life. The stranger took the red handkerchief out of Fonsy's pocket and pretended to wipe his lips of the blood and sweat that had gathered there. As he came close to him, Fonsy heard the familiar voice saying "but this is what I must get for letting some bumboclot aunty-man suck my dick, not true?"

Fonsy knew who the man was the minute the light caught his nightstick swinging next to his butt, heard those boots stomping the mud next to his aching head. Keith smiled to himself, sharing a private joke with the night guard for Carnival City: "Everything crazy these days. Even beauty can bite yuh, y'know?" The guard's jowls shook with laughter, "Right, boss," the only answer he knew that might whitewash the stain of what he'd just witnessed.

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Fonsy would never be able to say exactly what Candide said or did to make peace with her husband's violence. Nor would he know how Candide convinced Edricks finance Fonsy's newest business venture, an upscale boutique on Nevis Street in town to serve 'the modern Caribbean woman.' Somewhere along the line, everyone settled into their roles and played them. Fonsy, the headstrong and efficient

entrepreneur grateful to his patrons, Candide and Keith Edricks. Edricks, the newly urbane and hip young police commissioner, granting his wife's wishes by financing the new and improved Dreamyard.

Candide, settled into her new face, its curvatures and dips enhanced by makeup bought on shopping trips to New York, aging gracefully. Finally the daughter of PM shone with the flashiness and charm that got her father elected over and over again, despite the nation's grumbling.

Candide and Fonsy never talked about the hurts that threatened to tear them apart, or how they fixed them. The twins shared the same beauty and the same pain, although it cut them different ways.

University of Cape Town

Red

Rev. Critchlow shifted in his seat, fidgeted with his white collar. Rows of red acne lined his chin. His collar was a nesting place for dead skin and dandruff flakes. Critchlow always manifested the internal struggle between his dying body and his will to live for the Lord. He thought his long-suffering battle might command the small band of Christian soldiers at Codrington Seminary to follow his example. Here lay the paragon – suffering still yet facing each new day by God’s Grace, one pudgy leg at a time. His students, mostly shades of high-toned reds and yellows shaded from the sun in Codrington’s groves, chapels and classrooms, laughed behind his back.

“Prepare ye the way of the Lord,” Critchlow bellowed from the altar.

The men, ranging in age from eighteen years old to the seventy-year-old grandfather who’d found the Lord after the death of his mistress, looked up from their prayer books and were transfixed by the wooden Jesus dying on the cross. Jesus was beautiful even in death. Critchlow’s dying was an eyesore.

Frempong, a tubby brown Chinese student from Trinidad who never managed to leave Codrington after graduation, was assisting Critchlow as he read the gospel. He moistened the gold-trimmed pages, his sweaty fingers holding the book well above his five feet so that Critchlow’s eyes could read the text in his practiced sing-song. Most of Frempong’s fat sat like a tire around his waist, his body expanding as he walked so his halitosis and girth threatened to take up the whole hallway or classroom or nave. As Critchlow finished the gospel with a nasal “Thanks be to God,” the students pushed out “And with the Holy Spirit” as if Frempong had stolen all the air that belonged to them.

This was the face the 'boys' showed to each other—mocking, sarcastic and funny. An attitude that said that black boys, even those doing the Lord's work, shouldn't take any shit from any white man or his minions. They learned just enough scriptures and communion and evensong prayers to create the appearance of submission to the Church of England and the mother country. They bowed and genuflected before the white men at the seminary's helm, English and Irishmen and Scots, mostly drunks, debtors, sickly boys, and faggots banished to the Caribbean where the weather might cure them or the distance might disappear them. These men, seeing distorted reflections of themselves in the freshly shaven and polished brown domes of their charges' heads, held firm in their faith. Their mission, to send the best of the natives into the field where they could tend to the needy flocks, was not one to be taken lightly. Away from the lives they left at home, they created themselves anew, washed themselves in the blood and the wine and the holy water, the Church's tools of reincarnation.

What the priests suspected but did not know for sure was that just below the beatific smiles of the young men sent to Barbados by mothers eager to boast of their accomplished sons and fathers eager to rid themselves of their faggotish offspring lay the truth of this constructed faith. The young men yearned not necessarily to be closer to the Lord but to get a ticket out of the small islands whose sameness tugged invisible twine around their nubile necks. Mostly, the students were running from something back home—a lover, a lie, a baby, a curse, poverty that a career based on faith could save them from.

Some of the boys dreamed of a paradise that awaited them in Brooklyn or the Bronx. They'd heard from boasting uncles who came home flashing cash and telling only good stories about the States that any man willing to work hard enough could do

well for himself. At night, they dreamt of urban heavens filled with big-boned Caribbean girls with wrists and waists thickened by subway rides and American winters. In their dreams, these women worshipped them, waited for wisdom to issue forth from their blessed mouths. Some fixed their daydreams on one girl whose picture they kept pasted in a pants pocket or tucked into a wallet or taped up on the ceilings of their otherwise bare dormitory walls. In their minds lay a straight line from seminary to marriage to children and a quiet life in the church.

Unlike some of the other boys whose light skin and ability to eat their food from the backs of their forks betrayed their good upbringing, Jean was a wiry boy from Dominica whose tongue often got twisted in his mouth as he tried to remember to speak the Queen's English rather than the mix of Creole and patois that felt at home behind his teeth. He believed in the ways of the old people, his faith a combination of the Christianity he'd learned in church and the obeah his grandmother, Mom Viv, had taught him. Jean would leave his school books — The Book of Common Prayer, Do You Know the Lord?, Rhetoric for Sermons and Homilies in the Episcopal Church — open on the battered wooden desk at the south corner of his room before he went to sleep each night. Scared to be alone in his room after years of sleeping with his cousins and brothers and sisters, Jean thought that the words from these holy texts might make him safe. He imagined that as he slept the prayers and psalms mounted protection from the jumbies that came to steal his breath in the night.

In his first year at Codrington, before he'd been teased mercilessly by the second and third year boys for his late-night piety, Jean flipped the pages of his King James Bible so much that his hands sometimes tore the toilet paper thin pages.[At the beginning of his second year, changed forever by his first intimate encounters with his childhood sweetheart, Christine, Jean found other uses for his hands. Like the other

boys, he fixed a picture of Christine, posing next to a palm tree in his backyard, above his bed. Hidden by the shadows of his darkened room, Jean would look up and remember Christine. His digits threatened to rip apart the delicate sheets his mother had mended for him as his memories rose slowly in his pants. The soft, steady, pounding threatened to wake his classmates.

When Jean wasn't busy conjuring Christine, he found the skills he'd learned from his grandmother, Mom Viv, in high demand at Codrington. While the practice of obeah had been banned all over the Caribbean since anyone alive could remember, the legacy of spirit raising and soul calling survived. And so there thrived just beneath the surface a keen commitment to preserving the ancestral worship the slaves had brought with them from Africa. Women like Mom Viv saw in the new generation a disdain for the ways of the old people. But in Jean, she saw an opportunity to hand down the lessons she'd learned from her mother and grandmother.

As Mom Viv had told him, sometimes you had to "play fool to catch wise," to use the ancient arts to help yourself and whoever else needed it without drawing attention to yourself. And so it was that Jean set up shop in his room with herbs and potions and spells to help the sick and the needy. Every night Jean's hallway was weighted down by men heavy with their burdens. Priests and students alike came to Jean with worries ranging from gonorrhea to homesickness to lost school assignments. Jean was part doctor, part therapist, part spiritual healer. Everyone, including Rev. Critchlow whose acne he had cured, owed some small debt to Jean. By the time he was finishing his first year at Codrington, Jean had thought there was no problem he couldn't fix.

Naidoo and Rama, mixed-up Black and Indian boys from Guyana and Trinidad, who had been best friends since the first day they'd met at the top of

Codrington's cross-shaped entryway, dreamt the same dreams each night. They always woke up screaming at the same time, the bangles of the brides they'd left at home jingling and clashing with the church bells that rang out the time of the small hours of the morning. They said prayers to encourage sleep's return, wished that the heathen halves of their family, dark-brown and stubbornly Hindu, would convert one day so that they could sleep again. Their dark eyes, once weighted down only by the same jet black eyelashes, soon bore the fatigue of too many restless nights.

One morning, Jean, waken yet again by the screams that pierced the dormitory walls, suggested that Naidoo and Rama share a room so that they could stop the nightmares. Naidoo moved into Rama's room, pushed his single bed frame, thin mattress, and suitcase into a corner next to Rama's things. The nightmares and the screams stopped. Grateful for the restful sleep everyone now enjoyed, Jean's status at Codrington was reinforced.

At the beginning of their second year, Jean, Naidoo, Rama, and the fifty other boys who made up the Codrington's 1976 graduating class were no longer the neophytes who studied and followed the Codrington rule book to the letter. They sauntered onto Codrington's grounds with their small afros and bell bottom jeans in defiance of the rules. They lorded their new freedom over the first-year boys, walked with swaggers that suggested the new knowledge they'd gained from girlfriends persuaded with promises of marriage after graduation.

What had tongues wagging even more than the girls they'd snagged at home was talk of the new second-year preaching teacher, Red. His firebrand reputation at

the brother seminary on Guadeloupe, Les Freres, preceded him. Unlike the other lecturers who lectured and drooled into their black and grey robes, Red took a different approach to teaching, demanded that his students question for the first time everything they had been taught to believe. Where Rev. Critchlow insisted that students practice singing the scriptures in the nasal sing-song that he demonstrated, Red declared that those things didn't matter. Where balding domes and pasty white skin marked the other lecturers, the scarlet red hair that stood in a curly mop on his head and the brown freckles that covered his entire face distinguished Red.

On the first day of class, when the students looked at their syllabi and saw readings on liberation theology and writings by the great philosophers on ontology and the epistemology of religion, they struggled. These big words got caught in their mouths. Frempong, sent by the administration to sit in on Red's classes, raised his hand to ask the question that was on everyone's minds.

"Sir, when will our exam be?"

"Every day," Red answered.

"I'm sorry sir. I don't understand," Frempong replied.

"I'm sorry, I thought that I was speaking English. At this late point in the afternoon, sometimes my second tongue falters. You will forgive me, I hope. What I mean to say is that you will be examined every day. You will be expected to write compositions at the end of every class based on the assigned reading, the lectures, and the seminar discussions."

"So, does this mean that there will be no end of term exam?" Frempong asked.

"No, there will not be a final exam. To be more clear, what I am asking of you is not the regurgitation you are used to, but for you to use the cotton stuffed between

your ears to think. For next week, I would like you to prepare the question, ‘Who is God and what does He mean to me?’”

Jean and his classmates wandered back to their rooms, unsure of what to think of Red’s unorthodox teaching style. By the end of that night, the halls were abuzz with news of the black lecturer who would soon be taking over Codrington. Davies and Devonshire, resident initiators of the first year class commonly known as D&D, were all too happy to try dampening the other students’ fascination with Red.

“Well I hear that it’s some aunty man business that get him run out of Guadeloupe,” Naidoo said, twisting his oily black locks in the way that Rama kept telling him made him look like a girl.

“Well, you would know. They do say that it takes one to know one,” Devonshire replied.

“It’s a wonder your mouth so fresh. Seems like just yesterday it was Davies I was smelling on your breath,” Rama replied.

Jean was already hard at work on his essay on what God meant to him when he heard the noise in the hallway. First, the sound of Rama’s back up against his flimsy door and then the sounds of fists pounding flesh, a double team that he knew could only be D&D. Unafraid to remind his classmates of the fear and respect they should feel for him as the resident witch doctor, Jean bolted from his desk and went to open the door. Rama, D&D, and Naidoo fell in on him.

“Is what kind of foolishness going on out here?” Jean asked.

“Rama just speaking the truth and these two brutes vex,” Naidoo said.

“Well, I want all you to take your debates about your little half-caste lover somewhere else. Some people actually have assignments to finish,” Jean yelled.

At that the guys slunk away to their respective rooms, Naidoo whispering to Rama not to worry because somebody would fix up D&D soon enough.

Just as Jean was setting pen to paper to start his essay again, a knock came at his door. Jean went to the door to see who it was. There was Red filling up his doorway. Jean was embarrassed at first by the vest that betrayed his slimness and the tight pair of shorts he felt riding up his skinny legs.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Professor?”

“They say that you’re the man to come to if I want something done...”

“Well, it depends on who’s asking and what they are hoping for. Would you mind giving me a minute? You caught me in the middle of something.”

“Sure.”

Jean closed the door to his room and quickly tried to hide the traces of the work he had been doing on the essay for Red’s class. He smoothed down the covers on his freshly made bed and pulled on a pair of slacks.

When Jean finally let Red in, it was clear that what Red had to say couldn’t be said in English. Red began in a tentative Creole French patois that he knew Jean, being from Dominica, would understand. As Red told his story in the language that would always remind Jean of his grandmother and the healing and magic powers she had given him, Jean began to understand the gravity of his visit. Although Jean had to work hard to understand his grandmother’s tongue because it sounded foreign in Red’s mouth, he got the general idea and it scared him. What Red wanted wasn’t a cure for v.d. or a spell to bring back a lost lover. Red wanted Jean to find his mother, to ask her a question he’d wanted to know the answer to before he died.

“I can’t promise you a thing like that.”

“You disappoint me. You’re supposed to be able to talk to the ancestors, to communicate with those who have gone before.”

“Your talk is sweet but what you are asking of me is too much. To speak to those in the beyond is the work of those who have great power. Me, I’m just a petit fils in the eyes of the ancestors. Tell me that you want someone to fall in love with you. Or that there is something lost that needs to be found. And I will do it gladly for you.”

“There is something that is lost. My mother knows where my father is buried and I need to find him.”

“What good is a dead man to you?”

“You won’t believe me unless I show you.” And with that, Red took off his tee-shirt to show Jean the whip lashes there.

“Every night, I have been getting beatings from those who want to avenge my father’s death. I went to every voodoo woman on Guadeloupe and they all said the same thing, that only traveling across the water could stop it. That those who haunt me would drown me if they tried to walk on water. And yet here I am, two weeks in Barbados and the lashes are still here. I am afraid to go to sleep at night for the scars I know I’ll wake up with in the morning.”

Jean touched the rivers of welted flesh that criss-crossed Red’s back. He softened as he followed one from the base of his spine to the small of his back. Jean’s skin shook. This was the spiritual backlash his grandmother had warned him about.

“I can try.”

“That’s all I can ask.”

“And what will you give me in return?”

“Everything I know.”

“But you give that freely to all the other students. I want to know what you will give only me. There is something that you haven’t said.”

“I see your grandmother has trained you well to listen between the words. The family I come from stretches all the way back to Benin where my ancestors practiced voodoo. Once I find my father and bury him properly, I will break this curse. And then I can teach you more than what you now know of the beyond.”

“And if you don’t?”

“You have nothing to lose.”

They agreed to meet later that night in the chapel. Jean knew that he would need to summon all the strongest spirits to support him in his work and so he looked to John the Baptist and St. Andrew who resided in the stained-glass windows. To the trained eye, they were just pictures. For Red and Jean, they were the spiritual support needed for the task at hand.

Red arrived just minutes before midnight, dressed in the white clothing that Jean had requested he wear for the ritual. Jean settled into his place just beneath the altar and pulled together all his tools for the ceremony in front of him—four lilies, a bowl of water, a live chicken, the sage Mom Viv had packed in Jean’s trunk for moments like this.

Red looked on as Jean called upon the deities to aid him in communicating with Red’s mother. When he could only see the whites of Jean’s eyes, he knew he was gone. His body shook, foam frothing at the corners of his mouth. Many minutes later, Jean came back from a journey that looked like it had aged him several years.

“The journey ends where it begins. You can find your father where you took your first breaths,” Jean said.

“Is there nothing more? Nothing more that she said about what she did to him or why?” Red asked.

“Do you dare demand from the spirit world what it isn’t inclined to give?”

“No.”

Red thanked Jean, went back to his room and spent what was left of the night wondering what his mother meant by the place where he took his first breaths. For the first time since his back had turned up bruises, Red was able to fall asleep and dream. In his dream, he saw his young mother struggling in a canoe on the same river where they’d had Sunday afternoon picnics. There, in what was said to be the lushest land on Basse-Terre, lay his father’s remains, his mother told him. He knew he had to get back there.

In the morning, Red woke up sweating as he hadn’t in so many years. He got ready for his class in silence, found himself feeling lighter now that he knew his ordeal would soon be over. He walked to his class, which had ballooned to more than a hundred students crowded into a small class room, eager to learn about the meaning of God. The students voiced loud protests when they heard the news that Red would be returning to Guadeloupe to take care of personal affairs.

“If you think that this is an excuse to mess around in my absence, I expect your compositions on my desk before I start our next lecture,” Red said.

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When Red landed on Guadeloupe, he saw the little man who had previously only visited him at night waiting for him at the dock. Polite enough to leave things at

least until they were alone, the man leaned in to speak once they were both in the back seat of the taxi, heading to the river in Basse-Terre.

“But your grandmother never told you to listen between the words?” the spirit whispered, spit shining one of the many gold buttons of his suit.

“I gone leave you soon. So don’t worry yourself about how high and mighty you feel now,” Red replied.

The taxi stopped at the river and let out Red and the little man.

“Where you take your first breaths is where you go take your last.”

And with that Red was dead, pushed into the same river whose banks he’d been born on thirty-five years before. He remembered what his grandmother had told him once after he spilled a jug of water on himself and felt himself straining for air.

“You must remember that not everything you see in this world is for you. And that not everything said from the beyond is true. All you can do is listen between the words and use the eyes the ancestors gave you to hear and hope.”

Schwartz

By the time Moishe and Lem rolled onto Montgomery Street in their moving truck, there were already yellow patches on their white shirts where sweat had soaked through. Nobody on our block moved on a Sunday but then what we were doing couldn't really be called moving. And Moishe and Lem couldn't work on Saturday, because it was the Sabbath. Mommy told me that she once had to push the elevator buttons for a Hasidic woman in the Williamsburg bank building downtown. I didn't believe her but when I asked Moishe, he said that it was true.

The night before Moishe and Lem arrived, me and my sister packed boxes with our mother. This was the second time we'd moved in three years. This time, we didn't have an address where Daddy could send birthday cards or a stoop we could sit on when our legs got tired from jumping double dutch. Mommy said that we were going to live with the sisters of the church and Bishop Farred, that they would take care of us. Ever since she pierced my ears for my seventh birthday three summers ago, I've been wearing the same small cross earrings. I really want to wear the gold serpent earrings Granny sent me from Barbados, but Mommy says that those earrings are the devil's work, could only be made by someone who eats of the forbidden fruit.

Mommy has lots of rules now. We go to church every night after school. In the hour on the A train between our house and Harlem, we have to recite the prayers and psalms she's been teaching us and finish our homework. She says that every word that comes out of our mouths should be the word of God, not the filth she hears on the television and hears spouting from our raggedy friends' mouths. She doesn't let me play with the girl who lives next door anymore because she once heard her telling me what the word pussy meant. I knew what it meant already but I just wanted to see

what she would say. She tells me that it's my fault that Armando threw me down the concrete stairs in the playground at school because I wouldn't let him touch me down there.

Mommy teaches me how to fight after Armando pushes me down the stairs. She asks me if I enjoy being taken advantage of, coming home with scratches on my face and scared to go back to school the next day. I am not sure what to say so I don't say anything at all. When Tabitha Johnson beats me up and drags a sharp fingernail down the side of my face, Mommy is so mad that she punches me. The whole right side of my face swells to the size of softball. As she presses a cold washcloth to my face, she tells me that girls will always hate me because I am smarter than them and a little bit more light skinned. I want to tell her that the cross earrings and long skirts she makes me wear to school make me an easy mark, but I keep my mouth shut because I don't want anymore licks.

On the Sunday when Moishe and Lem arrive, Mommy has been smoking cigarettes since the sun peeped into our room early that morning. Mommy sleeps on the outside of the queen bed me, her, and my sister share. She ashes and puts out her butts in an old soda can that stands where our night table used to be. When we are awake and excited and talking about the next place we're going to move to, our voices echo. Where there were our textbooks and library books wrapped in brown paper on the bookshelf, now there are only a few cardboard boxes and crates, the rusty bed frame.

I whisper to my sister about the time she pulled one of my baby teeth by tying my tooth to the crate with dental floss and then running to the other side of the living room with it. Simone doesn't like to hear me reminisce about how she got a beating when Mommy found out there was no more floss. Right before the moving truck

honks outside, she slaps me when Mommy is not looking. In the living room next door, Mommy consider whether we should take the sofa bed that has a burn the size of my hand in the mattress from the time she left a cigarette burning there. I decide not to tell her that Simone has slapped me but I promise my sister I will get her back later.

Moishe and Lem take the elevator up to the third floor with me. It is dark and they ask me if the lights in the hallway have always been broken. I shrug my shoulders because I am used to the darkness. Downstairs, Mommy does the last of our laundry. Simone guards the moving truck to make sure nobody takes any of our stuff. Moishe, the fat one, gives Simone the keys to the truck and tells her to honk if there is any trouble. Simone is only fifteen but her big breasts and the eyeliner Mommy lets her wear now make her look at least three years older. I see Lem, the short one, look at the way that Simone's hips shake when she climbs into the truck.

In the elevator, Moishe and Lem ask me what my favorite foods are. I tell them I am tired of the black eyed peas and cuckoo and flying fish that my mother makes. I tell them that it is because she is from the islands that she cooks like that. I say islands because I am sure that if I say we are from Barbados they will not understand. I only want what the other kids have: a chance to eat Chinese food whenever I want to. I want greasy chicken wings to stain my fingers, french fries dipped in oil and msg, spare rib tips coated in special sauce. I tell them that my favorite is chicken and broccoli with garlic sauce, that my sister prefers sesame chicken and pork fried rice. Moishe wonders out loud what a pretty girl like me would do to get one of my favorite things.

I run in front of Moishe and Lem to our apartment at the end of the hallway. The keys hang from a long piece of red lanyard around my neck; they hit the hard

bone in my chest when I run. Behind me I can hear Moishe and Lem, walking slowly. The black shoes they wear look comfortable. I ask them if they are sneakers, because they are quiet like sneakers. I ask them why they both wear black and white blankets whose fringes hang out of the back of their pants. They say it would be too difficult for a little girl like me to understand.

The apartment stinks of cigarette smoke and the frankincense Mommy burns every night. I go to open the window to let air in but Moishe, the fat one with drop curls that graze his second chin, tells me not to. The window in our bedroom, where I used to talk to my friend who lived next door, is closed when Lem, the short one, wraps his arm around my waist and tells me that good girls are quiet, do as they are told.

Our queen sized mattress is rolled up on the floor in the bedroom; brown masking tape holds it closed. I know that when Moishe rips the masking tape, he will see the yellow stain from where I wet the bed. I try to head for the bathroom but Lem says that I should not go anywhere. He pushes me down onto the mattress. It is dusty and I sneeze.

In the time that it takes my mother to put three loads of laundry and coins into the washing machine downstairs, Moishe is on top of me. He puts a sweaty palm over my mouth. I swallow stray strands from the cardboard boxes piled up in the corner. I wonder if I will ever get the smell of those boxes and his hands out of my mouth. Lem pulls off my sneakers that light up when I run down the block. Moishe pulls down my panties and blue jeans, uses his right hand to take what was hard and pressing against my leg and put it inside me. It hurts. A pain that makes sense of the oranges and reds I see behind my eyes when I shut them tight. I bleed onto his black and white blanket. The mattress stays clean.

I do not fight or scratch or bite or kick. Mommy has taught me how to knock the wind out of my opponent, that if I kick a boy in between his legs, he will leave me alone. In that moment, I am only aware of the stale air, Moishe's palm on my mouth, the fear I feel.

Lem watches the door while Moishe is on top of me. I want to scream but Moishe keeps whispering that if I do, it will only make things worse. He says that if I relax I might enjoy it. I can't relax and am still scared when I feel the wet of my blood and his cum on my leg. When he is done, Moishe folds and tucks his blanket into his pants. I go to the bathroom, try to wrap my jeans around me. I am in the bathroom for a long time and when I come out there are no more boxes or crates and the bed frame has disappeared. Lem, who stopped knocking on the door when I told him I was all right, says that he has a surprise for me, chicken and broccoli from Happy Days Chinese food restaurant around the corner. When I pick up the Styrofoam container, Moishe jokes that there is almost nothing a schwartze wouldn't do for food. Lem says that if we only applied that same determination to a work ethic, our people would get farther.

Their laughter follows me downstairs where my sister is still sitting on the back of the truck. She is already eating her sesame chicken and pork fried rice. I give her mine to eat because I am not hungry any more.

Mommy packs our clean laundry in the trunk of the taxi that will take us uptown. She pays Moishe and Lem in small bills with the money left at the end of a month long with our needs. She apologizes because the tip she gives them is small, no match for the heavy sofabed they dragged down ten flights of stairs.

I stay quiet because I am a good girl.

Fish

The Caribbean Sea a distant memory, Fish saw in Cape Town's dockyards hope, strong winds, a sea too rough to swim in. He remembered hot days at the edge of St. John's port swimming with his brothers and father, waving to his mother who stayed ashore. She was too scared to let her heft drop into the water, where she knew her feet would never touch ground. Fish was never afraid to find his whole body submerged and his toes still stretching towards gravel or reef or sand. He got his name because he was the only one of his father's six boys who, thrown into the water at the age of five, didn't need any warm grownup hand under his belly so he could flail his arms and propel his body forward. Fish knew the sea, looked on longingly as his brothers splashed about and played and bathed and counted the years, then months, then days, until his fifth birthday party on the black sand beaches on Barbuda, Antigua's sister island. His stomach was full of fried bakes when he hit the blue expanse. His teeth were full of pineapple; the yellow strings hung from his teeth like streamers. From the deck of the *Esperanza*, he remembered that moment twenty years ago as if it were yesterday, the pink bathing suit his mother wore struggling against her skin's folds, the black sand settling in its creases.

Fish came from a family of fishermen, black men made blacker by the sun that shone down on them on their daily trips out to sea. At a time when most men were breaking their backs on tobacco plantations or losing limbs in the sugar mills, Fish's father, Reef, was a self-made man, supported by what the sea offered him. Rumor had it that Fish's grandmother, an even blacker woman straight from Africa, had made a deal with the devil that tied all of her future generations to the water. Reef insisted that nothing other than his love affair with the sea led him there each

morning. He explained away the indigo that his mother wore until her dying day and the chants she sang herself to sleep with as the way of old-timers. At night, lit by an oil lamp and comforted by the singing of his wife, Shona, Reef sewed fishing nets, mended his poles, told outlandish stories about fish larger than his head that he caught in his nets, spun tales about sharks that confided in him the details of their boy-eating adventures. Every day, except for Sundays and Christmas and Easter and Boxing Day, Reef dragged in doctor fish and shrimp and tilapia around sundown for the women who waited for him at the top of the beach, their skirts pulled away from their ankles to avoid the high-tide's kisses.

After his first taste of sea salt, Fish knew that his life would never be the same again. He wanted nothing more than to find his way on the sea's waves. Unlike his father and his father before him, though, Fish wanted to feel other ocean mists caressing his face. Unlike his brothers, who spent their days playing in the sea and flirting with girls they hoped would someday become their wives, Fish knew that he would need more than the skills his father taught him to see what he wished for.

In those days, education in Antigua took the form of transmitting basic numeracy and reading skills with more than a healthy dose of Christianity to the black natives. The natives needed to know enough to count correct change for their madams and read the bible to their children, the English examiners who set the curriculum for the colonies figured. Fish answered to his Christian name in school, Jonah, surprised his teachers and headmaster every year he had a first-class pass in every subject at St. Michael's. What he didn't learn at St. Michael's, he absorbed in the run down library in town, spent long afternoons dreaming about spices on the Indian Ocean and the European cities that beckoned on the other side of the Atlantic.

At the end of sixth form, when the O Levels results came in, Mr. White, his English teacher, wondered out loud how a native could trump the sun-baked sons of Scottish merchants and Irish sailors who rotated in and out of the dunce chair each year. Fish shook with his anger and brushed aside Mr. White's arrogance. He took his certificate home to his mother who framed it with the money she had been saving from Reef's Saturday fish sales in town.

After years of consultation from Fish, Reef's fishing business had grown from a one-man operation to one that employed his six sons as assistants. Fish's mother grilled fish on an open fire most Friday nights. Her cooking sent a mysterious scent of scotch pepper and onions above the wattle and daub houses that lined St. John's pier. Jealous women lined up to buy fish from Shona for their husbands, their scorn masquerading as a reaction to the strong spices she used in her cooking. On Saturday mornings, Fish accompanied his father to the market in town where they courted customers with credit, weekly specials, a wholesale buying plan. Other fisherman wished that they had a son like Fish. Fish saw his life stretched before him, the routine of rising with the sun and pulling in his boats at sunset, taking fish to market, marrying a pretty daughter of another fisherman. And he wanted more.

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Reef woke up on August 12, 1899 as he had on every other morning, wondering what gifts the sea would offer that day. He had a cup of English tea in the light blue of the morning, left his children and wife sleeping. Reef smiled when he spotted a hunched-over Trevor, manning his usual station on a tree stump on the beach. Trevor was so old that no one could say for sure how long he'd been walking

on this earth. By the look of his wizened face and hands cramped by arthritis, he could be seventy five or one hundred years old. He took all his aches and pains to the beach each morning because he thought that if sea breeze and sea water couldn't cure what ailed him, nothing else could.

“But what is this? You dressed as if you going to sea this morning,” the old man said.

“Yessah. It's forty-nine years that I've been walking down this road to find my fish. What's so different about this morning?,” Reef asked.

“Well, I would say if you want to see more years, you might take your hot foot back the way you came,” Trevor said, shifting on the tree stump to get a better view of his late best friend's son.

“Old man, don't tell me you find yourself caught up in all that obeh foolishness,” Reef said.

“It's the day you see the sea still that you should wonder what sleeping under there. I just hope you know what you going in for,” Trevor warned.

“Well, old man, I'm gone. It have seven hungry bellies to feed at home. I can't be dragging my feet. Sun catch me out here, the whole day gone and all the fish gone to somebody with a brighter step,” Reef said.

“All right. I just hope for you and them seven stomachs that what's sleeping under the sea don't wake up while you out there.”

“I'll be fine. Till later,” Reef said, waving his indigo hat to Trevor.

Reef walked down to the dockyard where his small boat, Faith, awaited him. Just an hour out to sea, Reef looked behind him to see his fellow fishermen making their way back to shore quickly, as if they saw something he didn't. He sat still in the sea's quiet, the only sound the fish nibbling at his bait. He calculated how a good run

today might mean they could make the annual trip to Barbuda to see his family for Fish's birthday the next weekend.

No one saw the wind or waves or trees knocking about until it was too late to fetch Reef from the water. He tried at first to paddle back to shore, but the force of the sea overturned Reef and the small boat and his fish in one cruel gesture. Reef's bloated and blue body washed ashore three days later to the sandy beach where his wife had been waiting for him. A dead doctor fish bearing the same sublime expression peeked out of Reef's pocket, as if he were saving it for a later that never arrived.

After his father died, there was nothing else to keep Fish in Antigua. He signed up as a seaman on Esperanza and hoped that the sea would take him as far away as possible from the pain that it soldered. Fish's memory failed him. He spent his nights on the Esperanza trying to piece together where the darkness of the morning light, the sea, his father's black skin and the indigo hat met and parted. He wondered if it could have been him, caught in the storm's eye, wondering how his lover could have betrayed him. Fish set out to see if his grandmother's offerings to Yemaya might protect him.

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Fish's feet briefly touched British soil before he was shipped out again to South Africa, where tensions were brewing between the British and the Boers. Fish jumped at the chance to leave behind the grey city where he first disembarked. Its cobblestone streets and its dwellers' dark glare reminded him of the haunts the British had created for themselves in Antigua, the burnt-out buildings up in Shirley Heights

where he and his brothers would sometimes play at being naval soldiers aiming at attacking ships. Fish recognized from the books he had read Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, the Westminster Abbey that his schoolteachers had once talked of so wistfully. Compared to the image he had of the grand city paved with gold and good fortune, London didn't measure up.

In London, Fish got his first shillings from his captain, payment for his services as a kitchen boy. For weeks Fish had been covering for the chef, a drunken Anthony from Spain who slurred his sorrows into glass after glass of whisky. In the four weeks of their journey, Fish managed to improvise enough variations from his mother's kitchen to keep the men happy without inviting suspicions that a darky was preparing their victuals. From the first time that he was called a boy and charged with keeping the men happy and well fed, Fish knew his place. Here, all the book learning and his first-class passes at St. Michael's meant next to nothing, if anything made him a potentially uppity negro. As his mother before had taught him, sometimes you had to play fool to catch wise. And so Fish pretended, stuffed his book learning into a back pocket until he could reach for it again.

On the *Esperanza*, men dismissed the realities that had brought them aboard. Even though on the first day you might see a glimpse of a lost lover or a destitute family in downcast eyes, by the end of the first week out at sea, everyone had adopted a new name for themselves, cloaked themselves in a new identity. Men who had been soft at home became hard. Those who barely spoke before became brawny with their invented tales of the seaside whores who pined for their return. Everyone got a new name. Everyone that is, except Fish, whose name suited him quite well already.

The second day at sea, Fish met Granville, who he didn't know then would be his forever friend. They were working together in the kitchen, peeling potatoes and

strategizing on how to make meals out of the scraps the cheap captain had provided them.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” Granville said.

Fish walked into the kitchen tucked away deep in the ship’s bowels, late for his first day at work. Fish had slipped out of his bunk the night before, wanting to see the stars from the ship’s deck. As the sea rocked him to a restless sleep in the cradle of his favorite dinghy, Fish wondered what his mother and brothers were doing under the same stars, if he might ever see them again, what fortune or misfortune might await him on the Cape. He found himself waking up every couple hours at the end of the same dream, catching himself right before he drowned. After a sleepless night, Fish was not in the mood for small talk.

“What happen? Your ears knock off?” Granville asked.

“Me, I’m just minding my business until you talk to me like you have some sense,” Fish offered.

“I see. A man of principles. I like that in a friend,” Granville said.

“Who said we were friends? My eyes just run on you and I’m not too sure I like what I see,” Fish said.

“Well, let’s start again. Dear sir, would you mind telling me what has brought you onboard the Esperanza? It is not everyday that angels descend to be amongst us mere mortals,” Granville joked.

“I don’t know why you mangle up your mouth so. Me, I’m just trying to take the sea as far as it goes,” Fish replied.

“Sounds like you trying to throw away your past when you ain’t catch your future yet.”

“Didn’t know that I had to have one.”

“Well, who say the future ain’t start all ready?”

“Yes, who said that?” Fish said, throwing another peeled potato on the pile.

Granville had left Barbados for the first time three years before, led to the sea by a family that never wanted him. He was a fair-skinned with curly hair and a beauty mark on the left side of his chin that made girls swoon for him. His mother had charmed so many men with the same beauty mark that she could barely tell her children apart. Having been called boy most of his life, Granville walked out at 17, when he thought he was old enough to be called a man, and set sail on the *Esperanza*. To hear him tell it, the *Esperanza* had sailed the seven seas, carried spices from India and pandas from Japan. Granville bragged that he could ask women for sex in ten different languages.

“But nothing at all go so. I know for a fact you don’t speak more than some bad English and a teaspoon of even worse French,” Fish said once, interrupting one of Granville’s tall tales.

“Love’s the same in all the languages. You can speak more with the eyes than with the mouth you know,” Granville said.

“I guess I still have a lot to learn,” Fish said.

“Watch the master at work and you will win every time,” Granville said.

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After three months onboard the *Esperanza*, Fish was unrecognizable to himself. He had exchanged the better part of the pay packet he received in London for a pocket watch, waistcoat, and some pomade to smooth the kinks from his hair.

Granville was encouraged by the wavy hair Fish had inherited from his mother and the freckles he sported on both cheeks.

“I’m almost twenty-one and there’s not a girl who set her eyes on me yet that doesn’t instantly fall in love,” Fish said, protesting his makeover.

“Yes, fisherman, I know that. But them Antiguan girls who does flash their teeth for an extra kilo of fish are not the same as the ones you will find in Cape Town. These girls have taste,” Granville said.

“Are you trying to say that I’m not good enough for them?” Fish asked.

“Nothing of the sort. Just trying to help you fit the Cape a little easier. I’m sure there’s going to be some fair beauty that catches your eye. And when you catch her eye, I want to be sure that she looks back,” Granville said.

Fish acquiesced to his transformation, sat still as Granville slicked pomade onto his hair and tied his head with a cotton rag. He was sure that key to his future wife lay in surviving the headaches that ensued.

“What’re we going to do about your name, Fish?” Granville asked.

“What do you mean we? I don’t see anything wrong with my name,” Fish said.

“Well, the question is not of wrong or right. But of whether you want to stay a country bumpkin or not,” Granville said.

“I’m not a country bumpkin,” Fish said.

“I know that. You know that. But anyone who hears you introduce yourself as Fish will not necessarily feel the same way. What’s your Christian name?” Granville said.

“Jonah,” Fish mumbled.

“Johnathan?” Granville asked.

“No, Jonah. Like the Bible,” Fish explained.

“I see. Your family not easy, boy. Like they made you for the sea. The whales might be less ready this time around to swallow you up whole. It’s like you getting fat since you come on board.” Granville said.

Like many travelers before him, it took Fish a while to get used to his new name. It still bore the sting of the monks who taught him at St. Michael’s but Fish had to remind himself that he was no longer a small island boy at the mercy of his teachers. By the time they docked in Cape Town at the end of the Esperanza’s four-month journey, Fish had transitioned to using his full Christian name, Jonah Absalom. It fit him like a new coat, still too tight and reeking with its novelty. But when he introduced himself to the first person he met in Cape Town, Granville’s sister-in-law, Carmella, he knew that he had made the right choice.

There were no fishermen’s dinghies competing with ships in Cape Town’s dockyards. The sea port bustled with people of all colors, a riot of sound and sea that overwhelmed Fish’s senses. The workers ranged from the most sun burnt red of the Dutch and English bosses to the blue black of the native Africans who fetched water and mended ropes. Everywhere Fish heard languages unfamiliar to his ears flying about. The harsh Afrikaans that the lighter-skinned blacks and the whites spoke stuck in the back of his throat when he tried to repeat basic greetings like thank you and hello. He cringed at the clicks shooting off of the native Africans’ tongues and reminded himself that at least here he was no longer a native. He was a subject of the British empire, a member of the Commonwealth. Things could be worse. He could be an African.

Granville was popular on the docks. As he made his way towards his wife, Constance, and their twin girls, Mischa and Michelle, Granville was stopped every

few steps by men with Afrikaans accents and a couple West Indians like themselves demanding his thoughts on London, the falling prices of sugar, wage stagnancy, the need for a mutual aid society among Caribbean men. It seemed like years before they finally made it to the crowd of good-looking women and children that stood patiently waiting for Granville. Mischa and Michelle, both shy enough to look down when they greeted their father's friend, found themselves pulled in by Fish's smile. The girls were won by the way Fish bent down to look into each one of their eyes and fold blue handkerchiefs into their palms.

Constance and her sister Carmella were like lighthouses on the pier, dressed in white dresses so speckles and form fitting that they seemed to have jumped from the sewing table onto their bodies. Carmella, ever wary of stepping out of her older sister's shadow, wore white gloves with red trim and a red carnation in her hair, a mess of loose curls tinted auburn by the sun. Fish looked on as Granville was caught up in the embrace of Constance and the two girls. Carmella stood to the side, as if she looked too good to break a sweat in January's heat.

She looked at Fish and said: "Well, then. It looks like there's nothing more to be said than welcome home."

"I guess not. Jonah Absalom," Fish introduced himself.

"Carmella Retief."

Carmella walked down the pier and towards District Six, the sun perched in her carnation's petals. She heaved her long left leg up and tried hard to pull her shorter right leg alongside her. Fish offered Carmella his hand and with that, a pact was sealed. Fish didn't feel pity or sympathy for Carmella. He was awed by how beautiful she could be even when asking for help. By the time they arrived at the two-room house on Deville Lane, Fish was already sweating and worried that he might be

smelling like dead flying fish, a scent he thought he'd never lose after so many years at sea.

"I'm sorry if I smell bad. It's just after so many days at sea, you can't get the salt off you," Fish said, anticipating Carmella's rejection.

"I like a man who smells like his work," Carmella said, pushing a whole hand into the zinc bathtub full of water she'd left to warm in the afternoon sun.

"Thank you," he said.

Granville and Fish bathed together in the small backyard behind the house. They made plans for the following Monday when Fish would start work on the dockyard, helping unload the ships that arrived almost every day from England. Because of the house's small quarters, Granville and Fish couldn't say more than what the eyes could about Fish's attraction to Carmella.

"Finer woman than Constance you won't find on the Cape, and certainly not in the rest of District Six," Granville said.

"I can see that and the two beautiful children she's made for you too," Fish said.

"Runs in the family. Nothing too big you could ask of me out here. All we West Indians have to look out for each other, care for one another. We can't forget where we come from. We only come to stay in this man country for a little while. When I make good, I'm going back home," Granville said.

That first night Fish and Carmella shared a mattress on the floor, giggled to relieve the pressure of their forced intimacy. A single blue sheet separated the sleeping area into two, creating the illusion of privacy. Constance whispered to Granville that she didn't remember the last time she'd heard her sister laugh.

Just a year after coming to Cape Town, Fish had done well for himself, working tirelessly on the docks by day and building a three-room house for himself and his young wife, Carmella, at night. Wanting nothing less than the best for his family, Fish built a concrete house with an indoor bathroom. He said that his house would be the best on his street, that he hadn't come this far to go back to the shack and shanty living of Antigua. By his own hand, and sometimes with the help of Granville and the other friends he made on the docks and at St. Mark's Anglican Church, the house that no one believed could be built was erected. The one-room houses that stood around Fish and Carmella's house slunk into the shadows, as if it wanting to disappear so that their house could look grander.

One afternoon, as they waited for the last coat of paint to dry on the new house, Granville and Fish sat down to have a beer, the first one they'd had in a long time.

"Well, anyone who says that black people won't work, you turning them into a liar," Granville said, before cupping his mouth around the beer bottle's sweating head.

"No sir. My father ain't raise six boys who 'fraid to get their hands dirty. If I don't see anything else in this world, I know that I will do the best by my family," Fish said.

"Well, you know Fish, it's not like you had to do it all by yourself. Here you were paying me rent and I told you that nothing at all have to go so. You ain't listen but I can see now that anything you set your mind to, it's God himself who have to come in and set you back," Granville said.

“Well, it looks like the future catch me looking better than I thought I would. And you, Granville, what happened to all that big talk you had out on the sea?” Fisk asked.

“Nothing happen to my big talk. My talk just get quieter now since I see how things really does work. You might read your Reader’s Digest and all your fancy books from the library up the road but still it’s only the way that we speak English and the fact that we not quite so black that separate all we from the kaffirs. We catching hell out here, Fish,” Granville said. His sipped on his beer longer now, reached just then for another bottle from the box Fish had bought to celebrate.

“Well, I say you only catch as much hell as you can fit in the palm of your hand. I think something about you get lazy since you taste land and that woman of yours again. The worse thing we could do is get too comfortable,” Fish said. In the dark, his eyes adjusted to the oil lamps he saw lit in the houses around him. The smoke from the dung fires burnt his nose and brought water to his eyes where there hadn’t been any before.

“The worse thing you could do is forget that money and things just passing through. It’s only the happiness you have, the memories, that you can always pick back up again. You think any of those soldiers that dying out there think that they wished that they had worked harder?” Granville asked.

“I’m not talking about any Boers or English men fighting over land. I’m asking you about what you’re going to do with the two hands that the good Lord gave you,” Fish said.

The beer tickled the top of Granville’s throat. He gulped it down, noticed the three bottles he’d already downed, the wet one that still stood in front of Fish like a sentry. A wall had gone up between the men that wasn’t there before. Outwardly they

were the same, brothers who supported each other, walked home from work together, inquired about each other's kids, planned family picnics in the summer. But Granville knew Fish found him deeply disappointing. And because they couldn't talk about this regret, it just stayed there, defeated their attempts at regaining the closeness they'd felt before.

After six years of saving and scrounging and working like a dog from can't see in morning until can't see at night, Fish saw the birth of his baby girl, Hope. By now, Fish was not only a supervisor on the docks but also on the vestry at St. Mark's Church, a member of the Brotherhood of St. Andrew, and the newly elected secretary of the West Indian American Association. When he wasn't running about to work or meetings, Fish was at home sleeping or playing with Hope. With her fat cheeks and eyes arched in the way of his family back home, Hope was the apple of her father's eye from the moment she came out of the womb struggling to breathe through a caul the midwife swore was good luck, especially for a seaman's child.

Carmella, buoyed by the other women's opinions that even if she didn't see her husband she knew that he was too busy making money to be cheating on her, suffered Fish's long absences without complaint. She spent her days taking care of her own baby and Constance's little ones as well. When Fish was able to do more than greet her and Hope, Fish made love to her that was more like wrestling than the sweetness she'd known before. She took her concerns to her sister, who still managed to glow with the affection Granville gave her every night. And though Constance told her not to worry herself, Carmella wondered if it was her long leg that had done this to her. Maybe if she had been less ugly, Fish might have made time to love her, she thought.

One Saturday afternoon, Fish came home early to see Carmella pressing his clothes for church the next day. He held out his arms for Hope, who jumped into them. He was surprised to see his wife in the day time, the way her yellow dress draped just below the back of her knees. He remembered that he had once known that terrain so well.

“Daddy, Mommy just made me some lekker koeksisters,” Hope mumbled through the sugar and syrup that stuck to her teeth and lips.

“Is that right, my darling? And where did you learn that word, lekker?”

“Mommy told me that lekker means sweet. Like I am her sweet little girl. And like you are sweet too, Daddy.”

Fish put Hope down on the floor and walked across the room where his white shirt was stretched taut across the ironing board. Fish’s hot breath caught in Carmella’s collar. The iron caught on her wrist and burnt the flesh there. She winced but did not let out the eye water that gathered there. In the back bedroom, away from Hope, Fish’s anger surged.

“What did I tell you about teaching my child some backwater African language?” Fish demanded.

Carmella kept quiet.

“You lucky that I’m not like some other man who would twist your mouth in two. I swear to God that if I ever come back in this house and hear you speaking Afrikaans to my child, all hell gone break loose in here. You hearing me?”

“Yes,” Carmella whispered. She clapped out of the room on the shoes Fish had bought from England especially for her. And in the only indoor bathroom in District Six, she let her tears flow into the face basin. Outside the door, Hope was

crying, sucking sticky fingers that had stained her clothes, using her free hand to bang on the bathroom door. Fish was trying to teach her the word 'delectable.'

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Fish and the men of the West Indian American Association planned picnics and outings for their families, schemed on new ways to get higher wages for themselves and more work, decided that the only way for them to get ahead was to stick together. While the Boers and the English invented new ways to destroy each other, the black men from the islands focused on the present moment, on how they could stay alive and thrive. Granville usually contented himself with his work and wife and Friday nights while Fish was always inventing ways to make more money, everything from selling fried fish like his mother on Friday nights to selling soap and bread through the window in his extra bedroom. But something shifted the day Granville found out that he was not the British citizen he thought he was.

Granville and his boys were enjoying Old Year's Night on Bree Street when suddenly they saw a couple, a white man and his wife, heading towards a fete at the top of Adderley Street. As everybody in Cape Town loves a *jol*, Granville thought to offer the man a sip from his container of whisky.

"Hey man, but doesn't everybody love a drink. It's almost the beginning of a new year. Live a little and take a sip," Granville said.

"If you'll excuse me please," said the man, reddening in the face as he noticed the five men lined up behind Granville.

"Won't you have a drink with us? And then maybe one for the lady?"

“No, I will not. What I will have is you arrested if you persist on speaking to a proper lady that way.”

“A proper lady? Not like my wife? And what will you have me arrested for? Enjoying myself on Old Year’s night?” Granville said, giving way to the four tots of whisky he’d had at that point.

Before Granville’s friends could tell him to ease up, the police came to cart him away. Granville spent Old Year’s night and a good part of New Year’s Day in a crowded cell with the other vagrants. When he was released into the heat of a January day, Granville had sobered from his drunken state and realized the gravity of his situation. Granville wanted to ask the officer if spending a night in jail wasn’t enough punishment for a crime he hadn’t committed, but he held his tongue. He didn’t need to waste his time with a petty officer. He decided to look to the British consulate for support.

Granville never made it past the gate at the British consulate.

“Excuse me, boy. You can deliver your parcels, round the back,” said the security guard in a clipped English accent Granville had always wanted for himself.

“I’m sorry, you seem to have me confused with a worker. I’m here to plead a case before the consulate,” Granville replied, imitating how Fish might speak in a situation like this.

“And what kind of case that might be?” the guard inquired.

“Well, it’s very sensitive, having to do with a case of racial discrimination at the hands of the South African police against myself, a subject of the British empire.”

“Really? And where do you hail from?”

“Barbados.”

“Listen boy, why don’t you make things easier on yourself and just turn back now? These are not the kinds of things a busy consulate wants to hear.”

When Granville tried to protest and wondered out loud what good it was to be a citizen of a country that refuses to protect you, he found himself in the gutter. Granville wiped the grime from his one good suit he had worn for his interview and walked away.

After that day, there was no turning back for Granville. Where before he had been content to drink away the part of his pay his wife didn’t put away for safekeeping, Granville was suddenly aware of the relationship between the back-breaking work he did down at the docks, the merchants who profited from the goods, and the native, coloured, and foreign blacks who mingled on the dockyard, pulling each other down without recognizing that none of them were actually on top anyway. No matter he figured the equation, people who looked like him were coming out with nothing.

Having overcome his fear of jail, there was nothing that could stop Granville from organizing the workers around him. Armed with several translators and the support of everyone from water boys to shipmates, Granville went forward with his plan to unite workers around higher pay and better working conditions. He proposed the first pay raise in dockworkers’ salaries that had been initiated in over twenty years.

The big bosses of the yard agreed to increase the worker’s wages, without too much resistance. They imposed a tri-partite wage increase, with highest wages for whites and the lowest for the Bantus. Granville admitted defeat in the divisions this

arrangement reinforced, but he couldn't say no to the deal that had been placed on the table.

What everyone had hailed as a victory soon showed itself for what it was. On the first Friday when the workers found their pay packets weighed down with more money than they'd ever seen before, plans were made for a party in District Six. At the top of Vermont Lane, just across from where the Jewish women had turned their house into a laundry and mess hall for the bachelors who had no women to care for them, Granville met his match, Carmel Cato.

Carmel was a Guyanese man with a knife scar running from his right nostril to his right ear that no one had ever had the nerve to ask him about. He didn't like Granville since he first set eyes on him. Where before Carmel had been the head of the crew of West Indian boys that worked down at the docks, he soon found himself replaced by Granville, who never required of his friends anything but a willingness to have a good time. With Granville you felt like you had a brother you'd always known, who would help you pack a barrel to send home or give you a little extra money to make it through the week, whose sympathies you believed were sincere when tragedy struck your house. Carmel Cato shone with the gleam of someone waiting to take advantage of your weakness. His friends stayed around him because they were afraid not to.

Carmel, like many of the West Indian men, had set up a side business. Unlike the men who organized cock fights or sold tailor-made trousers, Carmel made money off of other people's bad fortune. He charged twenty-percent interest for pay day loans that men used to pay off other debts or to buy their wives new fabric for their birthdays. Carmel Cato capitalized on the mens' desire to look and seem better off

than they really were. And so it was that Velmont Lane hummed on Friday nights with sound, the mutters of men waiting on line to pay Carmel what they owed him.

Carmel was on his front porch counting the money he had collected and writing down the names of men to whom he'd have to pay a personal visit later on that evening when he saw Granville coming up Velmont Lane.

"How you going this evening, Granville?" Carmel asked. The scar across his cheek shone in the light of an oil lamp on his porch.

"Not too bad. Can't complain with how everybody look so happy today when they get their pay. And you?"

"I'm doing all right. But something tells me that I'm seeing you in front of me but is run you should be running away from the trouble you cause down at the docks."

"I've already run as far from home as I'm able to go. Big man like me can't live with fear biting at my tail."

"Well Granville, you always was hard in the head when grown people talk to you. Let me whisper something in your ear, though."

"Ain't nothing you can't tell me in full earshot of whoever's listening. I'm not one to have a man whisper in my ear."

"Well I'll give it to you straight, Granville. If you know what's best for you, you would turn right back down that road, pack your bags, and make your way for somewhere where you name don't have blood on it."

"Well, if my name is dirty, the least that I could do is stick around and find out who's throwing mud on it. Good night, Carmel."

Carmel grunted a goodbye.

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Granville was found early on Saturday morning lying face down in his own blood, a bullet through the back of his neck. In those days, everyone knew that a black man's blood wasn't worth much. And so it was that everyone pointed the finger at Carmel Cato but no one reported him to the police. The men were intimidated by Granville's murder, as the big bosses knew they would be. And so there was no protest by dockworkers when the gains they had made slowly got eroded with layoffs and longer working hours without extra pay for those lucky enough to still have work. By the time news of Granville's murder had twisted about in the District Six gossip mill, it had turned into a story of a dandy who wouldn't pay his debts, not of someone who had fought for worker's rights and lost.

Fish was the last person to see Granville alive.

"But boy, you come through at last and use your two hands for good," Fish said, pulling out a chair for his friend.

"I only trying to follow in your footsteps, old man," Granville had said.

Above the din at Rocky's bar, Fish and Granville could barely hear each other. They just sat next to each other, enjoying the rounds of beer and spirits the boys bought for Granville. In those few hours between knocking off work and his death, Granville was a hero, had finally risen to the full height where Fish had always wanted to see him.

When a wailing Constance ran the hundred steps from her house to tell Fish and Carmella the news, Fish didn't say anything. He put on his indigo hat and set out for the dockyards. There, Fish joined his father, unprotected by the songs his grandmother, Reef's mother, had offered to Yemaya, the goddess of the sea. He went

back to the same sea had enchanted him so long before. It had become too hard for him to live on land.

University of Cape Town

Troubled Waters

Even before he walked the one hundred and nine steps from the courthouse to the prison yard at the top of Newgate Street, everyone in Antigua knew that Ambrose was a marked man. On an island where you could buy or talk your way out of almost anything, there was no amount of dash or diplomacy that could wash the blood from his hands.

In the newspapers, journalists wondered if the island was going the way of big islands that saw women throwing battery acid in each other's faces, aunty-men burned and found with their dicks stuck inside their mouths. Was this small island that had previously only seen scandals in parliament giving way to the kind of insanity that had gripped Guyana before? And if this wasn't a danger that you could padlock your door against, who could say that it couldn't happen again?

The women asked different kinds of questions. But, what kind of girls would follow after a man like that? What kind of mother would let her daughter walk to her death?

The mothers who did not mourn whispered.

"There's only so much that a child I born could hide from me if my eyes open, dear heart."

"Missus, me never see so many children pick up they tail and gone and the mothers crying never see and can't tell."

"And I hear one of them was even in the family way with him baby. But is not that story you reading in the newspaper."

The girls could not tell their story. So all you could rely on was the accounts of the mothers in white, the prayers and songs Ambrose sang proclaiming his

innocence, the townspeople who had seen first the daughters and then their mothers taking the long walk to English Harbor. Somewhere in between all those stories lay the truth.

No lawyer wanted to touch Ambrose's case. The only one who had tried, an easy-going Trinidadian who thought that even a guilty man deserved a defense, had been dissuaded. The morning after he went to meet Ambrose in his prison cell, a dead rooster with a note tied around its neck appeared:

Dear Mr. Williams:

If you ever want to see Trinidad again, you should rest your case now. This man we hear you praying with ain't worth the fleas that bite him in the night or the parchment that his death sentence is printed on. If you insist on defending the indefensible, you will see what is going to happen to you.

Yours respectfully,

The Mothers

Henrik Williams was not one to be run off by some obeah business. And so he set off from his cottage in Runaway Beach on the same Monday morning he saw news accounts of the massacre on the front page of the Observer. From what he could make out, Ambrose was distantly related to the Prime Minister and so there must be some money to be made. Henrik was bothered neither by the crowd of women in white outside of the prison's gates who cursed him nor the irrational way that

Ambrose insisted that he was being persecuted like the early Christians. In the short ride home from the prison, Henrik thought to himself that at least he could get Ambrose off on a plea of insanity; he figured that Ambrose would spend the rest of his days in the madhouse where he belonged. But then, just as he was as he was turning the key in his door, a petrol bomb went off inside his house that slammed Henrik and his plans onto the ground. Henrik crawled back into his car, made for the airport, and booked the first flight back to Port of Spain.

There was a band of mothers who kept a vigil outside the prison's walls. At their age, they had no need of prayer books or hymnals. Songs seeped out of them like the waves that came in at high tide, a danger so beautiful you would never expect it would send you to your death. They were country women from Gray's Farm, Liberta, Otters—places so sleepy you could discount them if you were a big shot from St. John's. These were women who worked as helpers, answered phones at Barclays Bank in town, cleaned toilets in the hotels where tourists exclaimed about how pristine and quaint the island was. Mothers and fathers to their daughters, they bore the burden of dreaming for their daughters. And now, the burden of grieving for them.

No matter how the fierce afternoon sun pricked them or rain soaked through to their slips and camisoles, the mothers stood outside of the prison walls, counting down the days until Ambrose's execution. They didn't carry placards or shake fists. Their hymns were enough. They wore white usher's uniforms, white turbans wrapped around their heads to indicate the seriousness of the task at hand.

It all started out innocently, with prayer meetings every few Saturdays organized by Ambrose, head of the Anglican youth group at the Cathedral in town. Ever since he had returned from Codrington Seminary in Barbados, it seemed that every woman in Antigua was competing to be Ambrose's wife. They tempted him

with plates of leftovers from their Sunday dinners, presented pies they said they needed taste testing before the Episcopal Church Women's Sunday bake sales, pretended to need personal counseling. One woman even showed up at Ambrose's doorstep to escort him to morning mass because she didn't want him to be late. Ambrose charmed the women with his single-focused attention; each woman thought that his laugh was intended for her, that the gaze he held from the pulpit on youth Sundays was her own. Even though three years after he became youth minister Ambrose still hadn't decided on a woman, there were no whispers that he had turned into an aunty man at Codrington or that there was a woman in Barbados he was holding a candle for. No, the women just girded up their loins as the Bible instructed and tried harder to win his affection.

The daughters, seventeen and so pretty it hurt their mothers to let them out of their sight, came home with a glow on their faces that said they had either seen the Lord or would soon. On their lips, between new talk about the rapture and the need to leave behind sin, was talk of Ambrose, the one who brought them to the Lord. Although they looked for signs that the crush they saw developing was on a man more mortal than Jesus, the mothers couldn't find any. And so when Ambrose invited the daughters on a weekend spiritual retreat way out in English Harbour, the mothers didn't say no. They preferred the long skirts and braids the daughters had taken to wearing to the hoop earrings and miniskirts they had tried to sneak out in on weekends before. The women gave their consent, smiled even as their daughters began the long walk to the other side of the island. Ambrose was the kind of man the mothers trusted their daughters with, the kind of man they wished they had been able to keep for themselves.

But something didn't sit right with one of the mothers. It seemed to Ms. Edwards, mother of Hattie Edwards, that just a few months before all Hattie could talk about was prayer meeting this and revival that and 'Ambrose says we should', she was telling Hattie that it's only trouble she was courting with all the male company she was keeping. Hattie had always been hot, had embarrassed her mother to no end when she was first caught kissing one of the acolytes in the sacristy after church. No, Ms. Edwards couldn't believe that Hattie's attention turned so quickly from the boys at Grammar School to the Lord. In fact, just a month before the girls disappeared, Ms. Edwards noticed that Hattie was looking fatter in her school uniforms, her breasts pushing out of her shirts, her belly growing so much every day it looked like she was in the family way. The prayer meetings that Ambrose led always seemed to go late into the night and even though Ambrose would drive Hattie home and even stop in for a late-night coffee, suspicion pulled at Ms. Edwards' collar.

Just after Ms. Edwards saw Hattie set out for English Harbour, for the spiritual retreat she'd been talking about for weeks, she thought two things. First, maybe she shouldn't always bad mind the child. If the Lord was coming into Hattie's life, maybe religion could cool down the fire which had been heating up her skirts.

And then a vision hit Ms. Edwards like a coconut knocked off the tree after heavy rains. Something was not right at all. She was already gathering up a few bakes and rosary beads for the journey when she started to feel weighed down, like a ghost was pushing her closer to the ground than she wanted to be. Just as she put her hand on the doorknob to go in the direction where she felt trouble was, water came to wet up her new shoes and the linoleum floor. What would have slowed another woman down with changing her stockings and wiping down the kitchen floor only made Ms. Edwards more determined. There is trouble by the water, she thought.

Things only got stranger from the moment Ms. Edwards set her foot on the road. She was walking fast in the noontime Saturday heat when she met up on the road all kinds of women who looked like her, schoolteachers and bank tellers and washer women wearing white clothes and shoes, their heads wrapped for the seriousness of the task. The women acknowledged each other without words and joined together. They formed a thick column that not even the sun at its highest point could penetrate.

You could drive across Antigua in two hours. But walking was a different story altogether. The women walked through town, past the police station, not stopping at their cousin's cool drink stall for small talk or even waving hello to the grandmothers who sat in the doorways of their zinc-roofed shacks to catch some breeze. While normally not saying howdy would draw cut eye that could pierce your flesh, no one took offence to their silence. Little girls, pulled by the mothers' protective energy, formed a ragtag line behind them. They wanted to sing songs about the brown girl in the ring and Panchanella, but the mothers' silence told them that if they wanted to come along, they would have to be quiet.

Not one woman reached into her purse for a handkerchief to mop her brow or opened her mouth to complain about the rivers of sweat that gathered beneath her breasts. These women were led by the sound of their daughters singing. From the slow, sorrowful cadence, they knew it was a funeral hymn.

I am the resurrection

I am the life

Those who eat and drink of this blood

They shall have life within them

And I will raise them up on the last day

But who could be burying on a Saturday afternoon that they didn't already know about?

If the women had looked down, they would have seen their wet feet, their toes wading in puddles that even the four o'clock sun couldn't dry. If they had looked behind them, the women would have seen their footprints mixed with water and sweat and the red dust that coated their ankles, proof of forty nine women on a mission to save their daughters from themselves. But they didn't look anywhere except forward, led by the strains of their daughters' dirge.

From deep within the walking crowd came a hum. A small woman, Ms. Isaacs, started the song. Her daughter, Polly, sang at funerals and weddings all over the island with a voice so beautiful that some brides stopped requesting her songs because they knew her angelic voice would steal their limelight. There were once rumors of Polly's father in America sending for her so she could audition at Julliard. But his letters arrived less and less frequently until his birthday and Christmas cards signed with an X stopped coming altogether. Polly was a forgotten memory the passage of time and the barrier of distance had erased.

At an hour's walking distance from the church, the mothers could hear Polly Isaacs leading the daughters with such gusto that they knew she was crying either tears of joy or tears of resignation. Ms. Isaacs walked with the mothers whose daughters had been baptized in the shame of a Saturday morning. The mothers followed her lead.

Lead me, guide me, along the way

For if you lead me, I shall not stray

Lord let me walk each day with thee

Lead me, oh Lord. Lead me

The women gathered strength in their legs from the song in their throats. When they finally turned right onto the road to St. Andrew's church, the little girls who had been bringing up the rear of the procession fell away. They knew that the rest of the work to be done was the mothers' alone.

At the doorstep to St. Andrew's church in English Harbor, the women's song diminished to a hum and then a memory felt in their tingling throats. Ambrose met the women outside, as if he had been waiting for them all along. The white cassock, cincture, and collar he wore seemed to barely contain the life force he had gathered up within him. Ms. Edwards, never one to hold her tongue, spoke first.

"Where are our daughters?" she said.

"The children of God have gone to meet their Father. I told them that they could no longer wait on earthly fathers to take up the weight of their hearts. In their Father in heaven they have a friend," Ambrose explained.

The women that did not feel disgusted by the way Ambrose's white smile blinded them knew that this smile, this warm voice, the laughter the girls had thought was their own, was what had led them there.

Ms. Edwards looked down to see what she knew she would, a trail of water running down the church steps. Lucky for Ambrose, the women were more interested in their children than in his explanations. And so they pushed him aside.

They were confused by what they saw at first: piles of white baptismal gowns folded neatly atop one another in the front pews, their daughters' bodies arranged in a cross that snaked from the altar to the back of the church where they entered.

Ms. Edwards was the first to recognize Hattie by her swollen ankles and the long cut on the bottom of her left foot. She tugged at the white bra and panties that stuck to Hattie's body.

“What you smiling about? You think it’s funny?” Ms. Edwards said to the corpse.

Indeed, all the girls were smiling, as if the ecstasy of death had taken them by surprise.

Ms. Edwards put her head to Hattie’s belly and heard her grandchild’s heartbeat fade to a hum, and then to a memory. She did not cry out or pull at her hair, just held her heart to her stomach, even after the beat had gone.

The mothers remembered that moment in shattered bits: the dead weight of their daughters on their backs, the way the wind shook their skirts dry as they waited for the ambulances to arrive, the crosses and rings and name bracelets that allowed them to recognize their daughters as their own. The women did not scream or pull their hair. They only mixed the salt of their tears with the chlorine water on the corpses, hoping to be close to their daughters once more. One of the mothers thought to say that she wished she had brought something warm for her daughter to wear. And in response to her, low grunts of assent about this last indignity arose.

At the courthouse, Ambrose described in detail how each woman immersed herself in the holy waters of baptism as the other women sang along, how he had arranged their bodies the way his Father in heaven had told him he should. Ambrose confessed that the last woman, Polly Isaacs, would not go willingly like the others. And so he had baptized her himself, held her face down in the water until her arms stopped their protest.

The stories stuck together, the truth bound somewhere between the mothers’ anger and Ambrose’s cool claims that he was as white as a lamb. The dead girls couldn’t speak for themselves.

On the day he was to die, the women shuffled into the prison yard. They looked like they had aged years in the month since they'd last seen Ambrose's wide-toothed grin. The women sang, a dirge that spilled onto Newgate Street and trickled to the farthest parts of the island.

The executioner ordered his men to tighten the rope around Ambrose's neck, then pulled the switch that yanked his neck above ours. The women's song faded to a hum and then to a memory. And it was over.

University of Cape Town

Mpho

When I greet my grandmother for the first time, I speak baby seSotho. Only enough to say that I'd like more rice or that I don't like pap or that Mommy said that she will be stopping at the supermarket before she comes home from work. At the airport in Johannesburg, we do not need words or sentences or the poems I have been writing about what this moment will be like. Only embraces, my grandmother's arm reaching up and around my neck, my head hugged tight against her chest, the tears that sit just inside the corner of my grandfather's eye. This is what you have been hiding from us all along, they say to my mother about me. Grandma talks fast in seSotho and my mother responds more slowly, unsure of its clicks, the dips and kisses of the lips. Grandpa's rough hands, the fingers yellowed by cigarette smoke, tighten around mine. I know what it means to be loved without having done anything except being born.

Grandma says that I am bigger than I looked in last year's school pictures. In that picture, wet now from sweating in the inside pocket of her purse, my permed hair lays flat against my scalp, my bangs too short from the haircut I'd given myself the night before. In that picture I am not smiling. But here, in Johannesburg, several days and many hours from the life I have left behind in America, I am smiling in spite of myself. These people are not the Mandela and Tambo and Jabavu I embraced from the safe distance of Boston, but my own flesh and blood. Here, the porters hustle to carry our bags, call me Sisi and treat me with respect because I am holding my grandmother's hand. They are smiling at the proud way my grandmother introduces me as her last born. The smell of their sweat is foreign to me, a child so used to

covering up odors with deodorants and perfumes and soaps. At home, I don't know anyone who smells like the work they do.

Driving from the airport to Soweto, I can barely see above the bags piled in my lap. The case of compact discs that I clutch to my chest and the photo album that bulges in my book bag make it difficult for me to see the places where my grandfather's hair has gone gray at the nape of his neck and in some patches disappeared altogether. I am more interested in the old mine digs and new buildings that rise up beside the freeway that takes us through city and, finally, to Soweto. My mother and her mother are talking about neighbors and cousins and aunties, some people whose names are familiar and others who I've never heard of. From what little I can understand somebody has had a baby, funerals in Soweto have turned into lavish affairs, it is more and more difficult to sleep well at night, many of the people who my mother went to high school have died or are living desperate lives. After their whispers about the lost generation, silence settles among us. My grandmother does not ask where my father is, if the rumors about him going around with a white woman with struggle credentials, are true. Certain things are too hard to talk about in any language.

Soweto looks different than it did in the books I read, sent by my father's comrades in London and Tanzania and Kenya. The books are really meant for my father but I read them with an enthusiasm he can't muster. There is a sadness that lights his eyes, a mournfulness in the way he sings along with the Mahotella Queens, Miriam Makeba, and Dolly Rathebe records that he plays when he misses home. I sing along with him, make him dance barefoot with me on the brown carpet in our living room. Mommy and my father tell me that the whites in South Africa hate black people, that they have taken over our land and made us aliens at home. This is the

reason why we are here in Boston where it is cold and no one who speaks seSotho or knows anything about South Africa besides apartheid. I never ask why we are not at home fighting with the children and the students and the old people who seem to die every day on the struggle we see on television.

The South Africa that I know is filled with glamorous black people and the whites who live to crush their spirits. When I am young, it is hard for me to understand the cruelty of the whites and how the blacks manage to look so good in spite of it. It is hard for me to imagine how it all fits together: the dignity of Nelson Mandela who I see from afar at a rally in Cambridge, the anger Hugh Masakela blows from his trumpet, the pictures of my mother in miniskirts and knee-high boots in front of my grandmother's house in Soweto. I only know South Africa from these moments and pictures, like a slide show taken in so slowly that the whole film never quite comes together.

At my grandparents' house, the zinc roof is rusty and you have to pick the front door up by its hinges to come inside. Although I have tried to play a conscious African proud of my roots for my friends back home, I am surprised by the indoor plumbing and the television sets in every room. I am not pleased by the room my mother and I share, by the wood panels that barely seem to keep the sound from flowing directly from my grandparents' room into ours. I feel like I am too old to start sleeping with my mother. Mommy says this is only temporary, that she will soon find a job and we will move into our own flat. I already resent the way that she has exchanged 'apartment' for 'flat', trust her less now because she has already done what she had never said she would—take me away from home. She bears the brunt of my silence, the sulky way that I ask if people will be coming in and out of the house all

day to shoot the breeze and eat our food. She bears the brunt of my anger at my father, who is not here.

My grandmother tells me in slow, halting English that there are plenty of other young people in the location who I could meet at church or when I start school after the holiday. I roll my eyes behind my grandmother's back, which my mother scolds me for later. I think, like my father, that the church is simply a tool to make poor black people give up their rights in this world for happiness in the beyond. And I don't want to meet any young South Africans my age, who are almost three years behind the styles at home. But I can't tell my grandmother that, don't have enough language to express the way that my pride at being South African in America mismatches the shame and disdain I feel here.

In Mapetla, the neighborhood where I stay with my grandparents, the streets are always bursting with energy—a haircut, a fight, a party, somebody's music pumped too loud. Because I don't understand what people are saying, I am always reacting on the wrong emotional register, laughing after jokes are over, mistaking sarcasm for seriousness. In seSotho, I am no longer the smart-mouthed girl from Jamaica Plain I used to be. I am more and more quiet, lost in the mix of seSotho and seTswana and English I hear around me. Why don't people speak English here, I ask my mother. In the night, I can hear the sound of her back brushing her silk nighty, her breath heavy against her chest, my grandfather's snoring in the next room. She asks me if she didn't raise me to know better than to ask those kinds of questions.

In Mapetla, I am not allowed to go past our front yard without a male cousin or my grandfather. The statistics say that it is more likely for me to get raped before I am 18 than it is for me to finish my matric. The newspapers claim that there has been more violence since the end of apartheid than in the bad old days. It is easy to forget

the joy of seeing Madiba walk out of Victor Verster prison, the way that I bragged at school the next day about South Africa's liberation. This is my first taste of being poor and a girl and vulnerable and I do not like it.

It is a Friday night when we arrive and I am already wondering what Tajuana and Jamila are doing without me. If they are missing me with the same pain that their absence causes me. I am still mad about the way that Shakira made eyes at my boyfriend before I left and then was the loudest and drunkest person at my going away party. Everyone says that they will miss me, that it will not be the same without me. But here, on the other side of the world where everything is different, I have no faith that they will understand me or or that they will try.

I am discouraged by the kwaito videos I see on television. The ill-fitting clothes and poor production quality is a shock after years of watching MTV. My cousin Siphwe tells me that kwaito is a blend of hip-hop and r&b and music from the townships. To my ears, it sounds like a cheap imitation of what I know from America. When Siphwe translates the lyrics, I am glad that I do not speak enough seSotho to understand them. At the very least I am sure that at my new school, my American-ness will make me cooler than my classmates.

On the first day of school, I breeze through the math and science lessons that are slowed down versions of what I learned during my first and second years of high school. My South African history is rusty though. I realize that the struggle history that my father taught me diverges from the textbooks we read in school. I do not raise my hand to speak in class, because I am afraid I will have to repeat myself. It was already too much to respond to my name, Mpho, and have my teacher not understand my "here" amidst everyone else's "present."

At lunch time, a group of the prettiest girls gather around me and ask me about my hair. It is nappy and pushed back into an afro ponytail that adds several inches to my short stature. They wonder why a cheese girl like me doesn't have enough money to perm her hair. Their words fly at me too fast for me to understand. The loudest one, Lerato, asks if I will buy her a cool drink. When I tell her I do not have any money, that I have brought food from home for lunch, she laughs. I am left alone in a corner of the school yard, hot in the tie and blazer and crisp white shirt I am wearing, annoyed with the knee high socks whose elastic will not cling to the top of my calves. I am surprised that it could be this warm in January. The American accent I thought would make me cool has not. The baby seSotho that I know will not work here.

After my first day at school, I tell my grandmother that I want her to speak to me only in seSotho. She is happy to have me by her side, asking her the questions I never did when I was small enough to long for milky Clover juices and ask for stories about my mother when she was young. At night, we watch news about the lead up to South Africa's first free elections. I ask her in English how she feels about voting for the first time. She says that her vote costs too much, that she wishes she had been able to pay less for her freedom. She stops, interrupted by the gaps between what she wants to say and the English words she knows. When the news is over and I have washed the dishes, we tape pieces of paper with words in seSotho all over the house, naming the clock, the mortar and pestle, the couch, the sofa bed where my cousins sleep when they stay over. Above my head, torn loose leaf marks my bed as *bethe*. I sleep well that night.

Grandpa drives me to and from my school in Rosebank in the rusty red car that he says he's had since before I was even a thought. His English is better than my grandmother's, but does not extend much past the things he learned as a gardener for

a Jewish family in Yeoville. Grandpa tells me that the husband was not often around and the madam given to drinking from early in the morning. And so he says that he learned about gardening from the other boys who worked nearby, who taught him when to water the grass, what kinds of plants thrived inside. He says, of the husband and his itinerant wife, that white people are a mystery he will never understand, even after fifty years of working for them. I notice the way Grandpa's laughter rattles in his chest. It is the same as my mother's laugh, which I have heard more and more frequently since we moved home.

Grandpa has managed to plant a few tomatoes and cabbage behind our small house in Mapetla, but it is nothing like the garden he grew for his madam. The topsoil in Mapetla is hard, will reap only what you sow with care and patience, he says. He tells me a secret I do not want to hear about the dung his family in the Free State used to make green grass grow in the townships the blacks were removed to.

In our backyard, there is a frangipani tree that my grandfather planted soon after I left for the States with my parents. At night, I spend hours reading under the tree, the only one of its kind in Soweto. Its yellow flowers and fragrance get caught in my hair and stick in my clothes. Grandpa says that he had always hoped I would see the tree again. He reminds me that the name which my grandmother gave me, Mpho, means gift, that this will always be my home.

In my class at school, there is a girl named Rebecca Friedman, pasty white with red hair and freckles, who is not friendly to me. She is the great-granddaughter of the family my grandfather used to work for. I do not want to think of her great-grandmother and grandmother and mother calling him boy.

My grandfather brings presents for me after school. Some of them only make sense later, like the leather briefcase he tells me that my mother used to carry to

school or the gilded pen engraved with the initials we share that comes in its original Montblanc box. One day, there is a small puppy that is so happy to see me that she bumps her head on the car window when I approach. I cradle her in my arms, ask my grandfather where he got her from. He answers me in his roundabout way, tells me that my only job is to like it, that I ask too many questions. At his age, he says, he can not take any chance with the reckless drivers on the road. And so it is hard to tell if he is smiling or squinting when I tell him in seSotho that I am going to name my puppy Moshoeshoe.

Six months after we arrive in South Africa, we are still living with my grandparents in Soweto. My mother has taken on a position as a lecturer at Wits. From what I can tell, the students there are not like the ones who my mother once taught organic chemistry at Boston College. She never thought that she would teach in South Africa, shakes her head at the fact that there are no black students in her department, fewer than ten in her faculty at all. The new South Africa is still young and already my mother doesn't believe in it.

On a cold day in April when I finally understand for the first time what people mean about the Johannesburg winter sun that shines but does not warm, the joy of our return is broken. Since before we came, we have all known about the real and imagined threats of violence from the whites who want to hold on to the South Africa they knew and the blacks who are vying for pride of place in the new dispensation. Of the white militias that had formed to stop the elections. Of the necklace burnings in the locations of people who were accused of being impimpi. But none of us were prepared for the trains that pulled into Soweto early one Friday evening, filled with the burning and bloody and dying and dead bodies of people who were trying to make

their way home from work. In that moment, we all wonder not whether the price of freedom is too high, as my grandmother says, but if we have finished paying for it.

My mother has stayed late to mark mid-term exams, had planned to get a ride home from a colleague in the African Languages and Literatures department that at that point is only a dream. And so she does not arrive on that train. Before we know that, me and Grandma and Grandpa all sit in front of the television with the same fear, while our pap gets cold, hardens on the plates in our laps.

After the phone rings and we are sure Mommy is safe, Grandma points at the television newscaster, says that young girls these days are covering up their beautiful skin with too much make up. She hopes I will always stay pretty and proud of the clear skin she has passed down to me, has stopped complaining of the kaffir hair I insist on keeping.

My seSotho is better by the time the polls open in April. I am too young to vote but I go with my grandmother to the polling station. The wait in the rain in Soweto is long and her swollen feet ache from arthritis. By then, I am no longer ashamed by the old ginger candy she offers me from her purse, the liniment that greases her joints and smells everywhere, the way she greets the other women on line she has never met before as if she has known them all her life. We put her vote in the ballot box together, my young hand holding her wrinkled one that is too shaky to hold pots now.

When we are home, Grandma takes me to the backyard. She says there is something she must show me. Underneath the frangipani tree lays the parts of me that my mother didn't take with her across the border and then to the States—bits of my umbilical cord, nothing more than a few pieces of dried skin wrapped in a piece of

brown cloth. Grandma tells me in seSotho words I can understand: Keno ka kgosto.

Welcome.

University of Cape Town

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Notes

“Ghaflah” is a poem from June Jordan’s Kissing God Goodbye (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

Inspiration for the story, “Fish,” was drawn from research on Caribbean migration to Cape Town in the early twentieth century. The most frequently read and referenced article on the topic is by University of West Indies, Cave Hill, professor, Alan Cobley (“‘Far From Home’: The origins and significance of the Afro-Caribbean Community in South Africa to 1930.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18(2): 349-370). Also useful was the Master’s dissertation submitted by Mischa Charles at the University of Cape Town in December 2004, “‘Soort Soek Soort’: The ‘American Negroe’ community in Cape Town, until 1930.” Finally, Christopher Saunders’ article, “From Trinidad to Cape Town: the first black lawyer at the Cape,” proved helpful (*Quarterly Bulletin of the National South African Library* 55 (4), June 2001: 147-161).