

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: UNDERNEATH IT ALL
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Underneath It All explores relationships in a society that can spill secrets as easily as it can keep them. Josephine's demons confront her when a man who had been incarcerated for over twenty-five years for the murder of his wife is being released. This event rips through decades-old wounds that Josephine had almost forgotten she had, and her adult daughters try to uncover why this is so catastrophic for her. Against a lush backdrop of verdant mountains, gushing waterfalls and cerulean seas, the impending release looms like a pregnant cloud. Meanwhile, these women navigate spaces where traumatic insecurities linger. There is tension among them. They live with violence, with grief. They live with memory, with shame, with alcoholism, with homelessness. They're negotiating notions of societal expectations of female sexuality, their bodies resisting conformance. These women's lives interrogate human vulnerabilities and the value of support systems. Amidst chaos, there is discovery of self. There is forgiveness. Above all, there is love.

UNDERNEATH IT ALL

by

Lisa J Latouche

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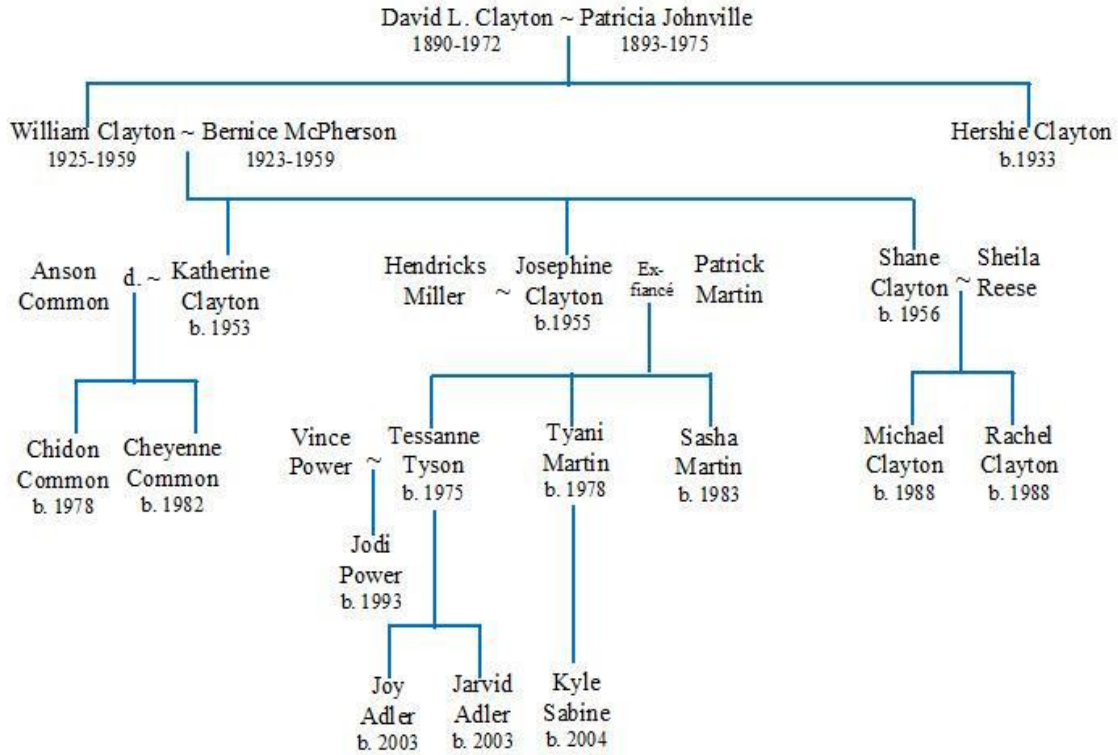
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Family Tree

Josephine's Family



Breaking News: Josephine Clayton charged with theft, accused of murder

October 9, 1981

Miss Josephine Clayton of Goodwill, witness to the controversial shooting death of her friend, Mrs. Sue Campbell, has been charged with theft in the region of Twelve Thousand Eastern Caribbean Dollars. Reports confirm that Clayton stole this money over a ten month-period, from her employer Shera's House, a subsidiary of The Hunte Group of Companies (HGC). Police are investigating the involvement of a member of Clayton's family who may have been the recipient of this money, and who has reportedly fled the island.

It is alleged that Sue Campbell's death is a direct consequence of this theft. On October 1st 1981, Conrad Campbell, husband of the deceased, was charged with second-degree murder. He claims that he is not the one who should be charged with the accidental death of his wife. "Although the gun was in my hand," he revealed in an exclusive interview, "Josephine is the one who killed her." He stated that on the night of the shooting, Patrick Martin, in a drunken stupor, brought his fiancée, Josephine Clayton, to the Campbell house after finding a large sum of money in her bag. "It was about 11pm,"

Campbell said. "My wife, Sue, had just come home from work. He [Martin] accused her of theft, saying she was involving his fiancée in her crimes." Campbell stated upon probing, he realized Josephine Clayton tried to make his wife complicit by asking her to hide what she had stolen. "Sue had access to money; she didn't need to steal," he said. "When I threatened to report her to the police, Josephine attacked me violently. And in the tussle, the gun went off."

One source close to the story revealed that Josephine Clayton's relationship with the deceased was romantic. "They were planning to leave their partners," the source alleged. She said that when Campbell discovered this information, he became enraged and shot his wife in a "fury of jealousy."

No bail was set for Campbell and a trial date has not been determined. He is remanded at the Dominica State Prison. The Campbells have one son, born earlier this year.

In the case of Josephine Clayton, the judge set bail at \$20,000, and the hearing is scheduled for November 9, 1981. The Waitukubuli Chronicle has been reliably informed that Patrick Martin, who is also

Josephine Clayton's surety, denies the Corporal's allegations. He says he will continue to support Clayton, and will speak

his truth when the time comes. HGC's attorney was unavailable for comment.

Part 1 - 2008

Josephine's Daughters

One - Tyani

A golden glow infused the pastel yellow kitchen swaddling Tyani in its warmth. She sat at the round, wooden table clicking through rental properties barely registering the images that floated across her laptop's monitor. Her navy work dress was unzipped in the back, her braided ponytail resting against her damp skin. It was her final time wearing this work dress and the weight of that knowledge came with a sense of loss, as if a part of her had died. Nasio Fontaine's *New Song* flowed through her open windows from the neighbor's radio like a benign wave, beckoning her to the river to lay down her burdens and to sing a new song. There was hope in the lyrics, a kind of reassurance that could be prevalent in art yet so absent in everyday life; and probably if she allowed it, Nasio's voice would relieve life's heaviness, like a balm. But she wallowed instead. The bitterness was still raw in her mouth.

Tyani sipped room temperature wine from her mug, the black one with '*Let your light shine*' intricately embossed in gold. It was just four years ago she had bought this mug to remind herself of her light. She had felt invincible then; a recently promoted supervisor, and a new mother in a happy relationship with Brent. *Still beautiful*, he used to say to her, in a way that was reverent, especially when she questioned why nature had welcomed her into motherhood by bestowing her with soft breasts and a pudgy, stretch-marked stomach.

Still beautiful.

He'd said it when her best friend Maya had reluctantly introduced them after a cricket game on the Dublanc playing field. She remembered the way his muscles glistened in the fierceness of the July sun. She remembered the intensity of his gaze, their grayness like a misty morning in the countryside. She remembered how her tongue had gotten stuck behind her teeth, wanting to tell

him he was still beautiful too; that there was something alluring about him as a man, something godlike.

Still beautiful.

It all seemed like a lifetime ago, as though it was someone else's story, not hers.

Tyani's laptop chimed, reminding her of why she was sitting there in the first place. She checked her email.

Yes to the muh-fking dress!!

Sasha Martin <sasha_k_martin@gmail.com>

03/25/2008 5:01pm

To: tyanikmartin78@hotmail.com

Hey Sis, as promised here are the bridesmaid dresses!! OMG! I swear these are the most gorgeous I've ever seen. Let me know what you think/which one you prefer. Final fitting for me was yesterday and girl!! Mademoiselle Liègne DELIVERED!! Here are some pics of me and Emma having a hectic but marvelous time. Martinique is awesome! :-)

Kiss my Kyle Kyle.

Bisous!

Tyani re-read the email, hoping that her sister's ebullience would somehow transfer to her. The bridesmaid gowns were beautiful but she experienced a crippling inability to connect with them. Tyani twisted her braid, feeling a heaviness in her soul that tore at her conscience. Sasha was getting married. Why was she uneasy about this? Was she being selfish? Jealous? Both? She and Sasha had lived together for the past few years and although her sister could be a thorn in her ass, it was hard letting her go. Who would help her with Kyle? She wiped her face with her palms,

wanting to fight the negative energy that was forcing its way into her soul, but it was moving too fast, forming its own path like excess water from a swollen river.

Tyani lifted her mug to her mouth and took a swig of hot wine. *Let your light shine.* Where had her light gone? Where was the promise that life had offered? This was not the life Tyani had imagined when she'd bought this mug. She had not envisioned that at age thirty, she would be a single mother living with Sasha. If she had her way, she would have been married to Brent. Tyani closed Sasha's message and composed a new one.

To: Brent Sabine

Subject: Need to talk

I'm sending an email as a last resort, because I tried calling you several times today. You don't know why I'm calling yet you're not taking my calls. But you have the guts to call yourself a responsible father. What if something had happened to Kyle? As I said the other day, I'm done trying to discuss marriage so no need to duck my calls and texts. Need to talk to you ASAP. About my job. By the way, did you contact the lady about the apartment for me..time is ticking. And your son has been asking for you.

Please call me.

Heart racing, she got up from the chair and stood at the kitchen window. Herbs and ferns lined the window sills. They were a mini jungle, one in their droopiness, potted in identical clay. Only the cacti dared to be different, tall and proud, unyielding in the heat and dehydration. Tyani envied the cacti for their poise and grace and wished she could be like them, unyielding, in the face of adversity. The concrete walls released their warmth, the wine generated its heat, and Tyani's quick heartbeats did nothing to cool her. She looked at the magic outside her window, at the way the sun hovered above the horizon, empyreal, its radiance dominating the sky and

splattering the clouds with pinks and oranges. Nothing compared to nature's perfection. She thought about capturing the beauty of the moment, but her camera was upstairs and upstairs was too far.

The honking of vehicles floated up her dead-end street from the main road, and voices called to each other, sometimes peppered with profanity. Some expressions reached her in fragments, parts of them drowned out by the community's hum. Some expressions rose above the buzz, giddy with Friday afternoon freedom. *Gassa, let's go by Davo's. Melvina's is de spot tonight!* Friday afternoons had a different feel from other weekdays; bars were more crowded; people were more festive. A week prior Tyani, too, would have basked in the Friday afternoon freedom, perhaps not to go partying like she used to before she had Kyle, but just knowing that she had two days to do whatever the hell she wanted, and knowing that come Monday, she would have a job to return to. Now, there was no glee, no Friday afternoon freedom, no job to return to.

Tyani went back to the table, and fanned her face with the Waitukubuli Realty branded envelope that her dismissal letter had been sealed in. It was surreal, a feeling of being suspended in time, and for the past few hours she kept asking herself if this had really happened. Her situation aptly represented something her best friend, Maya, had told her - that leaving your destiny up to man was dangerous and being employed by someone else, was in a sense, leaving your destiny up to man. Your employer could pull the plug at any time, Maya had said, and cause you to squash your plans or become destitute. Waitukubuli Realty had done exactly that - pulled the plug in a way that left her reeling with emptiness. Nine years she had worked at Waitukubuli Realty. Nine years. As a reward, they had invaded her body and released the air from her lungs, leaving her in the wilderness to crumble.

How would she pay for graduate school? Tears collected in her eyes. An assignment was

due the next day, and she had no desire to do the work. She checked to see if Brent had replied to her email. Nothing. Tyani closed the tab with the bridesmaids' dresses. She looked at a few rental properties before slamming the laptop shut. How would she afford another place anyway?

“Chugga-chugga choo-choo!” Kyle drove *Thomas the Tank Engine* into the kitchen, requesting a snack, and asking for the hundredth time when his grandmother was coming to pick him up. He was going to spend the night with her mother. Thank God! Tyani took a tangerine from the fruit basket on the table, peeled it and pegged it. As Kyle ate, he pushed the blue train with its smiling face the length of the kitchen, stopping at intervals, to tiptoe at the table and take more pegs from the bowl. She watched her son enjoying the space, the only one he remembered as home, and her chest tightened. Theirs was a comfortable space, a safe space. How many times had she longed for that freedom after her father, Patrick, had left them? A home to play in? To be safe in? She did not want Kyle to lose that security. She rubbed her chest hard, willing the discomfort to go away.

A light breeze came in from the back door, bringing in more *Nasio Fontaine* from the neighbor's radio, but failing to bring equilibrium, failing to stir the plants. Outside, crickets were starting to sing, a chorus of males wooing their partners. At least these insects have some sense of commitment, she thought, unlike Kyle's father. She inhaled the burgundy liquid, and told herself it was her first and last bottle for the weekend.

Kyle was halfway through his tangerine when they heard the rickety-rickety of her mother's car driving up their lane. Well, not her mother's car exactly; Miller's car. Her husband. Leaving his train on the floor, Kyle skipped across the kitchen, clambered the unstable wooden stool and leaned across the counter, craning his neck above the plants to look at the car. Tyani threw the Waitukubuli Realty branded envelope into the trash and gulped the rest of her wine,

feeling its burn as she swallowed. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and hurriedly ate the remainder of Kyle's tangerine, hoping it would mask the scent of her breath.

*

"Hello!" Josephine Miller, walked through the door wearing her 'Yes We Can' t-shirt and a bright smile. She was a tall, curvy woman with closely cropped hair and dark skin that gleamed. Her new favorite topic was Barack Obama, the man America needed, using words like 'caucus' and 'Electoral College' as if she knew what they meant.

Kyle, without wiping his hands, ran to his grandmother and threw himself at her. He squealed with delight when she lifted him, and her almond shaped eyes squinted as she smiled. Tyani grabbed the empty mug from the table and quickly placed it in the sink.

"He's excited about spending the night with you." Tyani's lips curled.

Josephine beamed. "I know." She turned to Kyle who was picking up his train. "Get your things, son, an' bring a book to read."

"Yes Ma'am!" Kyle saluted his grandmother and took to the stairs.

Josephine pulled out a chair and sat at the table. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "I find de neighbor radio rell loud today."

Tyani shrugged. "Her radio is not usually that loud."

Josephine shook her head in disbelief. She said, "*Ou bièn?* You look worried."

Tyani crossed her ankles. "*Wi, mwen bièn,* Ma. I'm fine. Just anxious about moving."

Josephine's chest heaved and she made a whooshing sound as her lungs deflated. She started rearranging the fruits in the basket. Tyani didn't mean to dig up old bones, but that's what moving meant – rehashing her early childhood – of moving across the island to live with relatives, friends, or strangers, after their father had left, before her mother had married Miller. Moving was

reliving the times when they were evicted for non-payment or plain impatience with their lot. Moving was hoping the next house would be more inviting with more privacy, more safety.

Josephine said, “it not easy but you have to take a step. Sasha getting married in three months.”

“I know,” Tyani said. “I’ll miss here. I really wish I could afford this house on my own. Especially because of Kyle.” The house was the last on a dead-end street, with ample yard space where Kyle ran free, kicked his ball and rode his bike. Roseau, the capital, was only five minutes’ drive away, and the cool Caribbean Sea was right there; they could walk to it.

“Sure you doh want to come back home?”

“Home? Home, Ma? Where is that?” Tyani chuckled, the laugh never reaching her eyes. “We talked about that already. That house was never my home and I will never move back there as long as your husband is alive.”

Josephine lowered her head. “Well, you work in real estate. Use your contacts.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Tyani twisted her braid around her finger. She wasn’t ready to tell her mother that at the month’s end she would be officially unemployed. Saying it aloud would make it too real, too final. And she needed a certain type of energy to deal with her mother’s negativity, because Tyani knew somehow, she would not accept that the company was restructuring, but think that Tyani had done something wildly inappropriate.

“You should ask Brent to help you with rent. Timoun li ka wèsté la osi wi. His child living here too.”

Tyani reached for the roll of napkin on the counter. She tore off two perfectly perforated sheets and wiped her face and neck, feeling a sudden intensification of heat. She had already asked Brent about sharing the space and that was a no-no but that was another discussion she did not

want to have with her mother. “Yes, I will ask him.”

Josephine nodded and Tyani was relieved that she didn’t push further. How could she tell her that what she thought was solid ground with Brent was actually mud? Slippery and smelly? How could she tell her that she felt torn because she wasn’t sure if staying with Brent meant staying in the mud or if leaving the mud meant leaving Brent? How could she tell her that she wanted the mud to dry up, to disappear beneath them, so that their ground would be solid again?

“All-you need to fix that old ceiling fan,” Josephine said. She took one of the table mats and Tyani watched her fanning herself. The table mats were made from larouma reeds, a gift from Tyani and Sasha’s paternal grandmother, Irene.

“Ma you know we want to preserve those table mats, yet you always insist on fanning yourself with them.”

Josephine sucked her teeth. “So why have them on de table?”

“I’m not in the mood for that today. It’s as if you don’t want us to remember our grandmother.”

“Well all you have to do is look in de mirror to remember her. Or look at Kyle.”

Irene was a Kalinago, one of the few indigenous tribes left in the Caribbean, the only tribe on the island. She’d also made the clay pots that were scattered around the house. People regularly asked Tyani if she was a Kalinago because of her long, wavy hair and honey complexion. It was an internal struggle because although she looked like them and had acquired knowledge about the Kalinago people through school and reading, she had no hands-on experience with the culture. It was uncomfortable at times, to be categorized as something that she knew so little about.

Sasha had inherited the Kalinago hair as well or perhaps it was Patrick's curly hair. They bore a striking resemblance - light skinned with eyes the color of the early morning sky.

“Irene was a *soukouyan*. Old witch. That’s why I wasn’t bringing all-you to see her.”

“Is because of that nonsense thinking we didn’t learn about our roots,” Tyani snapped. She saw the lack of connection as a loss and she regretted not learning more about Granny Irene, her history and her culture. Perhaps she would have picked up a thing or two about canoe building or basket weaving or pottery.

“Roots?” Josephine threw back her head and laughed. “You think your grandmother woulda teach all-you about roots? She din’ even tell Patrick about his white father, you talking about roots?”

As adults, Tyani and Sasha had only spent passing moments in the Kalinago Territory; a few hours here, a few minutes there, but their grandmother was always excited about seeing them. She used to offer cane and cassava or whatever was growing around her at the time.

“Patrick used to bring all three of you to see me - the dark one too. But all-you wouldn't remember that.” Granny Irene often said that to them when they had visited, never failing to pull out a faded photo she had stuck in between the crevice of the wooden planks that kept her little hut together. It could almost pass for a black and white photo: Granny Irene standing proudly behind three smiling girls, two plaits hanging on either side of her neck, their ends resting just below the waistline of her skirt. In the photo, one palm was resting on the shoulders of the plump, dark-skinned girl with thick braids jutting out like sprouts; Irene’s other palm rested on the shoulder of a thin girl with cascading hair that blanketed the upper part of her body. The third girl was caught in mid-totter, laughing at something off camera. Tyani wished she had that photo. It was one of the few where she and her sisters were together as children.

“Granny Irene was nice to us Ma, and I really don’t care if you didn’t like her. Just stop using the table mat as a fan.”

Josephine had already stopped fanning, but she placed the table mat under the fruit basket. “It looking like you meet de devil today and he put vexation in your spirit. But hol’ your attitude for yourself.”

Tyani didn’t answer. Instead, she called on Kyle. He was still dressing, he said.

Josephine was using her hand to fan her face. She asked, “you hear from Sasha?”

“Yes I heard from her. She had her final fitting with Mademoiselle Liènne yesterday.”

Josephine sucked her teeth. “That Liènne is poison. I woulda never let that woman make my clothes. She steal my sister husband.”

Tyani shook her head. “Well you’re not Sasha and Sasha is not you. That’s ancient history, Ma. I’m sure your sister is totally unbothered about her ex-husband and Mademoiselle Liènne. As a matter of fact your sister doesn’t even know if you exist but listen to you, holding on to an old grudge. You need to let these things go.”

Josephine grunted, her mouth stretched. “Is because of Liènne Katherine had to leave Dominica and stay away. She even take Katherine son like he is hers.”

“Ma, Chidon’s father took him to Martinique. Of course his wife would raise him. And I’m sure if your sister was interested in being in Dominica she would’ve come back already. People return all the time. Just look at that; this year is a Reunion year and all communities busy planning their reunion activities, even Goodwill, your old community. I’m sure she heard of the reunion and she will still remain where she is. So stop that rubbish about blaming Mademoiselle Liènne.”

“I’ll blame her till I die. Is her fault plenty things happen. Plenty, plenty things. You doh know nothing about that.”

Tyani scoffed. She wasn’t in the mood to hear any story because her mother only saw things from her perspective, and she was tired of listening to her blame other people for the way

her life had turned out. Her mother had never laid eyes on Mademoiselle Liènne, never interacted with her, but here she was judging the woman. Yet, she did not see her own faults, like the way she refused to take responsibility for the gap between her and her eldest daughter, Tessanne. At some point Tyani had become the bridge between Tessanne and the rest of her family, although her relationship with Tessanne was far from what it used to be.

“I heard from Tessanne today too,” Tyani lied, reminding Josephine that her first daughter existed.

“Oh? She an’ de chirren alright?”

“She was distant, as usual so I really dunno.”

Josephine raised her chin and made a small ‘hmm’ sound. She shifted the fruit basket and started aligning the circular table mats, one on top of the other. Josephine placed them neatly in the center of the table and put the fruit basket atop them. “De man keeping Tessanne from people. She was always a strange person but he make her worse.”

Anger welled up in Tyani, and she had a strong urge to slap her mother for her hypocrisy and denial. She had no recollection of Tessanne being strange. Tessanne’s partner, Stoney, was controlling, in a way that nobody liked or felt comfortable with, and Tyani’s rare visits to her house were tense affairs. But wasn’t Josephine the one who had forced Stoney to ‘accept’ Tessanne?

“Well maybe if you didn’t -” Tyani shook her head and stopped herself.

Josephine raised her eyebrows. She raised her voice. “If I din’ what? If I din’ step in? You prefer if I had let that sonofabitch abandon Tessanne an’ leave her in de streets with her belly?”

Tyani sighed, feeling her body light and heavy at the same time. Tessanne being in the streets would have been up to her mother, too. It was she and her husband who had asked Tessanne to leave the house when she needed help the most. But Tyani kept her tongue in the safety of her

mouth, unwilling to enter another verbal battle.

“Why you looking at me like that?” Josephine asked, standing. She pushed the chair in place and held on to its back. “I know what you thinking, Tyani, but you dunno nothing.” She stressed on the word nothing.

Tyani did not know how to shake off the fog she put herself in. Perhaps she shouldn’t have lied. It was as if the present moment was happening outside of her. “That nonsense has to stop. We’re all adults. I -”

“Tessanne come down from St. Maarten with her daughter penniless. You hear me? They was like refugees. I beg Miller to take them in. Beg! And you *see* how she repay us? With a belly. A belly! She an’ Stoney *had* to take responsibility for their carelessness. Not on my account she was bringing more chirren. No sirree.”

Tyani’s mind was trying to compute her mother’s perspective when Kyle’s footsteps sounded on the stairs. Mother and daughter moved to the living room, and stood at the bottom of the staircase.

“Tessanne make her bed de day she spread her legs for Stoney. If things not alright with her then I rell sorry, but I refuse to take responsibility for that.” She said it under her breath, between her teeth.

Tyani shook her head as her eyes shifted from her mother to her son, wondering if there was another mother in the world who was as unfeeling as hers. She had vowed a long time ago, even before Kyle was born, to be a supportive mother, a loving mother. Josephine’s parents had passed away when she was a young child, and Tyani wondered if she was one of those people suffering from dissociation. She wondered if her aunt, Katherine, who had fled Dominica was unfeeling, too. Not their brother, Shane, though. Uncle Shane was a ray of light, a quiet

disciplinarian, yet a man who was at ease with himself and those around him. He was just like Tantie Hershie, their aunt who had raised them, a woman as pious as Virgin Mary.

A slight headache was coming and Tyani massaged her forehead. She needed the tangy taste of the semi-sweet wine, or maybe she needed water. Or maybe she just needed to be alone.

Kyle carried his knapsack on his back and three books in his small hands. Over the knapsack was a black and red Spiderman cape he'd improperly fastened somewhere on the side of his neck. Both ladies chuckled in a tense way, like when people pretend that things are fine.

Mrs. Miller took the books from her grandson. "Darkness coming. Time to go."

Tyani stooped to her son's level, hugged him and kissed him. "Be good my little Spiderman."

"I forgot my Pillow Pet!" He pulled himself away from her and ran back up the stairs.

Tyani stood. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "Mi chalè," she said. "We really need to fix those ceiling fans."

"Is de rum that making you hot like that. Think I cyah smell it on your breath? It look like you want to be a drunkard an' a fool just like your father."

Something traveled within Tyani's body, from her feet to her head, and it stayed there, fumbling about her mind. All Josephine wanted them to remember about Patrick was a perpetually inebriated man swearing at little men in the streets that only he could see. But she remembered his warmth and his smile and that drunken fool image was not one she would adopt. "It's Friday, Ma. Nothing wrong with enjoying some wine after a hard week. And my father wasn't no fool."

Josephine ignored her and in the silence of the space, the sound of the neighbor's radio came through the house. The announcer was wrapping up the evening news and Tyani half listened about the decision to release an ex-forestry officer from prison who was involved in a controversial

killing. She was looking at Kyle coming down the stairs, dragging his pillow pet.

“Papa Bondyé!” Josephine shrieked, clutching her chest, her eyes wide and frightening.
“Papa Bondyé!”

“W’happen Ma?” Tyani asked, her voice a high pitch. She thought her mother was going to pass out but she stood there, as if paralyzed. She led Josephine to the couch. “Kyle, get some water for Grandma, please.”

“You din’ hear what de radio say? They releasing that animal! They releasing that animal! Papa Bondyé!” Her eyes were wild and Tyani didn’t know how to console her. She switched on the standing fan in the living room at its highest speed, and turned it squarely towards her mother.

“He kill Sue. That animal kill Sue!”

Tyani understood, and a little bit of relief washed over her. Sue was her mother’s closest friend, and the man who had killed her was her husband, the ex-forestry officer.

Kyle returned with the water and handed it to Josephine. “You ok, Gramma?”

Josephine nodded and gulped the water, but continued looking at them as if she no longer knew them. Tyani asked Kyle to wait in his room while she spoke to her mother. She watched him go up the stairs, turning back at intervals, concern on his face.

Tyani rubbed her mother’s back until her breathing normalized. Circumstances could make you remember things, Tyani thought, things you thought you had buried. The news tonight had done that to her mother; unearthed the pain which she had so carefully tucked away.

When Josephine spoke again, she sounded calmer. “You see how life is? You see how life is?”

“But Ma, that was when? Twenty-five years ago? He probably served his time. And they’ve had all those petitions to release him.”

“You see how life is? He din’ even serve his full sentence. You see how life is? Sue well die aready.” And she sobbed in a way that Tyani had never seen, not even when her father had left.

*

Tyani watched her mother drive away almost an hour later, still a bit shaken. She had insisted on taking Kyle, and he, too, was desperate to go with her as if duty-bound to ensure that she was alright. But Tyani kept him home, and he fell asleep crying.

She locked her front door, leaned against it and released a loud, long sigh, welcoming the silence. The bond her mother had shared with Sue was remarkable, and it reminded Tyani of her relationships with the women around her. Sue’s friendship had been a gift, Josephine said, and she’d never found another friend like her. Her death had disrupted the course of Josephine’s life and learning of Campbell’s release opened the wound again, as if someone had ripped her sutures.

Tyani wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. It was the same impact the imminent move was having on her; dredging up memories of moving from place to place as a child, and reliving experiences she would prefer to forget. Life was like the sea, with wave after wave of challenges; some small and manageable, some so big they required maneuvering or ducking or running away. She needed to maneuver the ones that were there and the ones that were coming, especially the move, with no job. Tyani looked at the open space of the living and dining area, thinking about what she could sell if it came to that. Her eyes found the brown oversized couch and wall mounted flatscreen; the plants in the clay pots Granny Irene had lovingly made; Sasha’s paintings and her book shelf laden with books; Kyle’s toys scattered about; her sewing machine tucked in a corner. She couldn’t sell any of it.

Her gaze shifted to the carved wood sculpture of a faceless couple, their bodies molded

into one, the woman's breasts taut and her pregnancy prominent. Brent had gifted her with it when they'd found out she was expecting. She used to call Brent her Adonis, her beautiful man standing at six feet, two inches with skin the color of cinnamon. Her Adonis who could provoke the dissoluteness in her.

Tyani took her phone from the table and her heart beat frantically as she dialed Brent's number. She listened as the phone rang, her breathing rapid, her palms sleek. She wiped her forehead. No answer. She checked her email. Nothing. It had been two weeks since she'd last seen him; since he'd spent time with Kyle. Work, he'd said. It was a rough time because a colleague had resigned. Tyani knew better. He was avoiding the commitment conversation. Over the years they'd spoken about getting married but the situation was never ideal. Other things were going on in their lives that needed their energy and resources, like her mother's fight with cancer and Brent going off to graduate school for two years. Recently, when she had tried to bring it up, he told her they were already committed to each other, that all the talk of Sasha's wedding was getting her worked up.

A dark cloud hovered above Tyani and she found herself at the kitchen table twirling her braid, an unopened bottle of wine in front of her. She closed her eyes. Inhaled deeply. Exhaled loudly. Life was too heavy. She should probably resume therapy.

Her legs took her across the kitchen, navigating the space like it was sea water. She took her mug and ran her finger along the embossed cursive print: *Let your light shine*. How would her light shine in uncertainty and rejection? How would the flame survive in the ocean that was her life? She was about to take the mug back to the table so she could lose her thoughts in the depths of the wine, when something her friend Maya had said found its way into her consciousness. *Distract yourself*. Tyani quickly took the sponge and the soap and washed the mug. She scrubbed

the rest of the crockery and utensils with vigor, barely flinching as the water got hotter.

She'd probably have to purge Waitukubuli Realty from her system too. And Brent. Absent Brent. Non-committal Brent. She needed him now, she needed his advice, his warmth. Why didn't he see her? What was missing in her?

She littered the counter with bleach, wiped it down, pressing into the tiles, willing watermarks and stains to disappear, not caring about the harsh scent that caused her eyes and nose to burn.

Nine years in a job. Nine years in a relationship. Waitukubuli Realty released her like she was nothing. Brent was still avoiding the kind of commitment she wanted. Wasn't she worth anything?

Tyani rid her large appliances of every crumb and fingerprint. She brought the wooden table to a shine it had not seen in years. She swept and mopped the kitchen's cream ceramic tiles punishing the grout for changing its color.

Nine years in a job. Nine years in a relationship. Nine years and a son.

Tyani watered the plants. By that time, the crickets' cacophony was louder, more urgent. There was nothing more to be done. Tyani checked her phone. Nothing from Brent. She acknowledged her mother's text that she'd gotten home safely. She put the phone on the table and walked away, resisting the urge to call Brent again, resisting the urge to open the bottle. Tyani switched off the lights.

Slowly, her legs took her up the stairs. Her fingers gripped the sturdiness of the wooden rail, her chest feeling the weight of unreleased air. Her whole life had been a battle. Of unacceptance, of discomfort, of unrequited love. Maybe it was time to let the past go and open her mind to new possibilities, new experiences. Time to find a permanent space for her and Kyle and

leave Brent's muddy ground. Time to rebuild a relationship with Tessanne and release her envy of Sasha. As if her body could no longer bear the weight of her thoughts, she slowly slumped at the top of the stairs, enveloped in darkness. Sitting there, a lump lodged itself in her throat and when the tears came, she welcomed them.

Two -Sasha

Wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and large sunglasses, Sasha emerged from the grove of coconut palms into bright sunlight. She paused to admire the expanse of the white sand beach. Tourists and locals were milling about, some lounging on towels and on beach chairs, and others enjoying the sparkling turquoise water. Smiling, she extended her arms and filled her lungs with the sea's zephyr, her sheer white tunic flapping in the ocean's breeze. This was one of her favorite places in the world and coming here always made her feel renewed, peaceful. Sasha released the air from her lungs, an audible sigh, like a prayer.

“Grand Anse des Salines,” she whispered.

The sun stung her legs and the heat from the sand penetrated her flip flops, as if she was standing on hot coals. She looked around for her closest friend Emma, and saw her a little distance away, waving at her, her mahogany skin gleaming in the sunlight. Sasha half strutted, half-skipped across the sizzling sand to where Emma was standing, as her oversized bag bounced on her hips. Emma had secured a beach lounge chair in a shaded spot under a thatched-roof cabana, and Sasha kicked off her flip flops and reclined in it. Emma sat at the end, catching up on emails on her Blackberry, sullenness marring her face. Sasha decided to let her be.

Through her dark sunglasses, Sasha's eyes caught the sky, a cloudless dome, tinted a deep, beautiful blue. The color reminded her of the cerulean ocean they had crossed to get here, the ferry bobbing on its tumultuous waves. She wondered how her forefathers, the Kalinagos and other indigenous tribes, had maneuvered their little canoes in these oceans, moving from island to island, plying their wares, escaping colonizers, searching for opportunities, searching for better lives. People were always escaping situations and places, she thought, always searching for better,

searching for more. Hadn't she, Sasha, tried to escape her wretched home life by following the wrong crowd, searching for better?

Jason referred to that time of her life as 'The Pit' and she wondered if they would have met each other if she hadn't been in that space. It was that same search for better that propelled Tyani to help secure a scholarship for Sasha to go to university, to completely escape 'The Pit.' And here she was again, searching for better. Her cousin, Chidon, was taking them around, showing them places where they could negotiate deals, taking them to places of interest. Sasha inhaled deeply. There were so many places to explore, but they were leaving soon.

Seven days of bargaining and shopping had gone by swiftly and she was satisfied with the items they had purchased, particularly their quality; linen, decorative pieces, glassware, cutlery; there was no way she would find such fine things in Dominica. She'd bought full outfits for the children in her bridal party - her nieces and nephews - and crossed her fingers that everything would fit.

Sasha said, "Tyani selected her dress. The lilac one. She picked one for Jodi too, so we will collect them when we leave here,"

"Ok." Emma's head was still bent over her phone. Sometimes it was so hard to pull her out of a funk.

Sasha placed her hands behind her head. She said, "Your parents can get through one day without you checking in."

"I make decisions for the company too and have no problem checking in," Emma retorted. "You should probably try checking in with your mother too, considering how the news of your soon-to-be father-in-law affected her."

Sasha heard the sting in Emma's voice and shook her head. Emma was a dark cloud waiting

to burst, and Sasha didn't know when that day would come. It had to be about the wedding and she had tried to pry it out of her to no avail.

“We spoke earlier and she's fine. I just didn't expect the news to shake her up like that, especially with those petitions that were going around.”

“Oh please Sasha. You knew they were releasing the man; you could at least have prepared her. I'm sure she didn't expect him to be out for another five years or so. Imagine, the mother of the bride calling the father of the groom an animal. Hmm. What interesting dynamics. I look forward to seeing that spectacle.” She laughed, a meaningless sound like a bad actor struggling onstage.

Sasha had an urge to shove Emma off the beach chair. However, she composed herself, because she knew Emma's anger was not directed at Josephine. It was Sasha she wanted to hurt. Emma's behavior was unlike her, a needless jealousy that was eating away at their relationship. They'd had several conversations about Sasha's new life and how that would affect their friendship, but there were things that Emma wasn't saying. It was only that week it occurred to Sasha that whatever was brewing in Emma's soul was severe. She had accompanied Sasha to the fitting for the wedding gown, both of them exuberant, standing in a fully mirrored room about ten feet wide, empty, except for an incandescent chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Light bounced everywhere, illuminating the space in a way that seemed magical. When Mademoiselle Liègne, renowned fashion designer, zipped the dress, they had all gasped simultaneously.

Sasha looked at her reflection, her blue eyes wide in amazement. The top of the dress accentuated her curves, an intricately patterned corset of pearls, crystal beads and rhinestones that glittered in the light. The skirt was a multi-layered affair, with diamond shaped fabric flowing over each other, like large leaves in a garden.

“Absolument magnifique!” Mademoiselle Liègne repeated as she circled Sasha, tugging the dress in places and remarking on the fit. She’d sewn the dress herself. Chidon told her she was lucky, because people usually booked her at least one year in advance. She was Chidon’s stepmother, a raving beauty even in middle-age. She and Sasha had bonded over exercise and plants, a friendship that was ten years strong. They had established a longstanding tradition of touring *Jardin de Balata*, the Garden of Flowers, whenever Sasha visited Martinique and the artistry of the horticulturist never ceased to amaze them. Sasha often mused about that relationship in comparison to the non-existent one she had with Chidon’s biological mother, her mother’s sister, Katherine.

Mademoiselle Liègne asked Sasha if she was comfortable walking in the dress, or if she felt anything coming loose, or if it was too tight in certain areas.

“Perfect,” Sasha exhaled.

It was at that moment she caught Emma’s downturned mouth and wet eyes in the mirror; large dark eyes that haunted her dreams that night. Large dark eyes, all knowing, and muddling the clarity she sought.

At the beach, Sasha took a bottle of Ponche Kuba from their cooler and poured some into her personalized glass, one Tyani had gotten her on her last birthday. *Sassy Sasha. Est.1983*. She savored the creamy texture of the drink, enjoying the blends of spices in the rum. Sasha nodded with satisfaction. “This is fucking amazing.”

She offered some to Emma who was standing now, most likely searching for a spot in the water that was not too crowded. Her red and gold dreads framed her face, and they swayed with her movements. Emma had started growing them while they were away at college. They were a statement, she said, defying the conventions that her parents and others had set for her. Emma

declined the drink.

Sasha tried to lighten the mood. “Big difference from yesterday’s scenery, right?”

“Yeah.”

“But just as beautiful.”

“Yeah.”

They had decided to use their last two days to explore places of interest in Martinique. The morning before, they had tried hiking Mount Pelée, a volcano in the north of the island that had erupted violently in 1902. Unprepared for the mist and the cold, they gave up after about a mile and returned to the Visitor Center. At intervals, when the mist lifted, the views were breathtaking, and they admired the flattened town of St. Pierre, that lay in the mountain’s shadow, a former city that had lost about 30,000 people within minutes of the eruption.

Now, still reclined on the lounge chair, Sasha sighed, as if in reverence. “I never tire of this place,” she said. “As a teenager, I used to follow Chidon, Christophe and their friends to the other side over there, to Petite Anse des Salines, and we would smoke weed and drink and fool around. It’s a nudist beach. Want to go?”

“No.”

“But it’s our last day! Let’s be wild and free!”

“Sasha. Wild and free you will no longer be.”

“Ha! I’m only twenty-five, boo. Life is just beginning! Plus, freedom is a state of mind.”

“Guess you and Jason will figure out that freedom thing. Don’t see him being ok with it, anyway.” She sat down and rummaged through her bag.

Sasha took a deep breath. “We’ll see.”

Jason Campbell. Their relationship was like fabric with fraying edges that they

continuously patched to keep it going, to keep it strong. And sometimes, Sasha was content to let it unravel. What drew her to him initially - his maturity, his rigidity, his safeness - often suffocated the fire inside her. But he was a provider, a man with a good heart, and knowing that, she found herself picking up the needle, mending the fabric, and cutting off the frays. He had always been a harbor, like Emma. Safe. Consistent. There.

“Sunscreen?” Emma asked. “You know how quickly you light skinned girls burn.”

“Not light skin, boo. Honey gold.” Sasha adjusted the position bracket on the chair, and angled her body so her friend could rub her. “My skin is honey gold.”

“Uh-huh.” Emma said. She lifted Sasha’s sheer tunic and massaged the lotion into her skin, starting with her arms, on to her shoulders, down to the small of her back, lingering where bikini bottoms met flesh. “Tomorrow, we go home.”

“Tomorrow, we go home. But tonight, we fucking party!”

A sound came from Emma’s throat, and Sasha couldn’t determine whether it was dissent or assent. “Girl, live! We’ve been hustling ever since we got here; we deserve to have some fun.”

“Sasha, your idea of fun sometimes makes me apprehensive. Right now, my fun is enjoying the beach.”

She finished rubbing Sasha’s back and arms, and they exchanged places. Sasha worked her way from shoulders to buttocks admiring her friend’s narrow waist and toned muscles. They’d both been school athletes and maintained their habits, running and working out regularly. Sasha’s hands moved up Emma’s sides, letting her fingers stray just a little, feeling the concave of her waist and the excess flesh that splayed just below Emma’s armpits. Emma used to be uncomfortable about that overflow, and over the years had worked to fit all of it into a smaller bra. She squirted more lotion onto Emma’s back. Her hands moved down the center all the way down

to where her back dipped, over her buttocks, to the back of her thighs, to her inner thighs. Sasha heard Emma gasp, sending a little shudder between her own thighs. She was tempted to go higher, to hear that intake of breath one more time, to feel that space one more time. But Emma raised herself from the chair and stood.

Her eyes pierced Sasha's conscience and Sasha busied herself with putting the lotion away.

"Going for a swim," Emma said.

Sasha watched her friend of twenty years walk away, the sunlight catching her dreads, turning them into a color like fire. Her anchor, Sasha referred to her, because no matter how far she attempted to stray, Emma kept her grounded. People sometimes asked them how they remained so close, one being vibrant and outspoken, while the other appeared so reserved, and Sasha had no answer. How does one begin to describe friendship? A bond? There were so many facets to their relationship besides what people saw, or knew - commonalities, differences, transformations, love.

Love. Her heart ached in a strange way for Emma, and she was overcome with a sudden rush of grief, as if she was losing an important part of herself. Sasha fanned her face with her hat. It had to be love, she thought. A love so deep that she could not explain it to herself even if she tried. How do inseparable people part ways? She tried to rationalize what her and Emma's relationship would look like after getting married, and she couldn't imagine it, couldn't imagine a life with less of Emma.

Sasha refilled her glass and strutted to the water's edge, aware of the foreign eyes on her. A young man close by whistled and as she let the waves lap at her feet, another one came up to her asking her name and where she was from. They conversed in French Creole, a language generally spoken between the English-speaking islands and the French islands.

"Belle femme, belle zyé," he said. *Beautiful woman, beautiful eyes.*

He was good-looking too and as she told him so, she touched his chiseled chest. He invited her out to dinner and Sasha declined, something she frequently did. She was used to it, the attention, and he left after she promised to check him at the bar before leaving the beach.

Sasha joined Emma, immediately immersing herself in the cool water. It was a welcome change from the heat on shore.

“Getting married but still flirting,” Emma chided her.

“Girl, live a little nuh. It’s not like I’ll see him again. Didn’t you see that body?” She laughed and when Emma smirked, she laughed again.

Emma said nothing and Sasha sipped her drink. After a while, Sasha said, “I invited Christophe to join us tonight.”

Emma looked at the sky, and rolled her eyes. “I knew it!”

“Christophe was a long time ago, Emma.”

“Christophe wasn’t that long ago, Sasha. We both know it, no matter how much you try to make me think otherwise. I know you!”

Sasha sipped her punch. Emma was perceptive and Sasha had to come clean at some point, but her view of things was different. Emma knew the history between Sasha and Christophe yet, she refused to acknowledge that sex and love were completely different things.

Emma continued. “You want to know what I really think?”

Sasha's voice fled; she could not find it. She’d been anticipating the downpour but she still wasn’t ready for the drench. Her heart accelerated.

“Your wedding gown is the most beautiful I have ever seen. Truly a work of art. But it is a waste of money because clearly, you’re not ready and you know what? Deep down, this is *not* what you really want.”

“Em- I - I-”

“You’re putting a noose around your damn neck.”

“P-pardon me?”

“You heard me Sasha. You *know* you don’t want this marriage. You *know* you’re not in love with Jason. Goddammit Sasha!”

The ‘Goddammit Sasha’ was loud, so unlike Emma, and it frightened Sasha. She swam away and Sasha watched her go, her heart beating faster than she was comfortable with. People who were close by watched Emma swim away as well, as if she wanted to conquer the sea and all the creatures in it. Sasha took little comfort in the knowledge that they were in French territory and the onlookers may not have understood what Emma had said. A noose was downright outrageous. Sasha downed her drink, its spices burning her throat despite the smoothness of the creamy liqueur.

Embarrassed, Sasha went back to the beach chair and tried to channel positive energy into her spirit. “Bright sunshine. White sand. Turquoise water. Laughter. Bright sunshine. White sand. Turquoise water. Laughter.”

Sasha repeated the words but the peace didn’t come. She slipped on her flip flops and walked the length of the beach, her feet burning from the heat of the sand. Coconut trees bent forward, as though bowing to the ocean. She returned to the water, a little distance away from the crowd, and swam away from where her feet touched the sand. In one fluid movement, Sasha was floating on her back, her arms outstretched and eyes closed. Laughter and voices faded. There was something solitary and peaceful about being covered by the sun’s warmth while floating on the sea’s surface and Sasha surrendered her body to its gentle current and its steady hum.

A noose, Emma said. A noose. Sasha would show her and everyone else she could give up

the thrills for a stable life with a good man. They would fan their flame into a raging fire, and make their marriage work. As the current shifted Sasha's body, her mind drifted to her and Jason's journey. They had met at a youth camp which the Catholic Church hosted, and she had only attended because of Tantie Hershie's adamancy that she get involved in something positive for once. "Pretty child like you always in the streets dressed like what I wouldn't say, with those low-life thugs. What you really think will become of you?"

"Anybody riding a street bike is a low life thug to you Tantie," Sasha used to tell her. "These people are my friends and they are good people."

But when several of her friends were arrested for shoplifting, and they had tried to incriminate Sasha, who was not with them at the time, the 'I told you so's' and 'choose your friends wisely' kept on ringing in her head. The experience of being picked up by the police and questioned at the station had unsettled her, and Tantie Hershie's persistence was like an answered prayer. Sasha had boarded the bus that took her and other teenagers to the camp at Holy Redeemer Retreat House in Eggleston, eager to leave the possibility of a tainted life behind. After the serpentine drive into the mountains, getting off the bus was a relief, and as she inhaled fresh mountain air and observed the verdancy of the area, a calm washed over her. It was there that she had met Jason, white teeth against dark skin, welcoming her to the place and showing her and a room-mate to their room. Sasha was transported to a whole new world with scenic views, exquisite gardens and an evasive peacock.

Jason, just two years her senior, was a team leader and she felt a connection to him somehow; maybe because of his life story, growing up without parents, or maybe because they discovered his deceased mother used to be her mother's closest friend.

Josephine was elated, as if it was his mother, Sue, who had returned from the afterlife.

They gravitated to each other; Jason hungry for stories about his mother and Josephine eager to talk about her friend. As time rolled along, Josephine grew fonder of Jason.

“A good man,” she referred to him. She said having Jason in her life was God’s way of redeeming her.

Sasha and Jason dated off and on after he’d helped her find her way out of ‘The Pit’ but it was only after she had returned home from university, that they had decided to label it a relationship.

She had not always been the best partner to Jason but he was willing to look past her flaws, past their differences to build a life together. And since their engagement six months prior, she had tried to do better, to stay on a straight path.

When Sasha returned to the cabana, Emma was already dressed, and Jason was hanging around, waiting to take them home. The ladies packed up in silent discomfort, the cloud hanging over them, still full. With jealousy. Insecurity. Loneliness.

“Jealousy isn’t cool Emma,” Sasha said as she wrapped her towel around her.

“Jealous of what, Sasha? Or rather of who? You? Jason? Christophe?”

“You know what, we’re both tired and stressed. Let’s just get through tonight.”

“Christophe has been hanging around for half of the time we’ve been here. I see you, Sasha. I see you.”

*

Sasha, Emma and Chidon stood outside the casino, their first stop for the night, waiting for Christophe to park. Sasha’s black mini clung to her curves like skin, with a neckline that plunged all the way to her navel. Emma was in black too, her knee-length dress hugging her body, her cleavage a whisper. Chidon had recognized the tension as soon as he picked them up at the beach

and tried in vain to grasp the situation. “Look at us, under a perfect, starry sky, dressed like royalty, avec vous comportez comme deux enfants,” he chided.

They both remained silent. When Sasha saw Christophe walking towards them, her stomach rippled. He was fire. All in black. Chest and biceps bulging through the button-down shirt. Long, confident strides. Honey gold skin, just like hers, and greenish, mischievous eyes that mesmerized her as he drew closer.

“Ma chérie, you are stunning!” Christophe kissed both of Sasha’s cheeks, as is the French custom, and she wanted him to stay near her, to feel his heat.

“Emma,” he nodded at Emma. From day one the kissing thing didn’t work with her and he had learned not to bother.

The men led them to the casino and not for the first time since this trip, Sasha was transported back to times of immeasurable bliss. A summer fling with Christophe that turned into a ‘must see’ every time she visited Martinique, a spark that had turned to an inferno. This was their first meeting after two years, and she still felt the same attraction that she did all those years ago. It was always like this between them, a force that drew them together, no matter what was at stake, no matter who else was in their lives. No strings. Just unadulterated pleasure. Not even Jason could elicit this reaction. Only one other person in the world had this effect on her.

Tonight, Christophe’s scent was intoxicating, his eyes twinkling with mischief, and his smile was a command that drew her in, closer and closer to his fire. He’d pulled his dreadlocks to the back of his head and Sasha was tempted to touch them, to feel the roughness on her palms.

She could feel Emma’s eyes on her, watchful, territorial. Emma was an implosion waiting to happen.

As the night wore on, the alcohol flowed and they loosened up, and when Chidon won

some money, they all agreed it was time to move on to the club. Even Emma was excited about going clubbing.

The club's dance floor was below ground level and as they descended the stairs Sasha's mood spiked, feeling the energy like a heartthrob. It seemed like the lights were pulsating, too, to the same rhythm as the music. The dance floor was a wide area with elevated platforms where people were dancing, gyrating, swiveling on poles. Sasha counted seven bars. There wasn't a single place like this in Dominica. They found a spot that wasn't too crowded and Chidon and Christophe went to get them drinks. Sasha looked at Emma, pretending to dance, pretending to be carefree.

"We good, Em?" Sasha tried.

"Never been better." Emma danced away from Sasha.

Sasha didn't like it when they fought; it was too hard to win back Emma. But she wanted to have a memorable last night as a single woman in Martinique. Emma would get over that Christophe thing, she thought. They were going to their respective homes the next day and in a few days this mood would blow over.

When the men returned with the drinks, other thoughts took over Sasha's mind. Christophe was dancing too close to her. Her heart thumped and there were flutters in her stomach, as if she was feeling his energy for the first time. When she looked for Emma, she saw her dancing with Chidon and she almost spit out her drink.

"Shall we dance chérie?" Christophe asked.

"Mais oui."

She held out her hand and he pulled her in, crushing her with his maleness. "This dress is too sexy for outdoors," his mouth was on her ear, his voice deep, and she felt it vibrate between

her legs.

“I’m indoors.” Sasha smiled.

Christophe roared as he swirled her around, moving to the beat of the zouk. When he brought her to him, she lost herself in his arms and he held on to her. Wanton. It felt like time had not elapsed since they touched and Sasha thought she would burst out of sheer elation

“Tu es le feu,” Christophe whispered.

“As are you mon amor. You. Are. Fire.”

One last tryst wouldn’t hurt, she thought. Over the past few days, they hardly got a chance to themselves, with Emma hovering and their schedules so tight.

Christophe held on to her. He slid a lock of her hair between two fingers, his eyes following the movement of his hands over her breasts to the end of the lock. “Blond suits you,” he smiled. “But I prefer it black and curly. You look more angelic.” His eyes were twinkling again.

“Well, we all know I’m no angel,” she replied. “I look more mature with straight hair.”

“You are still the most beautiful woman I have ever laid my eyes on,” he cupped her face in his hands. “Tellement belle.”

“Merci.” Being wrapped up in his fire sent heat waves throughout her body, causing pulsations where her thighs met. Sasha tried to distract herself from his magnetic force, and asked what she wanted to ask all along. “Whoever thought you would move to Paris? Is it a woman?”

Christophe rested his forehead on hers. “Oui. And a job.”

Something coursed through Sasha, something like a dull ache and it was only then she realized they had stopped dancing. “Good for you. For finding a woman and a job. Science business?”

“Oui. Recherche sur l’environnement.”

Sasha nodded. He had always been passionate about science. “We might never see each other again, with you going so far.”

“And you, getting married.”

She nodded. “Yeah. Think you will marry her?”

“Je ne sais pas,” he shrugged.

“I’ll miss us.”

“Moi aussi.” He bit his lower lip. “Let’s talk in a quieter space. Allons-y.”

Sasha took his hand and when she turned to look at Emma, she didn’t miss the irrefutable look of disapproval on her best friend’s face. She would deal with Emma later.

He led her up a flight of stairs she hadn’t noticed before. They found themselves in a dark lounge. A purplish haze permeated the atmosphere and Sasha couldn’t help the sudden pique she experienced. She glided through the fog as if in a dream, as if she was floating on clouds to the beat of soukous, though not as loud as the dancefloor. Only silhouettes indicated that a few other people were in the lounge. They found a private booth at the far end with purple or black cushioned seats – Sasha couldn’t be too sure - and sat opposite each other.

Christophe placed his drink on the table. “Quelle surprise,” he said. “You getting married.”

“Pas tellement,” Sasha answered. “We’ve been together for a while.”

“Oui, oui.” He took her hand in his, raised it and kissed her palm. “Tu me manque tout temps.”

“Me too,” she replied.

He smiled at her, dazzling her, and Sasha yearned to lean over and kiss his face, his lips. She heard her heartbeat as the blood raced through her body, causing a dizzy, familiar feeling. Thoughts of Emma and Jason tried creeping into her consciousness but she silenced them, looking

at Christophe's full lips as he spoke. She wanted those lips on her body. One last time. The timbre of his voice was rich and deep and she wanted to feel those sound waves travel through her ear, vibrate on her eardrum, and course throughout her body. She wanted his voice inside her.

"Did you hear what I just said?" he interrupted her reverie.

"Non," her voice was raspy.

"Seeing you has awakened something inside me. Something I thought I would never feel again," he said. "Come home with me, amor. One more night."

That boldness. That confidence. Before her mind could register another thought, he was on her side of the booth and she fiercely locked her mouth with his, her resistance gone. Her hands found his locks, his chest, his face. He cupped her breasts and moaned when he realized she was braless.

He broke the kiss, looking at her with intensity. "Allons-y," he groaned. "Let's go."

Sasha had no words. She attacked his mouth with vengeance, feeling a rush as her primal instinct dominated her mind, her body. She climbed his lap, and his strong hands roamed all over her, his mouth devouring her neck, her breasts. Her dress rode up her thighs and she ground herself on his erection, moving to the beat of the music. Sasha closed her eyes, reveling in her pleasure.

"Let's go" he repeated huskily.

Unzipping his pants, she met his eyes and Christophe bit his lip to stifle the groan. Sasha stroked his rigidity, feeling his throbs, feeling his hunger. "I want that dick now."

"Pas ici," he gasped. "Not here."

But his hands couldn't obey his words. He shifted the lacy fabric which separated them and Sasha guided him into her warmth. She gritted her teeth. "Fuuuuuuuck!"

Relishing the moment, she closed her eyes, and everything around her disappeared as he

transported her into another realm. His movements intoxicated every fiber of her being, playing on every contour of her body, like a musical chord, deriving the sweetest sounds. Their rhythm was a frenzied one to which both of them instinctively knew the steps. He cinched her waist with urgency. Sasha matched his pace, feeling the techno pounding within her breasts, feeling the vibration emanating from her center.

“Ché-rie! Ché-rie!” he panted repeatedly.

Sasha feasted on his sweaty neck sending him into overdrive. Before long he growled, a guttural sound that sent shockwaves throughout her body, and they both exploded in a blissful crescendo.

Three - Tessanne

Nestled in the cocoon of her multi-colored hammock, Tessanne watched the smoke from her lungs become one with the night. The hammock was strung from the branches of two mango trees on the edge of the lawn in her front yard, and it swayed gently as she crossed her ankles. Frogs and crickets were singing in the thicket, and Tessanne found solace in the steady hum of the river a few hundred feet behind the house. She pulled on her cigarette and held the smoke in. Peace at last. Well not peace, but respite. Stoney had gone out early that afternoon and had not returned, her children were in bed, and Tessanne was happy to be free, albeit momentarily.

She released the smoke between her teeth, making a hissing sound, and watched it unfurl into nothingness. Overhead, silver light peeked through the canopy of rustling leaves and she caught glimpses of the moon's half circle on its journey across the sky. The light shifted on her t-shirt reminding her of sleeping under the moon's gaze after her stepmother had forced her out of her father's house. She wasn't much older than her daughter, Jodi, and she cringed, thinking about any of her children being in that situation. Tessanne had learned the streets with her friends, learned what men were willing to pay for, and often ventured to the Dutch side of St. Martin. It was there that she had met Jodi's father, Power, her missing-at-sea husband who had shown her what it was like to be loved and valued.

Life was different now. Tessanne pulled more tobacco into her body as her eyes scanned the two-story building that was her home. Well Stoney's family house. The master bedroom occupied almost half of the top floor with an elaborate bathroom and walk-in closet. The bedroom opened onto a balcony, overlooking the grounds or the river, depending on the side one stood. Oversized spaces, with little warmth. On one hand she was happy she and her children had a place

to stay, and on the other hand, it was a prison.

It was because of Josephine she was in this prison. It was Josephine's fault she had met Stoney in the first place. Fucking woman didn't give her a chance to settle when she'd returned to Dominica, harassing her to find a job, and every day it was the same lines: "You cyah live in this house an' doh contribute. We cyah feed you an' your child."

Josephine found her a job at a laundromat offering dry cleaning and other services where Stoney was a regular. Tessanne remembered how mysterious he was, a man of few words who intentionally sought her out and it didn't take long for sparks to fly between them. Though small in stature, he walked like he owned the world; a kind of confidence that Tessanne found intriguing. Her mother referred to Stoney as his family's black sheep and shamed her for jumping into another man's bed so soon after losing her husband. When her detective eyes caught up to the pregnancy and she realized that Stoney wasn't coming around anymore, she called Tessanne an embarrassment, a fool, and other names she was still working on forgetting. And when Tessanne could no longer hide the pregnancy Josephine's husband asked her to leave his house. Again, Tessanne found herself on the brink of homelessness.

"My mother never do nuttin to help me," she muttered. "Always ready to give me up like a bad fucking habit."

Tessanne shifted her body to retrieve her pack of cigarettes and lighter. She was about to light the cigarette when her phone vibrated, startling her for a moment. It was Stoney's brother, Collin Adler, the only one of his siblings who checked for her.

- *Been a while. How are you?*
- *Helloooooo! fine. you?*
- *Great. I'm good. What are you up to? Let's go to Can's.*

Their hangouts were rare, and when they happened Tessanne enjoyed them. She was tempted to go, to spend some time away from the house, to socialize with people outside of her immediate family. But Stoney didn't like her going out and she was skeptical about taking the chance. Sometimes he stayed out late but what if tonight he came home early? With unsteady fingers, she texted Collin:

- *Awa too late*
- *It's only 8 o'clock. Wouldn't be long. Just about an hour. One drink.*
- *No ride*
- *I will pick you up.*
- *Awa*
- *Come on, Tess. You need a little break. Let me come for you.*

Tessanne looked at the car parked in the garage, a car she no longer had access to. She looked at the prison she'd been trapped in for the past five years. Fuck Stoney.

- *K. Gimme 20 mins*

Tessanne hurried to her bedroom and rummaged through her closet, settling on black jeans and a black blouse. She dabbed some perfume behind her ears and onto her wrists, twisting her body in the mirror and turning up her nose at what she saw. Belly rolls. Large face. Large breasts. Untidy hair needing a relaxer. She used to want hair like her sister Tyani's; silky hair flowing down her back. She wanted her light complexion too, so everyone would call her pretty. Her father used to tell her that black is beautiful, but no matter how hard Tessanne looked, she couldn't see how black could be beautiful.

After swapping her blouse for a looser one, she donned a cap and hoop earrings. A touch of make-up hid the fading discoloration near her right eye. Red lipstick. Better. Tessanne stopped

by Jodi's bedroom. She was lying in bed writing in her journal, a novel face down next to her. Her physique was like Tessanne's, only smaller. "Going for a drink with Uncle Collin. Coming back in a hour or so."

Jodi nodded and went back to her journal. She spent all her pocket money on those journals, and guarded them like they contained explosive secrets. Tessanne looked at her for a little while, proud of her confidence and focus. They were different in so many ways, and Tessanne admired what she saw in her daughter; attributes she did not find in herself.

As the vehicle drove down the driveway Tessanne's hands shook, a mixture of apprehension and excitement overtaking her. She needed the break, she reminded herself. Fuck Stoney.

Tessanne entered the green Range Rover, the irregularity of her heartbeat sounding loud in her ears like the drum of doom. Bob Marley's *Three Little Birds* came through the speakers, clean and soothing, as if reassuring her that everything would be alright.

"Been a while," Collin smiled as he pulled out of the driveway.

"I know," Tessanne smiled back.

"Are you ok? The kids?" He asked

Tessanne nodded. "Yes."

As they drove, she was tempted to tell Collin to take her back home, but she also wanted to see some of her acquaintances and enjoy adult company.

"Relax, Tess. It'll be fine," Collin said as if sensing her apprehension. "Doesn't hurt to get out every now and then, you know?"

She turned to look at him, so sure of himself, like Stoney. He glanced at her, a smile playing on his lips. Men were so free.

“You know your brother,” she said.

Collin nodded but said nothing. He was taller and broader than Stoney yet younger and more focused, and part of her wished Stoney was more like him; respectful, calm, attentive. He maneuvered the car around the corners, up the mountain, the cool breeze waltzing in through the windows, slapping her cheeks and disheveling her hair. She put her glass up halfway. Through the trees, Tessanne glanced at the river meandering in the valley below, glistening from the moon’s spill. She relaxed in her seat and tapped her feet as reggae satisfied her like no other genre could. It was as if the music reached above her head, lifted the basket of burdens she carried, and placed it at her feet.

Tessanne asked Collin about his wife, Lena. She was a medical doctor attached to one of the district clinics, and Tessanne felt a pang of envy listening to the pride in his voice as he told her that Lena had recently hosted a training for her staff.

“So how do you feel about the Campbell release?” Collin asked her.

“Who?”

“The man they were petitioning for since whenever. He had killed his wife years and years ago. We were children still.”

“Oh! Campbell! Oh they freeing him for real?”

“It’s all over the news.”

“Well good for him. Sue was his wife name. She used to babysit me and Tyani sometimes.”

“Really?”

“Mmm-hmm. She an’ my mother was close.

“Oh? Interesting. I wonder how your mom is taking that news.”

“Me ain’ give a fuck.”

Collin laughed, a loud roar that shook his body. When he calmed down and he saw how serious she was, he apologized. “I don’t mean to laugh at your relationship with your mom. I just wasn't expecting your answer, you know?”

Tessanne shrugged, but she was still processing the news of Campbell's release. She remembered the night of the shooting; it had stayed with her all these years, sometimes resurfacing, most times buried. At times, Tessanne told herself that she had dreamt about the events, but the memory was so vivid, it was hard to cast it aside and call it a dream. Although two decades had passed, she had a clear recollection of her mother coming home from work during a terrifying thunderstorm. She, Tessanne, could not sleep because she used to think of thunder as a huge boulder that could fall from the sky. That night, it kept rolling and crashing and rolling and crashing, and her heart was doing somersaults in her chest because she was convinced the thunder would fall onto their house. She remembered her mother shifting the curtain to their room to check on her and Tyani but by the time she’d taken the pillow off her head to say good-night, all she saw was Josephine’s silhouette beyond the curtain. Tessanne heard her mother’s voice and Patrick’s, so low she could not make out the words, but she could tell from their tone that they were arguing. They exited the house soon after, and Tessanne recalled the fear that clutched her, the confusion and the loneliness as lightning crackled and thunder boomed. They had gone for a long, long time and she fell asleep crying, only to be awakened by the community’s shrieks of shock and grief. And she always wondered whether her mother and step-father’s leaving in the night had something to do with Sue’s death.

“Hey, you ok Tess? I’m sorry I laughed. Didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Is ok. I wasn’t offended.”

They drove through Trafalgar, past the school and the community center, towards the road

that led to the Trafalgar Falls. The Falls were the pride of the community, the source of the river that snakes through the valley, and one of the most popular natural wonders of Dominica.

As they drove along, the cascades flickered through the forest, as if playing hide and seek. “You seeing the Falls?” Collin asked, slowing down the vehicle.

“Uh-huh.” Their splendor never failed to awe Tessanne; two waterfalls gushing from different caverns just feet apart from each other, separated by lush greenery. She could hear Patrick’s voice in her mind, telling her that the Freshwater Lake fed one waterfall, and the Breakfast River fed the other.

“I remember hiking there as a child with my mother, my sister, an’ my stepfather, Patrick. We used to soak in the warm sulfur pools at the bottom of the falls. Patrick used to say the taller one is the father an’ the shorter one is the mother. Good times,” Tessanne reminisced. “Good times.”

Collin parked at the bottom of the hill, outside of Can’s. There were very few buildings in the area and Can’s was a concrete structure with no sign indicating its existence. If you knew it, you knew it. He switched off the engine and turned to her. “You can still have good times, Tessanne.”

“Easy for you to say,” she replied, exiting the vehicle. Tessanne rubbed her arms as the chill enveloped her. In her haste, she had forgotten a sweater.

“Here,” Collin said, handing her his jacket.

Tessanne squeezed her body into it like her life depended on it, and almost danced when its warmth covered her. It smelled like Collin and she fought the impulse to press the flap to her nose.

As they approached the bar, music and laughter reached her ears and she consciously

released her anxiety. No big crowd ever came to Can's, except on the rare occasions they hired a band or a DJ, and Tessanne was happy to see the regulars, scattered around, playing pool, playing dominoes, drinking and dancing. These were familiar faces though she seldom saw them, and she separated herself from Collin and walked around to greet her people. "Where you hiding?" they shouted above the music. "Long time no see."

Tessanne sashayed to the bar, hips and feet moving to the bouyon music booming from the speakers. There were shelves stocked with rums infused with local spices and herbs. She drank a shot of nanny and spice with the bartender, her body moving to *Balance Batty*. The concoction moved from her throat to her stomach like a heat wave.

"Cyah travel on one leg," the bartender said. "Here's another one."

Tessanne laughed and tilted her head. She threw back the drink and the heat on the inside of her body found its way to her skin. She grinned, already feeling the tingling effects of the alcohol.

"Chalè!" She gulped the glass of water someone handed her and joined the people in laughter.

A slim man, she didn't know his name, positioned himself behind her. She whined on him, stroking back as the song commanded her to, as the crowd cheered and clapped, all of them agreeing that Tessanne's behind was too much for the man to handle.

After a while, Tessanne left the music and the smiling faces, and joined Collin on the balcony overlooking the road. He was sitting at a table in the corner, two Kubuli beers before him. Feeling a little festive, she was tempted to lead him to the bar area to dance, but thought this might be crossing a boundary.

Tessanne sat, the sound of the waterfalls like a distant lullaby.

Collin said, "I ordered grilled fish and fried dasheen, your favorite."

She took a cigarette from her purse and lit it. "Man, the last time I had that was when God make Eve."

Collin chuckled. "You should get out more often, socialize a bit, you know?"

"I wish."

"Tess, you shouldn't live your life in fear like that. Stoney is my brother but that's not a good life; not for you, not for your kids."

Tessanne pulled more smoke into her body and held it in, looking at Collin, shaking her head. She released it, a white puff that eventually blended with the darkness. "Not your business, Collin."

"My niece and my nephew are my business. And if they continue to see this kind of behavior, that is what they will learn. Not good. Not good at all."

Tessanne sucked her teeth. She held the cigarette over the ashtray and drank from her beer. "I come out to free up my mind, not to talk about all that. Cool out." She turned away from his gaze and looked across the river, where a mountain loomed tall and proud, luminous and bluish gray, in the moon's glory.

"You know what your problem is? Your stubbornness." Collin said. "Lena is open to you coming home to stay for some time - you and the kids. We'll organize a job for you so you can get on your feet. I don't know why you don't take us up on our offer. What you need is independence. And we want to help you."

"I already living on all-you charity, in all-you family house. Ain't coming in all-you business too."

Prior to her moving into the house where she lived, the Adlers had used it for storage. It

was Josephine who had changed that, when she approached Old Mr. Adler about Tessanne's pregnancy and Stoney's abandonment. He had willingly offered Tessanne a temporary room there and paid a crew to clean out the spaces she would need and Tessanne remembered having to navigate piles of strange-smelling boxes with her large stomach. A lot of cardboard in one place could be nauseating. After the twins were born and Stoney was satisfied they looked like him, he gradually moved in and convinced his father to completely clear the house so the children could breathe clean, fresh air.

"I am doing this on condition that you finally settle down and take care of your responsibilities. There is value in that. And honor," the old man had told his son. "Stop wasting your life gallivanting all over the place."

As a new father, Stoney was hands on and Tessanne had grown to love him even in the twisted way he treated her. It wasn't a fiery love like what she and Power had shared, but it was love. And although she wanted Stoney to love her the same way Power had, she knew he never would.

"You're turning down an offer for a happier life," Collin was saying. "You don't have to work for us. I know people."

"I dunno when last I had a regular job. Nobody not hiring nobody without experience. You's the top manager. You supposed to know that."

Collin sipped his drink. "That way of thinking will keep you back, Tessanne."

The bartender called Collin for their food. Tessanne checked her phone, relieved when she saw no calls from Stoney. She hoped he didn't get home before she did.

When Collin returned to the table, he said "I reached out tonight because the other night Stoney was at home with some friends bragging about having control of women, and giving you

a black eye. Lena gave him a piece of her mind but you know how he is, never backing down. Why did he hit you?"

Tessanne shrugged. She looked away.

"He said you talked back to him. What happened?"

Tessanne ate slowly, the food tasting like clay in her mouth. She shook her head, still silent.

"What happened Tess? Should I tear the words out of your mouth?"

"Is 'cause I go out with his car the other night without asking."

"What? Wait, isn't it your car?"

Tessanne chuckled in a sarcastic way. "My car? I ain't own shit. I can go grocery shopping with it; I can pick up the children with it; but I cyah go out with it."

"Nah Tess. You and these kids deserve better." He looked at her, his hooded eyes intense, as if he was considering something weighty. After a while, he said, "I really think you need to leave Stoney."

Tessanne chewed in silence, tears pricking her eyes. Leaving Stoney would mean leaving the twins. He had made that clear over the years. Besides, her children were accustomed to a certain level of comfort. She had already moved Jodi from St. Martin to Dominica, and stayed in her mother's miserable house, before moving to the Adler house. She knew how it felt to be without a home and she wasn't about to go through that again.

"People like to think others can just walk away from their relationships. It ain't easy like that."

Collin leaned back in his chair. "So you prefer to be miserable?"

"Nobody ain't have no perfect life. Nobody ain't have no perfect relationship. Sometimes me an' Stoney good, sometimes we does fight. Nuttin wrong in that. I ain't moving nowhere."

“Tell me. When are things ever good?”

Her lids released her tears silently, like leaves dropping from their branches. When were things ever good? The Campbell news helped her to remember when things were good, and a feeling like grief crept over her, and she felt dispirited, as if mourning for those years when things were truly good, before Sue had died, before her mother was taken away.

“I know it is a difficult decision to make, but you should think about forging a new path, especially for Jodi’s sake, for Joy’s sake, for Jarvid’s sake.”

Tessanne reached for her phone, her hands trembling slightly. No call from Stoney - not yet. She was relieved and anxious at the same time. She wiped her tears and gulped the rest of her beer. “Collin, lemme tell you someting. When we was children, my mother force Patrick to leave the house, you hear? After he left, she couldn’t keep up with the expenses an’ she drag us across Dominica from house to house like little rats, fraid to sit an’ watch the people tv or go in their fridge when we was hungry. We was sleeping on people floor in their living room, man touching our pussy an’ our ass. You hear me? You dunno nuttin about that life.”

Her voice cracked and her fingers shook violently. Collin put his hand on hers.

“My father come for me, take me to St. Martin, an’ it was pure mizè under his wife. Misery. To keep my sanity an my life, I had run from that house and live in de streets, or with friends until I meet my husband. An’ nobody never tell me w’ happen to him. You hear? I dunno if he drown in that sea or hiding somewhere; I dunno if Gendarme put him in foreign jail or if they kill him an’ forget to tell me. I dunno. But after almost two years of trying to survive, I had to get out of St. Martin cause things was getting rell crucial, you hear? My children have their comfort an’ erryting they need. I ain’t moving nowhere.”

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When they got back to Copthall, Stoney's SUV was in the driveway. Tessanne's heart made a racket in her chest. "Oh fuck."

"I'll talk to him Tess."

Collin eased into the garage and they exited the vehicle. Inside, she asked him to wait in the living room, while she went to look for Stoney. It was strange he had not called her, and her heart continued to rattle as she climbed the stairs to their bedroom. She hoped he was asleep so she wouldn't have to deal with him tonight. In the master bedroom, the shower was running and Tessanne called out to Stoney. He didn't answer and she wasn't sure if he was ignoring her. From the bedroom, Tessanne pushed the door to the en-suite bathroom and poked her head in.

"Good-night Stoney."

"Tessanne, where the hell were you?"

"By Can's. Wi-with Collin."

"Who the fuck gave you permission to go there?"

"I – I was trying to call you," she lied, hands shaking.

Tessanne waited for his answer and hearing none she left the bedroom. She stopped by Jodi's door but it was locked; Jodi must have gone to sleep. In the living room, Collin was staring out a window facing the back of the house, where they had a clear view of the river.

"Everything alright?" Collin asked without looking at her.

Tessanne joined him at the window, seeing their faces reflected in the panes, and if she concentrated hard enough, she would see the river in the distance.

"Yes. He in the shower. You can go."

"Sure?"

Tessanne nodded but Collin made no move to leave. She watched his reflection in the glass,

his face expressionless except the downward curve of his mouth. His eyes were like Stoney's: small and dark under hooded brows, but his twinkled when he talked and laughed, and she had never seen that light in Stoney's eyes. Stoney's feet were light on the stairs and if Tessanne didn't know better, she would dismiss the footsteps as imaginary. The scent of his cologne reached them before he did and Tessanne stepped away from the window, a lump forming in her throat. Plaid shirt rolled up to his forearms, black jeans, black loafers. He regarded Tessanne, two lines between his brows, his cheekbones prominent, his mouth a hard line.

Shaking his head, he pointed at Tessanne. "You're looking for every reason to get me angry, right? You left the children here alone, without telling me you're leaving the house. Where the fuck is your respect and your common sense?"

Tessanne swallowed. She said, "Jodi is a teenager, she can stay home with the children once in a while. I ain't go for long."

"Look Stoney -"

"Shut the fuck up Collin!" Stoney hushed his brother. He turned to Tessanne. "So what is it, you fucking him now? Coming in my house wearing his fancy leather jacket. One brother wasn't enough for you to trap?"

Tessanne bit her lower lip, shaking her head, and burdened by the heaviness of the jacket that she'd forgotten she was wearing. She heard Collin telling Stoney to stop being an ass and their voices joined the monotony of the river. It always came back to that; their beginning. Every time he brought it up it hit her hard, the same way it did five years prior, when he accused her of getting pregnant on purpose, and questioned whether he was the father. He didn't sign up for this, he had said when she had told him she was pregnant. Throwing money at her he told her to get rid of it, and pushed her out of his vehicle, leaving her on the roadside, alone and in shock. A co-worker

brought her some herbs and Tessanne drank it every day for one month but that didn't end her pregnancy.

Tessanne jumped when Stoney's voice pulled her back. He was in front of her, the scar on his cheek shifting with his twitching. "No answer bitch?"

Collin pulled him back by his shoulder. "You're downright disrespectful, man!"

Stoney stumbled backward and when he regained his balance Tessanne watched his brows fuse together. His breathing was loud and wheezy as if his lungs were making life difficult for him. "You get to have final say at Adler & Sons, but not in this house! My fucking house! My fucking rules!" He beat his chest as he said it, glaring at Collin and Tessanne.

Tessanne's eyes darted between Stoney's balled fists and the door. Her hands and lips quivered. A voice in her head was telling her the scene was turning uglier, telling her to run. Stoney's phone, in the pouch clipped to his belt, rang and Tessanne almost screamed from the suddenness of it. The sound pierced the stillness of the house; it grew louder and louder until it was all around her, all inside of her. When it stopped, it started again and keeping his narrowed eyes on Collin and Tessanne, Stoney answered. He turned and walked to the front door and Collin gave Tessanne a reassuring look. "Goodnight Tessanne. I'll talk to him."

Tessanne bolted up the stairs and quickly entered the twins' bedroom. She locked the door and crept into Jarvid's bed, heart hammering, feeling like she was suffocating. She shook all over, as if her stomach was generating tremors. Tessanne listened for the eruption of voices, or Stoney's footsteps on the stairs. None came. Within a few minutes she heard the vehicles leaving and she rushed out of the room, to the balcony adjoining the master bedroom. Trembling, she held onto the railing, feeling her throat clogging, thinking about her life, thinking about her loneliness. She breathed in deeply, stuffing her lungs with the fresh air, feeling the slight breeze on her face. Moon

rays shimmered through the branches and Tessanne saw flickers and shadows on her hammock, her flower garden and her vegetable beds. The lawn below her gleamed. She wanted to escape, to be free like the breeze, but she also wanted her children to be comfortable and happy and safe, and escaping would mean taking away those things from them.

Tessanne's purse was still strung across her body, and she fumbled for a cigarette in the pack. With trembling hands, she forced the cigarette to her quivering lips and struggled to roll the lighter's wheel with her thumb. The cigarette fell to the floor. She retrieved another one, and raised it to her lips, hands unsteady. Clamping her mouth on the stick, Tessanne cupped her hands over the end, and struggled to flick the lighter. After several unsuccessful attempts, she hurled both the cigarette and the lighter across the porch and they crashed onto the tiled floor.

In defeat, Tessanne raised her face to the moon, willing its energy, its magic, its beauty into her soul. "At least the moon have the earth. But nobody ain't love me. Not Stoney, not my mother, not Tantie Hershie, not my sisters. Only my children love me."

A howl rose from her belly and she crumbled, awash in silver light.

Four - Tyani

A sheen of sweat coated Tyani's body. She swatted the occasional mosquito with her racket, deriving a measure of satisfaction from the rapid tick-tick-tick sound and the scent of their tiny bodies as the wire mesh roasted them. Flushed from warmth and wine, she leaned forward on the rattan furniture, the one she had rescued from its demise a few months prior. Her buttocks were on the edge, barely enjoying the softness of the seat's new padding, her feet planted firmly on the patio's floorboards. Hands between her knees, her fingers clutched another rejection letter. The words stabbed her every time she thought about them. Words like regret, best wishes. These no vacancy letters left her angry at Waitukubuli Realty, angry that they had derailed her life and left her out to rot. She languished there in the barrenness, a stranger to her own self. Lost. Empty. Useless. Betrayed. Her eyes roamed her corner of the world. In a few hours, the gold sky would fade to gray. It was just the way with life - ever changing. The landscape. People. Jobs. Love.

Gold to gray. Happiness to sorrow.

Her ears picked up Kyle's laughter and her eyes followed the sound, past Sasha's tiered plant stands, through the patio's crisscross railings, into the backyard. He was kicking a ball Sasha had brought him, his short legs lost in the overgrown lawn and fallen leaves.

Green leaves. Yellow leaves. Brown leaves. Dead leaves. Like dead ends. Like her.

The ever-changing life had done that; scraped her insides and left her empty. Gold to gray. But she wasn't dead, was she? She was alive like the mango trees that were interspersed throughout the lawn; one's branches almost touching the ground, the others' arms reaching for the sky. She was alive like the papaya tree in the corner, standing with its back erect, refusing to buckle as it cradled a cluster of green and yellow fruit.

The letter slipped through her fingers. It made no sound when it fell to the floorboards, and it scuttled at her feet, obeying the commands of the breeze. She lifted her *Let Your Light Shine* mug from the patio table next to her, and sipped. The wine was not as cool as it had been earlier; the heat was brutal and unkind and she couldn't muster the energy to refill the ice-bucket.

Kyle called Tyani from the backyard. "Look at my skills!"

Tyani slapped a mosquito that was feasting on her lap. She should have worn leggings, not shorts, she thought. She hoisted her body from the rattan couch and placed her elbows on the wooden rails. She forced her lips to stretch, and her cheeks rose, just a little, almost bringing out a sparkle in her brown eyes. When he kicked the ball into the net, her hands came together and her lips parted to release a sound that mimicked delight.

"Daddy coming tonight?" he asked.

"I don't know, son," Tyani said.

Kyle still asked for his father although Brent had come around a few times. But Tyani understood what Kyle pined for - he wanted the father who used to be present.

Brent had shown up the following night after she had lost her job. "Been so busy at work. They need to hire at least three more people with the expansion and whatnot," he had said.

He came several times after that, consoling her and offering advice. Tyani had watched him playing and laughing with Kyle. She watched him reading to Kyle and whispering boyishly as he tucked him into bed. But there was a bitterness that tugged at her, a nagging feeling that something was off, something beyond his reluctance to commit. It solidified when she had pressed herself against him and welcomed him into her body. He was different, distant. Afterward, he apologized, feigning fatigue; leaving before she could gather her regret, her loneliness and her underwear. Too many times she was impelled by her longing to be desired, to be valued. Her

innate compulsion to fix things and make the ground solid again lured her into giving too much. But what she needed to remember was the futility of disregarding logic; of evading the truth about what the ground really was. Muddy. Slippery. Smelly.

Tyani's soul was burning up for Brent. A lump was forming in her throat. Had their gold really turned to gray?

She sank into the orange cushion of the rattan furniture and drank the rest of her wine. Sasha's potted flowers shared the patio with her; shades of pink, purple, yellow, red and white, gracing tiered stands, reviving from Tyani's neglect. They swayed to the rhythm of the slight breeze, as though its tune whistled within their thin stems.

The door leading from the kitchen to the patio swung open, squealing from want of grease. Tyani looked up, expecting to see Sasha, but it was Josephine and Sasha, and Tyani groaned inwardly. She wanted to grieve in peace, for her man and her job, for her life as she knew it.

Sasha's bleached hair was coiled into a bun, like a crown atop her head. Watering-can in hand, she walked to the tiered stand close to Tyani. She was still wearing her sports bra and leggings from the gym, her wide hips and round behind on their usual display. Tyani admired her sister's consistency and her commitment to fitness and self-care. The results showed in her toned, shapely body and the confidence with which she carried it. Tyani could probably have had a clearly defined waist and a washboard stomach like Sasha's, she thought. If only she was as disciplined as her. But she kept falling off the exercise wagon, and the pudginess in her stomach only worsened with time.

"Still out here, Yani?" Sasha asked as she examined the leaves of a plant.

"Uh-huh."

"You got any work done?"

Tyani glanced at the text book next to her mug and shook her head. She had not even bothered to open it.

Josephine called to Kyle and blew kisses at him. She plopped into the rattan chair next to Tyani's and said, "rum again?"

Tyani ignored her mother and asked Sasha about Emma. "Haven't seen her since you got back."

"She's out of state, had to travel for work," Sasha said, still examining the plants' leaves.

"And how are plans for the wedding?"

Sasha turned to Tyani and opened her hands, palms facing skyward. "I dunno if I know what I'm doing anymore. I think we'll need a professional planner. So many things to do, so little time. I have a lot going on at work and Jason has his hands full, renovating his father's house and all kinds of things."

"I'm available if you need an extra hand."

"So nice of you to offer! I'll let you know how you can help."

Tyani nodded. It would be a good distraction for her to get her mind off things; off her financial situation; off moving; off Brent, off Waitukubuli Realty. Sometimes, being without a job felt like living without an identity and Tyani missed being part of something larger. She still found herself wondering what she would be doing at Waitukubuli Realty at certain times during the day.

"You know what?" Sasha said to her. "You're in charge of outfits for the bridal party. Make sure everything is fitting as they should and arrange for alterations. Cool?"

"Cool."

Josephine stretched out her legs and crossed her ankles. She said, "so Campbell relly going to be at your wedding, Sasha?"

“He’s Jason’s father Ma.”

Josephine sucked her teeth. “He will spoil it. That man is a old, dirty beast. Praise God Jason take after Sue, and not him. That animal din’ want Sue to go nowhere if he wasn’t going too. An’ every time he wanted to control her salary. In those days they used to pay us in cash. Every fortnight they used to put our wages in little envelopes an’ she used to have to hide her money so that damn animal wouldn’t take it. He always wanted control. I could never stand that man.”

Tyani took her mug to sip but it was empty. She half-listened as Josephine went on about Mr. Campbell. Then she shifted to Patrick’s drunkenness and then to Mademoiselle Liènne, blaming her for ‘everything that happened.’ Whatever her battle was with the past was beginning to show its ugly self and as she ranted, Tyani and Sasha exchanged looks. They had discussed taking their mother to a therapist, because perhaps she was having a midlife crisis, or perhaps she was depressed. But the trigger was Mr. Campbell’s upcoming release. Tyani had pestered Tantie Hershie for some kind of answer.

“Try not to put too much pressure on your mother, Yani,” she had said. “That was a tough time in her life. She will talk to you about it when she’s good and ready. And if she doesn’t want to talk about it, then you have to respect that.”

If Josephine did not want to discuss with them why his release was affecting her, then they thought it would be beneficial to her to talk things through with a professional. But who would pay? Sasha had wedding expenses. She, Tyani, was unemployed. Tessanne was in her own world. Her mother did not have medical insurance and she was sure Josephine’s husband, Miller, would not see the need for any kind of therapy, and therefore would refuse to put his money there. It was a similar situation when Josephine had had her mastectomy. He did not believe that Josephine really had cancer because she looked the same and continued working with the same kind of

energy, and so he surmised that the doctors were mistaken. Tyani had borne the bulk of the financial burden, putting her mother on her insurance plan and taking a loan to pay what the insurance did not cover. But here she was calling another man a dirty beast, when the beast of all beasts was sleeping in the same bed as her.

Sasha was encouraging Josephine's monologue, interjecting a 'hmm' there and a 'really?' there, as if her show of interest would help Josephine articulate her anxiety. Or probably she was genuinely interested. After all, she was marrying into the Campbell family.

"Sue had inherit money and property from her auntie; her mother sister. That lady was a big shot lawyer in St. Kitts; Marie something was her name. Marie-Anne I think. She din' have no chirren an' she had love Sue as if she was her child. Sue was the only child in her generation an' get everything. Campbell was benefitting from all that. Sue wanted to leave him but he was threatening her, pulling out his gun on her. She was so afraid, an' is me she used to tell those things. Is a pity she din get to enjoy her money. An' now that animal going to be free and live off Sue money. You see how life is?"

Tyani placed the empty mug on the patio table. She said, "So you're feeling bad because you think you could have done something to prevent him from killing her?"

Tyani watched Josephine inhale deeply. Sasha shot her a look and she didn't know if she had spoken too soon or if she should not have spoken at all.

Tyani pushed. "Ma, why are these things bothering you so much? That was a long time ago. Campbell is an old man and Sue is long gone."

"All-you is chirren. All-you dunno nothing." Josephine stretched her mouth.

Tyani reached for her bottle of wine but decided against it. She grabbed her mosquito bat and swatted the mosquitos that had gathered above their heads. Kyle was still kicking his ball,

calling to them at intervals to witness his goals.

Josephine stood, and Tyani's spirit lightened. Sometimes, dealing with her mother was exhausting. Josephine was enigmatic and Tyani did not have the capacity to figure her out at this time, considering her own challenges and uncertainties. As Josephine gathered her keys, Tyani's eyes moved to the backyard, beyond the chain-linked fence that ran the perimeter of the property, to the gentle decline of the land leading to the ravine. It was alive and bustling; with crickets calling to each other, with overgrown grass and shrub, and water trickling its bed. It used to be a river, older people said, and when there were heavy rains it roared like a raging beast, carrying boulders and tree trunks, flooding properties. Her eyes followed what she thought was its course all the way to the distant hills, where clouds were gathering, as if conspiring against the land.

“Looks like it will rain later,” Tyani said.

“Well good for my plants,” Sasha said. “Especially the croton.”

Josephine did not acknowledge Tyani's weather prediction. She said, “You Tyani. I mad about you too. So secretive, just like your father. You mean I had to find out from a Waitukubuli staff they fire my own child? How that looking?”

Tyani took a deep breath and released a puff of air. She apologized. Again. Not because she was sorry, but because she had no energy to fight. Their island was too small for secrets, too small to delay certain discussions. “I just wanted to think about it for a few days before telling people. Is all.”

“Is all? So we is ‘people’ now?” Josephine punctuated the air. “De thing with you is that you like to hold secrets. An’ you was too shame to tell me. You know why? Cause is two main things people get fired for. Is either they tief things or having sex with people in de workplace they have no business having sex with. Not saying you do none of them, but something wrong

somewhere. Something not right.”

"Come on, Ma." Sasha said.

It was things like this that made Tyani wonder about her mother’s mental health. And it was things like this that made her want to cuss her out. “Ma,” Tyani said, exasperated. “People get fired for all kinds of reasons. It could be bad customer service, a mistake, anything. The company made my position redundant because they’re not doing well financially.”

Josephine stretched her mouth and grunted sarcastically.

Tyani continued, “But why me, though? I was so shocked that’s the only question I could ask them. Why me.”

Sasha was at the other end of the patio. She had finished watering the plants and was transferring one to a bigger pot. “I don’t get why you’re so surprised, considering the international recession and all.”

“Why shouldn’t I be? I worked there for nine years, Sasha. I was confident my position was secure. Just that same week my boss was commending me for good work.”

“Damn bitch was buttering you up for the roast,” Sasha chuckled. When Tyani did not laugh, she said, “you’ll be fine, sis. This will pass. I’m sure there’ll be others, if it’s a matter of restructuring.”

“That’s what they said but that’s no answer to my question.” Tyani fumed. One hand found her braid and she brought it to her nose, finding no comfort in the fusion of the scented oils.

“If they was downsizing it would be in de news, Tyani. Is only you they send home. You, Tyani Martin. Is either you’re a fool or you taking me for a fool.”

“Think what you want, Ma. Just don’t go and discuss me with your church friends and let that foolishness come out from your mouth. You think you know everything.”

“Me Josephine? Me? Discuss you? Child have respect for me. An’ I know plenty things. Plenty things. You think going to university make you smarter than me? Look at you, so long you cyah find a place to stay. Talking about trauma. Damn drunkard. An’ you calling yourself smart? You calling yourself a woman?”

Tyani turned her face away from her mother’s and placed her mosquito bat on the patio table, not trusting her hands to hold it. She wanted to rest it against her mother’s face and sear her skin so she could bask in the scent of burning flesh, similar to the bodies of the mosquitoes. Her ears throbbed as if her heart had relocated, and she forced herself to take a few deep breaths. The thoughts that were sizzling in her mind were too raw to verbalize without an uproar, and she would not want Kyle to see that. The neighbor’s mongrel, Bruce, was barking and Tyani shifted her gaze to her right, into her neighbor’s backyard, to Bruce’s kennel made from thin plywood. The dog was leaping and getting hoarse, excited about something Tyani could not see. Tantie Hershie said dogs can hear things that humans cannot; they can sense when evil is near. If only humans were so perceptive - knowing that something was near, something was coming. Tyani would have known to prepare for life’s events. She would have known to prepare for her mother’s insults.

“People have real trauma, Ma. You of all people should know that.” Sasha said to Josephine. She turned to Tyani. “Try not to take the redundancy so personal, Tyani. It’s just business.”

“Just business? After nine years? You know how hurtful it is to be released like that, like a thief, after nights and weekends of sacrifices and loyalty? You know how embarrassing it is to pack in front of colleagues while they’re pretending to work but gawking and whispering questions and accusations? You know how embarrassing it is to turn in your pass to security and walk out of the building you had access to for nine years, with a box in your hand, like some kind of

criminal? It's personal to me, Sasha. It was hard. Water was hanging from my eyes but I couldn't cry because I was so ashamed. It's a kind of shame and rejection I hope you never have to feel."

Tyani wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her t-shirt. Before Sasha could answer she continued. "Why me? I want to know how they came to the conclusion to terminate my employment out of fifty-three others. Right now, with all these rejection letters, all I'm asking myself is what the hell am I lacking and if I meant anything to these people. Why is it so easy to let me go? Everybody just letting me go like I am nothing."

"You will find a job, Yani. It's only been a few weeks. And that's your what, third letter? Just look at it like a vacation." Sasha picked up the letter from the floor and handed it to Tyani.

Tyani took it and crushed it. "A vacation with no money? I don't think you understand what's happening here at all."

Josephine closed the gap between her and Tyani and patted her shoulder. "Well, we'll have to dedicate a mass for you in church. Maybe you have *lamawaj* from soukouyan Irene."

"Really Ma?" Sasha spun around. "You don't think you've said enough?"

"Make your mass for yourself. If I'm cursed then it's probably passed on from you. Generational curse they say? Make -"

"Me? Cursed? I ever tell you I have trauma child?"

"So trauma is a curse? And yes you have trauma or else you wouldn't be bothered about the old man's release. So make the mass for yourself and ask God to forgive you for all your sins against your children. It's because of you I have trauma now."

"Sins against my children? Child what you know? You dunno nothing."

"I know things, Ma. I know your sins against your children. Like shipping off Tessanne to St. Martin after she tried to protect me from that pedophile you were calling your friend. Sins like

turning a blind eye when your husband was insulting us or doing us things he had no business -”

Josephine shot up from the couch and shouted at Tyani. “Child shut up your stinking, lying mouth! Ungrateful drunkard! I do all I could for all-you, trying to keep a roof over all-you head, send all-you to school -”

“Granma! Mammy!” Kyle called out, hugging his ball to his chest.

“It’s ok, son,” Tyani tried to reassure him from the patio.

“That was uncalled for, Ma,” Sasha stopped putting the dirt around her plant. “Every time we try to talk to you about that man, you deny it. You know damn well everything that was going on.”

“Patrick turn his back an’ not a dollar he send. An’ you want to complain about a man that take care of you.”

Josephine stormed away from Tyani and Sasha and went to Kyle. Tyani looked at her, a fake smile plastered on her face and Kyle nodded, looking more confused than comforted.

Josephine left through the side gate leading to the front of the house. Tyani watched her walk away, her negative energy trailing behind her like a smoky shadow. Its density faded with every step, some of it dispersing like floating tresses, settling onto Tyani’s chest.

Josephine had discarded Tyani’s anxiety in the same way she discarded the trash of the offices she cleaned. Life’s heaviness required the strength of an army, and Tyani remembered the paw-paw tree refusing to buckle as it cradled its fruits. She did not want to carry her mother’s burdens, she already had hers, but she would search for answers to figure out the why of it all.

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As the day faded into dusk, insects buzzed. Tyani was still sitting in the same place waving her mosquito racket, its tick-tick-tick longer than earlier. More mosquitoes. Sasha joined her on

the patio. She'd refreshed up; changed into a tie-dye strapless romper. She'd dyed it herself, pinks and blues swirling in irrational patterns, the hem barely covering her hips. As she handed Tyani a glass of grapefruit juice, she asked, "how you feeling, sis?"

"Not good. Not good at all." Tyani accepted the glass and sipped from it before placing it on the table, next to her empty mug. "You see Ma? She is a wicked woman with selective memory. Miller is the biggest animal under her nose but she refuse to see that. You think another mother would allow a man to walk over her children the way that man used to do us? I remember one night he came home late and he touched the burners of the stove to see if they were hot. He asked Ma who used the stove. She know how vile and stupid he is, she could have just said it was her. The man gimme me a sick beating for using his gas. You think I can forgive that woman and that man for those things?"

"Fucking pig. The last time he tried to beat me I was waiting for him. Remember that? I was hungry and I ate his bread. When he came into the room I had my curling iron hot and ready. I press that nicely on his old wrinkled chest. He never tried to beat me again. Mother fucker."

Kyle was still kicking his ball in spite of the waning light, and he called out to them to witness another goal. The clapped and cheered and told him how good he was.

"You have a lot going on. And Ma isn't helping," Sasha said.

"Yeah. Waitukubuli Realty. Brent. After I gave them so much of my life."

"Time to move on, Yani. I understand how you feel and I'm really sor -"

"You dunno nothing about my feelings, Sasha. You're not the one who has to worry about paying for university, or finding a place to rent without an income. I barely have enough savings to survive two months. I have no job. Soon, no home. And it's starting to look like no man. You have your job. You have your perfect, wealthy man and a perfect house waiting for you on a

perfect, fucking hill!”

Tyani saw her sister’s blue eyes widen and she looked away, immediately regretting her words. Sasha leaned into her face, holding the arm of the chair for support. “I’m really sorry about your situation Tyani. But I’m fed up with your shit, listening to you bitch about Brent this and Brent that. I am tired of telling you to take the fucking hint! *Nom la pa vlé’w!* Look at your son, trying to get your attention. Focus on him and yourself instead of beating up yourself about a man who is not interested in you. Focus on Kyle and yourself instead of hating on me or my relationship or a house I have not even moved into! The sooner you accept your losses and work on your fucking self, the quicker you will make space for new opportunities.”

Sasha walked away, her words ringing in Tyani’s mind. *Nom la pa vlé’w. The man does not want you.* She’d said it before, and the words sliced through Tyani every time. She reminded herself that Sasha was entitled to her own opinions and she knew nothing about the depth of Tyani and Brent’s love. What did she know about love anyway, seeing how she sometimes treated Jason?

Tyani jumped as the door slammed. A lump the size of her fist was in her throat, choking her, forcing her to gasp for breath. She drew up her feet to her chest and rocked back and forth, back and forth.

Lights came on in the house. It filtered through the windows trying to dispel the darkness that had coiled itself around her. The glow illuminated the colorful petals of the flowers, reminding Tyani there was still hope; that it was possible to bounce back even on the brink of death. Hadn’t she starved these plants? Deprived them of water and love? Still, here they were, swaying gently, showing her their resilience. Grey to gold. Alive.

It took Tyani a few minutes to realize that Kyle was no longer in the backyard, and her two seconds of panic vanished when she heard his voice drifting through the night. As she rocked back

and forth on the orange cushion of the rattan furniture, she listened to his innocence. He was asking Sasha, in between chewing and swallowing, if there was fire inside the mountain she had visited in Martinique. She heard Sasha's soft chuckle and her simple explanation of Mount Pelée to Kyle. Tyani's heart throbbed, from guilt and shame.

How would she care for Kyle without Sasha's help? It was her responsibility to provide for this child, to keep him comfortable and happy, to protect him from stray hands and destructive mouths that had tormented her as a child.

Stray hands and destructive mouths.

Tyani massaged the space between her eyebrows. Her therapist had told her it was okay to cry when she remembered her childhood, it was ok to feel these emotions again. But it wouldn't be healthy to dwell in that space where memories suffocated unsuspecting people, where tears drowned them. Tyani rubbed her forehead, trying to release the emotions into the universe or wherever emotions went. Sasha told Kyle it was time for his bath and although Tyani wanted to get up from the couch, to take care of her son and to apologise to her sister, she couldn't find the strength or the will to do so. The weight of everything was pressing her down, like wet dirt on her body, pushing her beneath the surface of the earth.

*

Tyani lifted herself out of bed and floated down the stairs to answer the persistent knocking at the front door. She swung it open and Brent was standing there, holding a bouquet of red roses, his face a mixture of pain and love. A blast of air disturbed her body's gravity and as she stumbled backwards, Brent reached out to stabilize her. He handed her the bouquet. She read 'I'm sorry' on the card and when she looked at Brent again, he was on one knee holding a ring that dazzled her. The blast of air traveled to her throat; cold, unwelcome. It lingered there, devouring her voice. She

squinted to minimize the ring's luminosity and squeezed her eyes shut when that didn't work. The golden glow was all around her as if someone had shifted the sun into her heart.

“Yani, wake de hell up.”

Tyani bolted upright. Breeze and sunlight tumbled through her opened windows. A small mocha body in a white cotton dress stood there, shoulder length black wig with bangs covering her forehead. A beautician. Her closest friend.

Tyani lay back down and shielded her eyes with the back of her hand, waiting for her racing heart to abate. She wished she could get back into her darkness and her dream. It had seemed so real, and she'd felt so happy. The euphoria flowed out of her and the disappointment of her reality settled in.

“Wake de hell up, girl. It almost midday and you there in a dark, stinky room. I opened the windows to freshen up the place.”

“Ugh. Maya.” Tyani's eyes fluttered open and the daylight streaming through the window pierced through her. She shut her eyes, and she let the brightness dissipate behind them until all she saw was a single dot.

“I brought pelau from Pearl's,” Maya said.

Tyani sat up slowly. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and buried her face in her palms. Before a word passed her lips, tears rushed from her eyes; wave after wave as if a faucet had opened inside her. She wasn't even sure why she was crying; whether it was out of gratitude or heartbreak or disappointment or shame.

Maya took a few sheets of tissue from the nightstand and handed them to Tyani. She sat on the bed, her slim frame barely making a dent in the mattress.

“Alas Yani. It's a difficult time for you but you have to face the world. Life goes on without

Waitukubuli Realty. Chapters end, stories end.” Her voice was a balm, soothing Tyani like the sun’s warmth on a chilly day.

She rubbed Tyani’s back in a circular fashion, her bracelets jangling against each other. Tyani felt the calluses on her friend’s palms through her thin t-shirt, and it brought her a sense of comfort, a sense of peace. Maya kept rubbing until the stream of tears dried, until Tyani pulled in a large gulp of air and released it.

“Let’s go for a drive. Get you out of the house,” Maya said standing, her five feet four-inch body just a little taller than Tyani’s seated torso. She undid Tyani’s rumped braid and after applying her home-made elixir of oils, she worked her fingers through the lush mane to Tyani’s scalp.

“I think three days is enough time to stay in bed and ignore life. Wallowing in self-pity never solve no problem. Today we going into the mountains for some nice fresh air. Okay?”

“Yeah,” Tyani took a deep breath. She closed her eyes, relishing the fragrance of the combined oils and the comfort of her friend’s hands. Round and round Maya’s fingers went, applying slight pressure, pulling the tension out of Tyani’s body. Three days she had stayed in bed, but she was lethargic as if she’d been working on a plantation the whole time.

“So I hear they’ll release Jason’s father before the wedding?” Maya said.

“Yeah. Jason is happy about that. As he should, I guess.”

“My father said it was big news back then and people had all kinda things to say. Last night he told us he heard the wife stole money from her employer, her husband wanted it for himself and he ended up shooting her while they were wrestling. Then my uncle said no, it was her best friend that stole the money.”

“What?” Tyani exclaimed, twisting her head. “Sue had her own money. She wouldn’t steal.

And my mother was her best friend. She was my godmother.”

“Oh? Small world. It could be somebody else. Dunno.” Maya said, now brushing out Tyani’s tangles, with long slow strokes, from the crown of Tyani’s head, down her back.

“That stealing money part is probably rumors anyway,” Tyani shrugged. “You know how people like to talk rubbish.”

“Not rubbish at all. My uncle said they had arrested somebody for the theft. It was in the news.”

Maya brushed repeatedly, until the waves felt like silk. Confusion ran through Tyani. Her mother spoke so highly of Sue; she certainly did not paint her as a thief. Maya gathered the hair at Tyani’s nape and braided it, her acrylic nails making clicking sounds as her fingers moved down Tyani’s back. “My mother never mentioned anything about theft. The man killed his wife in a rage because she wanted to leave him.”

Maya used a thin hairband to secure the end of the braided ponytail just the way Tyani liked it. “Well I dunno but based on what they were saying somebody else was involved. Somebody else was at the crime scene.”

Tyani stood. She stretched out her arms and a loud yawn rushed out of her body. She thought about Josephine’s recent behavior - worse than she usually was - and she wanted to know more. What Maya was saying troubled her, and she wondered if there was any truth to it. She pulled Maya into her arms, her fuller body like a blanket around her friend. “Thanks for this, girl.”

“Welcome.”

“You looking rell good wi. As usual.” Tyani smiled.

Maya thanked her. She seldom left home without her make-up and today it was light; lip gloss with a tint of pink and brush of bronze on her eyelids. A natural look, she said. She looked

the same as she did in high school. Except for the Alopecia.

“Lemme take a quick shower. Meet you downstairs?”

In the shower stall, cold water sprayed Tyani’s body and a surge of gratitude flowed through her. Maya had come all the way from Dublanc - an hour away on those winding roads - to wake her the hell up and bring her favorite food. She’d always been like that - showing up when Tyani needed her. They had met when they were twelve, as first year students of the Convent High School, who happened to be sitting next to each other on the first day. In little time, their furtive glances had turned to comfortable chatter.

It was at Maya’s house in Dublanc that Tyani had found solace when things got rough at home. It was in Maya’s village that she developed a love affair with the ocean, when Maya’s father, a fisherman, rowed them out into the calm Caribbean Sea under the blazing sun. On some days they caught fish using twine and hooks. Sometimes they marveled at the rugged cliffs that guarded the land when the sea raged, and sometimes they admired the majestic mountains that climbed to the sky. What Tyani enjoyed most was when they cannon-balled into the deep blue water and swam around the boat or beneath it. Underwater always amazed her, especially the view of the sun’s rays penetrating the sea’s surface.

It was in Dublanc that Tyani learned to lift river rocks and peel clams from the rocks’ smooth surfaces. It was in Dublanc she’d learned to play cricket on the playing field near the beach, where village children came out on Sundays to frolic and enjoy each other. It was there, on that playing field, that Tyani had fallen in love.

After Tyani showered, she donned her usual jeans and a loose blouse, and joined Maya in the kitchen. Immediately, she noticed the vibrancy of the ferns, the cacti and the other plants. “Well well! Those plants were so droopy under my care. Look at them now.”

“The power of nurturing, girl. Ever hear you reap what you sow? Whatever level of attention and care you give something, you create an environment to flourish, or languish or even perish. Same principle in all areas of life. Whether it is our relationship with plants or with each other, or with ourselves. Or whether it is honing a craft. It’s all about the quality of care and attention.”

This was not a new concept but Maya’s words struck Tyani, as if she’d just had an awakening. Again, she experienced a rush of gratitude for her friend, acknowledging this visit for what it was; an act of care and attention, an act of support, an act of love.

On the round table in the kitchen were several take-away containers. Tyani held onto the back of a chair and inhaled deeply. “That food smell rell good, yes. Who g’wan eat all that?”

“I bought for Kyle and Sasha too, knowing you didn’t cook.”

“Aww. Sweet Maya. Thank you.”

“Welcome hunny. Now grab your lunch and let’s go.”

Tyani did as she was told. She also took her digital camera and hot pepper sauce, and cavorted out of the house, feeling like a child headed to a party.

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“Clear skies. Beautiful day,” Tyani said dreamily as Maya navigated her Honda CRV on the two-lane road in Tyani’s seaside community.

“Perfect day to visit the valley,” Maya replied, turning up the volume on the car’s radio. The DJ was hyping the upcoming reunion celebrations, speaking excitedly over Michele Henderson’s *Celebrating the Journey Together*, the official theme song. Tyani had worked with Michele years before, providing back-up vocals for numerous calypsonians during the calypso season.

Tyani and Maya moved to the upbeat music as Maya wove through the lunch-time bustle among blaring horns and careless bus drivers. Chauffeurs stopped along the way to pick up or let off passengers, or to speak to people on the side of the road. Pedestrians sprinted across the street where there were no marked crossings, a common occurrence, and Maya braked several times to avoid collisions. Even the usually tranquil Botanical Gardens had its share of traffic and noise, and it was a relief to leave the chaos and drive through the coolness of the Roseau Valley. Small communities clustered in that area of the island, some at the foot of the mountains near rivers and hot sulfur springs, some nestled in the folds of the green hills near waterfalls and lakes.

The DJ was still hype about the reunion, and was now talking over another signature song, *Forward We Go*. Tyani knew this artist too, Daddy Chess, and she smiled, remembering her short-lived foray into the musical industry. She used to sing in the church choir from childhood to young adulthood, but that was different. She and her friend had joined a band and they used to perform at various places, and provided back-up vocals for local artists.

“I could have been an artist, you know,” she said to Maya. “All now I’d have something to fall back on.”

They both laughed. “I thought you didn’t like the long hours of rehearsal.”

“Yeah. I almost forgot that. When I got pregnant with Kyle it was a wrap. New life, new responsibilities.”

“I used to enjoy your performances. What you saying? You’ll give singing another try?”

“No way. Not for a living. Maybe for fun when Kyle gets older.”

Sometimes it was good to look back on the better parts of life and Tyani smiled. She would always cherish those experiences, singing locally and regionally, meeting new people and building her confidence.

As they drove, Tyani observed the river snaking the bed of the valley. Her father used to take them river-bathing when they were children and she remembered a few visits to the Trafalgar Falls.

“Dominica is so lush. When I was in St. Martin’s Primary School, we used to hike to this area for *belle marché*. Used to be so much fun.”

Maya smiled. “The good ole’ days of primary school. We used to hike to Indian River and canoe upstream or hike to Syndicate Falls.”

“Nice! Is Syndicate in Dublanc or is it part of Morne Diabotin?”

“Heights of Dublanc. Foothills of Morne Diablotin.”

“Brent and I went hiking there once, a loop really. We didn’t see the falls.”

“It’s in another area.”

“Ah! Makes sense. Ever wondered how the people from Pirates of the Caribbean learned about the Indian River to come and shoot the movie there?”

Maya shrugged. “The internet, I guess.”

They passed the intersection that led to Copthall, the community alongside the Roseau River where Tessanne lived. Tyani thought about Tessanne and what Maya had said earlier about nurturing relationships. The guilt she carried in her heart seemed to intensify and the tug to restore their broken bond kept pulling.

“How’s Tessanne?” Maya asked as if reading Tyani’s thoughts. “She came to mind as we’re in her area.”

“I really dunno. She says she’s ok but you know how she is, keeping her distance from us. I haven’t seen her in months. I’m uncomfortable about it, you know? We used to be so close.”

“Well, as I said before, if it means that much to you, then get off your butt and fix it.

Nothing gon' happen if you don't make a move."

"True. But my mother is such a pain. It is mostly her fault Tessanne is like that and it feels like she placed Sasha, my mother and me in one box."

"So you, Josephine and Sasha come as one package? Tessanne can have a relationship with you and not with your mother or sister."

"I want all of us to be on good terms with each other."

"You must be living in a bubble. Where on God's good earth you ever heard that in families?"

"Your family is cool like that."

"We're close knit, yes, but that doesn't mean we don't have our tensions."

They passed the fork in the road that led to Trafalgar and kept on climbing the mountains into the village of Laudat, leaving the sight of the river behind. Just before the entrance to the village, they stopped at a lookout to admire the communities in the valley they had just left. It was a scenic view and Tyani never got tired of it. Birds were chirping, the breeze was cool on her face and calmness wrapped itself around her. Tyani snapped a photo with her digital camera.

They continued their journey, higher into the mountain and Tyani stiffened as they wound their way along mountain passes with deep gorges below. It always amazed her that human beings had found these remote places to form communities. She said, "The people who first settled here really wanted to get away from the plantations and the slave masters. Can you imagine coming all the way up here on foot?"

"These people had their own secret trails. And they cultivated their own food and raised their own animals so they were self-sufficient. I don't think there was much need to go into town."

"I guess so. But I wonder how they found these spaces, all the way up in the mountains

like that.”

“Exploring. When you don’t want to be a slave no more, you find a way. Big up our maroons and our Kalinagos!” Maya laughed. “But for real, they were hardcore.”

The CRV ate up the hill near the water pipes that resembled monster snakes, and Tyani relaxed when they got to the plateau. Usually, that area was misty and windy but there was hardly any mist today. Maya parked and exited the vehicle. Still inside, Tyani put on her sweater, admiring the serenity of Freshwater Lake. It is the largest lake on the island feeding the Trafalgar Falls and the river she’d been watching, meandering through the valley. It fascinated Tyani, how such beauty could be the result of utter catastrophe. Like the rest of Dominica, the lake was born out of nature’s volcanic violence and it formed part of the rim of an inactive volcano. Up close, the water looked dark green, reflecting the surrounding trees and foliage. But from a distance, like standing on the surrounding mountain trails, the water was emerald.

Tyani remembered a few summers back when she and Brent had hiked the trail. That day, the mist was dense and visibility was low.

“I’m not doing this,” she had said to Brent before they had ascended into the mountains.

But he had convinced her, and when they got to the mountain ridge, the lake was barely visible and the wind was beyond anything she had ever experienced. She couldn’t tell if it was mist or low clouds that whizzed past their bodies, sometimes shrouding them for only a few seconds. They crouched, and held on to thick brushes to maintain their balance. The ridge dropped on both sides, steep, and in single-file, they crawled slowly across it to avoid being blown away into the abyss. Tyani shook her head at the memory. There were some things in life that you did only once and hiking in the wind and mist was one of them.

She joined Maya outside and helped her lift an oversized bag out of her trunk. They each

held a handle of the bag and walked to the far right of the lake. Maya spread a blanket on the cool grass. She brought out the food, water, passionfruit juice and fruit cake. All around them birds sang and whistled, a variety of beautiful sounds that blended with the rustling breeze. Tyani snapped some photos, hoping to capture the tranquility and beauty of the place. She took photos of their picnic set up and some candid shots of Maya.

She looked at the images she'd taken, and deleted those she didn't like. After taking a few more, Tyani sat on the blanket. She sprinkled hot pepper sauce into her pelau. Tantie Hershie made that sauce and sold it to special customers, people who used to support her when she sold provisions at the Roseau Market.

"I dunno how you can stand pepper in yuh mouth, girl," Maya laughed.

"Spice is life," Tyani smiled, diving into her pelau, the rice dark brown and grainy with the right amount of chicken and lentils just the way she liked it. She smacked her lips and smiled at her friend. "Girl, that's some good food. Thank you."

"Welcome. You could sell food, you know. I'll bring you provisions and herbs from my lil' garden. You can start cooking right in your kitchen."

They both erupted in laughter and Tyani felt as if new life was injected into her. "That and God's face you will never see."

"So what's your plan?" Maya asked.

"Dunno yet. Just thinking about things." Tyani said in between blowing out air; as the heat of the sauce burned her mouth.

"You cyah think clearly if you lay up in bed all day drinking wine eh. I took down five empty bottles from your room. Three days is enough. You cyah go on like that."

Tyani nodded. "I know. Everything coming to me at once. I have a lot of expenses, you

know? And a lot on my mind. Now Kyle thinks I'm sick. Sasha can be a pain but she's really helping to take care of him."

"She told me what happened with your mother."

"Yes. You know how she is. But she's going through something so I'm trying to be patient."

"Well you're going through things too. You have to be gentle with yourself first."

"Yeah."

"So how about the apartment Brent was checking for you?"

"Too expensive. And too far."

"A client of mine has one in Canefield. I'll inquire about it."

"Thanks."

"So Brent didn't check on all-you at all?"

The question was a blow. "Sasha didn't mention him. I guess if he had come, he would have come to my room."

Maya nodded as she chewed and Tyani was relieved that there was no judgment in her friend's expression, no further discussion about Brent's absence. His lack of show was disappointing and embarrassing, and she didn't like that he was proving Sasha's point, that he was not interested in her.

Maya said, "you used to talk about starting your own business. Maybe you could give it a shot?"

"Yeah that's on my mind. I was thinking about a real estate business but I scrapped that idea because I prefer sewing and upholstery. If I get a job I'd be alright with that too. Get back on the corporate cog, you know? It's the risk of entrepreneurship I'm afraid of."

“No risk, no reward baby.”

“I know. But no money, no food.”

Tyani and Maya laughed.

After a while Maya said, “maybe you can help me. I’m putting a plan together for rebranding. I’ll need my furniture to match the new colors.”

“Well look at you Maya! I would be delighted!” She offered her hand and Maya shook it, mocking officiality.

“Fresh start wi,” Maya said, a wide grin lighting up her face.

“I just wish Brent would come around. Now *that* would be a fresh start. I keep dreaming about us getting engaged.”

Maya’s grin disappeared. Her fork remained mid-air. Her jaw slowed its movements and her eyes grew larger and larger, until her eyebrows could travel no further. Those eyes bore through Tyani’s as if searching for every secret her soul was hiding.

“What Maya? I shouldn’t dream about getting married?”

“No-no Yani. Not that. Is just... is just.”

Tyani watched her friend struggle to find words. She was the one who had introduced Tyani and Brent, also the one who had dissuaded her from taking Brent seriously.

“I thought you were moving on, Yani. Personally, I think that would be the best decision for you. I agree with Sasha on that.”

“Well Maya, it’s not about you and it’s not about Sasha. Not your decision to make.”

“No. Not my decision to make. But you deserve a committed partner. How many times you want to go through that, Yani? Absences and neglect? And Ava-Lyns? That’s not love.”

Tyani’s eyes found the green water. Its surface rippled with the gentle breeze. A couple

was getting into a white kayak, their laughter sailing across the space. She wanted to walk away from the picnic, but she tucked that thought into the place it had come from, chiding herself for even thinking about it. Maya was speaking the truth, but wasn't that what relationships were about? Challenges? Ups and downs? Forgiveness?

Eyes still on the couple and the kayak, Tyani said, "I've had happy years with Brent. Even after this whole Ava-Lyn business. Nobody is perfect. I know I said I would forget about Brent and I know things are shaky now, but a part of me wants to give our relationship a chance."

Maya scoffed and shook her head. She spooned rice into her mouth.

Tyani continued, "it seems like both you and Sasha are on a mission to discourage me from fixing my relationship with Brent, when the both of you are moving happily along with yours. You've been married, what, eleven years? Is it hard to understand that I want the same thing? To love and to be loved? To be happy?"

Maya's eyes were roaming her face, eyebrows raised, her mouth full and barely moving. She chewed slowly, swallowed slowly. Finally, she said, "lemme tell you something girl. Happiness is an inside job, you understand? Marriage never make nobody happy, at least not in the long run and it is not as glamorous as it can seem. You think I depend on Andre for happiness?"

It was Tyani's turn to be silent. As she chewed, she observed the sleek movement of the kayak slicing through the water. The paddles splashed rhythmically, *swoosh swoosh*, unsettling the lake's surface and creating little waves. The woman leaned into the man and kissed his mouth as he rowed. A twinge of jealousy coursed through Tyani, but she also thought this moment would have made a good photo.

Maya continued, "each of us have to find ways to make ourselves happy as individuals. I have a void inside me that Andre cannot fill. And he have a longing inside him that I will never

fulfill.”

“You never know,” Tyani said.

“Awa. It seems as if I will never carry another child. A lotta times I’m tormented cause it is hard watching him wanting to be a father, knowing he could have been a father and knowing damn well it’s my fault we’re in that situation. That guilt does eat me up, you know?”

“I’ll never understand why you’re not telling Andre what happened. That’s too much anxiety you’re carrying around. And too much guilt. Those abortions were since before y’all got married. He’ll forgive you. Scar tissue and all.”

Both of them were looking at the lake. The couple were further away from them now, their kayak getting smaller and smaller against the greenery. Tyani placed her arm around Maya’s shoulders. A lady in her village had performed the abortions both times, within months of each other, and Tyani remembered how sick and withdrawn Maya had become. She had been riddled with guilt, convinced that God would strike her or her family for defying the teachings of the church. It was around that same time she started noticing the patches in her hair, round and bald like coins. Her punishment, she’d said. When her father brought her to their pastor for counseling, concerned about her loss of interest in life, Maya had used her falling hair as an excuse for her disinterest.

Tyani said, “you’re not that scared seventeen-year old girl anymore, afraid of disappointing your father and your church. I keep telling you, tell Andre the truth.”

“Sometimes it’s on the tip of my tongue but the words stick somewhere in my throat. Fear is a helluva thing eh?”

Tyani nodded. “It is. Technology is evolving. I’m sure you can look at alternatives.”

“We’ll see. But as I say, happiness is an inside job. Married or not.”

Tyani poured juice into two plastic cups and handed one to her friend. “Cheers to happiness as an inside job.”

Maya smiled. “I’ll drink to that.” She threw back her head and gulped the juice like a shot of whiskey, and Tyani laughed.

“Seriously though Yani, you have everything you need to be happy. You’re blessed with a sweet son, you’re intelligent, you’re beautiful. And you have hair! Pour me another drink!”

They laughed again as Tyani poured the juice. When the giggles turned to silence Tyani said, “I’m ready to settle down. Nine years is a long time.”

“It is. But seriously, Brent does *not* deserve you.”

“Maya, just talk to me.”

“Not my place to tell.”

“Girl, really?”

“Ask Brent point blank what de hell is going on with Ava-Lyn.”

Tyani placed her plastic cup on the blanket and dabbed the corners of her mouth with a napkin, feeling her spirit retracting, retracting, retracting to an all too familiar place. “Ava-Lyn? But I thought she didn’t live here.”

“They say she got a regional position with her company so she’s splitting her time between St. Lucia and Dominica.”

It made sense. The absences and the returns. Tyani’s heart started as a gentle canter then before she knew it, it was galloping and she was afraid if she opened her mouth, it would leap right out of her body.

Five - Sasha

Sasha settled into the plush seat at Shera's House, hoping to lift the week's weight off her chest. She sipped a mango cocktail while the waitress filled her glass and Jason's with water. The cocktail was moderately sweet, just as Sasha liked it.

She smiled at the waitress. "This is good."

"Glad you like it," the woman smiled back. "You're very pretty. Nice eyes."

Still smiling, Sasha thanked her. Being at Shera's House always brought her a sense of peace, and she couldn't put her finger on what it was about the place. Maybe it was the friendly staff, impeccable in their signature all black, and the madras tablecloths, perfectly steamed with simple flower centerpieces. Maybe it was the light fixtures hanging at intervals like miniature moons. Or maybe it was the stone walls and the stone corridor that made her feel as if the place was a fortress, protecting her.

But memories wanted to rob her of that peace, pulling her into their vortex where silences and tension existed. Sasha fought to anchor herself in the present, resisting the vertigo of arguments and disagreements; with her sisters, with Emma. It was so easy to give in to a wandering mind, so easy to let it lead us into places we don't necessarily want to go. And sometimes, like now, she knew she had to rein it in. Sasha sipped her cocktail, struggling to shake off the image of Emma boarding the taxi, alone, after she had ignored Sasha on the ferry back to Dominica. She battled with herself, fighting an overpowering desire to check her phone, to see if Emma had replied to the hundreds of apologies she had sent over the past days.

When the waitress was out of earshot Jason said, "Manners, miss? You coulda wait for her to bring my drink."

Sasha raised her eyebrows, her mouth a little O.

“I’m joking, babe! You should see your face!” Jason’s body shook as he laughed. “You know, in certain cultures the man is served first.”

“Pure fuckriss if you ask me.”

He chuckled and lifted his glass. “Cheers to us. To love and laughter.”

Sasha raised her glass and clinked his. “To us.”

Jason had secured a corner table, her preference, and she had a full view of the dining area. Most of the tables were occupied; couples, families, friends; animated faces, smiling faces, frowns, laughter. Her eyes shifted to the stone walled corridor that led to the kitchen. It was fascinating, the corridor, and she wondered what the former colonial masters had used the building for.

“Sometimes, when I’m here I try to imagine our mothers, young and happy, working together,” Jason mused

“Me too,” Sasha said. “Tyani has a photo of the two of them standing outside this building. I should ask her for it so I can make a copy for you.”

“That would be nice,” Jason was smiling in that gentle way that had pulled her to him. “You two on talking terms again? How is she?”

“For the most part, yes. She’s not in the best place right now. Drinking more than she should. But hopefully she will be fine and won’t become a drunkard like my mother predicts.”

“A drunkard?” Jason laughed.

Sasha smiled too. She leaned in and touched the petals of the red anthuriums that were nestled in between three large leaves in a small glass vase. Their centerpiece. The petals were rubbery, fresh, as if Shera’s House had placed them there just for her and Jason. She looked at him looking at her, traces of his smile still lingering on his face.

“So what's the plan for the wedding now that Tessanne pulled her children out of it?”

“Tessanne.” Sasha sucked her teeth. “I was skeptical when Tyani suggested her children be a part of the wedding and I was surprised she agreed. It was too good to be true, you know? Right now I just want to beat her fucking ass for pulling that stunt after we spent all that money buying their clothes and shoes and stuff. I don't understand why the fuck she's giving Stoney all that control over her. They are her children too. She should have a say.”

She sucked her teeth again. “Now you're asking me what's the plan, like it's not your wedding too. Typical of you to leave all the work up to me.”

“Probably if I had siblings or nieces and nephews I would be of help here. You know very well the only cousins I have are Vincent and Ti Nom. Two hardback men.”

“I'm not just referring to that. I'm talking about everything else. All this planning is really overwhelming.”

“I know it's a lot, babe. But it's ok with no mini-bride and mini-groom. Remember I told you we din' need all that. We can keep it simple.”

“Simple as in sparse, you mean? Cheap? So people can talk about how I had a drabby wedding?”

Jason held up his palms, both facing forward. “Have the frills, babe. But I really cyah help as you would like right now. Too much going on.”

“That's why I suggested Amanda.”

“Amanda wants to make a fortune off me.”

“So, you have no problem paying a fortune to fix electricals for your tenants, plus renovate your parents' old house, which is totally unnecessary by the way, and you cannot pay a wedding planner for your own wedding?”

“Renovation is necessary, Sasha. My father needs somewhere comfortable to stay when he gets out, and my tenants need to get value for their money. I’ve not done any work on that property since my grandparents passed away. I’m spending all this money maintaining those two houses plus sprucing up my place for us. I’m paying for the wedding including funding the trip to Martinique for both you and Emma.” As he listed, he counted on his fingers.

“You’re really going there? Reproaching me, when you’re the one with the money?”

“It is not infinite, Sasha. And I’m not reproaching you. Is your wedding too. You can think about paying Amanda.”

“For your information I saved you a ton of money by buying those things in Martinique. And you don’t get to tell me it’s my wedding too when I’m the only one hustling to plan it.”

The waitress came with their food. Steak for Jason and fish for Sasha. “Bon appetit,” she smiled at them.

Sasha kept her eyes on her fiance, a storm of resentment brewing in the pit of her stomach. His eyes were on her, light brown like tamarind shells, behind thick lenses that almost concealed the intensity within them. Almost concealed the accusations. Selfish, those eyes called her. Why? For trying to preserve her pennies? Didn’t those little brown eyes behind the glasses know she’d suffered enough? That her need for safeguarding herself was warranted?

In their silence she heard the hum of the restaurant, the soft jazz instrumental seemingly came from all around her. Conversations. Clinking glasses. Metal on ceramic. The occasional car on the bayfront.

Jason reached out and touched the back of Sasha’s hand just as her phone vibrated on the table. At that moment her heart stopped. When it restarted, it was erratic like a sputtering engine.

“I’m sorry, sweet. I din’ mean to cause a fight. Is just that everything coming at me one

time, you know?” Jason said.

Sasha tried not to conjure possible words that were floating on her phone’s screen.

She focused on Jason’s face. It was an earnest face, eyebrows furrowed, full lips curved slightly downward. The light above their table, though dimmed, reflected on his bald head. He was not her usual cup of tea, but he’d grown on her after meeting at that Catholic Youth Camp all those years ago, and he’d shown up for her over the years.

“Forgive me?” He asked.

“Only if you pay Amanda.”

“Sasha, Sasha.” He shook his head but a smile played on his lips. “You are something. Fifty-fifty?”

“Fifty-fifty.”

Jason removed his hand over Sasha’s. Her phone vibrated again. She hoped Emma was finally coming to her senses. She wanted her to understand that it was just sex with Christophe, a last fuck before they went their separate ways.

Jason’s voice pulled her back “...will release my father before the wedding, and frankly I dunno know how to feel. I should be happy considering I don’t have siblings or a mother, but I feel a kinda dread. I dunno the man. Dunno if he killed my mother on purpose. You know?”

Sasha nodded and folded her fingers over her phone. “I know what you mean. But at least you know where your father is. You have a chance to get to know him and find out the truth.”

“Yes, true.”

“I called your mother last night. She’s so upset about him coming out. I hinted about the therapy vibes but she said she din’ need any extra people in her business. She’ll talk to her pastor.”

Sasha nodded. “The death was really hard on Ma. Someone told us they’ve been seeing her

by Sue's grave."

Jason nodded; his mouth was pensive. "It's bringing up memories for her."

He eyed the phone in her hand and opened his hands, palms facing the ceiling, as if asking what was so important on her phone.

Sasha placed it back on the table. She said, "You still haven't told me what your father thinks of us getting married."

"Why you keep asking about that? I thought you said you din' need his approval."

"So you didn't tell him."

"Well. Honestly we din' talk about it much. I din' have a lot of time and he wanted to know about the house and stuff. But he axed to see you."

"Asked, Jason. To see me? Why?"

He shrugged. "Dunno."

"I don't understand why he wants to see me when he will be out before the wedding. What he has to say can't wait?"

"I told you I dunno."

"So how come you're only now telling me that?"

"Cause honestly I was thinking twice about asking you."

"Why?"

"Cause you said we din' need his approval. And with the way Jo's been behaving, I -" he left it there, shrugging again.

She'd visited Campbell once, with Jason, when they were teenagers, before they'd started dating. He was the same color as Jason - like dark varnish with some sheen - and his formidable size had awed her. He'd dominated the space, towering over everyone else in the visiting area with

a barrel of a chest and sinewy biceps that threatened to rip the seams of his blue prison shirt. What she'd found intimidating were his dark, bulging eyes that seemed to swallow her naked soul. And although she had a million questions on her mind to ask him, they had not exchanged a single word, other than hello.

"I'll come with you next time you visit," Sasha said.

Jason exhaled, as if he was holding his breath while waiting for her answer. "Thank you, babe."

Sasha observed him. His relief was so obvious, like someone who was expecting terrible news but received the opposite. "It looks like you want his approval," she said.

"Well. I din' think so at first but visiting him more often recently I just thought it would be good to get his blessings."

"Blessings? From a man you barely know?" Sasha scoffed and then she started to snicker.

"Not funny. Not funny at all."

"That's like asking Patrick for blessings."

"I have my doubts about my father but I'm willing to try to build a relationship with him to answer questions I have. You don't have to like it."

They ate in silence for a little while, and Sasha's mind went back to her phone. She was thinking about going to the bathroom to check it when Jason spoke.

"That's why I keep suggesting you all find your father. Get answers too."

Sasha held up her hand. "I already know the truth about that deadbeat. My mother said the man was a drunk and an abuser. Drinking so much he used to see little men in the streets and chase them with a cutlass. His only redeeming quality is that he used to make some boss-ass furniture. Not fucking interested."

“But that’s your mother’s version. You still don’t know why he left.”

Sasha’s phone vibrated again. She grabbed it, looked at the screen. Her heart throbbed within her ribcage, half listening to Jason talk about her language and the importance of family, forgiveness and healing.

Sasha opened the message.

Emma Wharton

8:02pm

- *Just want to let you know that I’m not comfortable being your maid of honor knowing what I know & feeling what I feel.*
- *Probably should have said so from the very beginning but after Martinique, it’s a no!*
- *These past few months I was giving you the benefit of the doubt but all you think about is yourself.*

Pulse on high speed, Sasha put the phone face down. It vibrated again, and again. She sipped more of her cocktail as her world spun. How could she stop it? In a span of one day her wedding party had dwindled and she had no control. But that was nothing compared to the possibility of losing Emma’s friendship.

She looked around. Music. Food. People. Laughter. Wine. Music. Food. People. Laughter. Wine. Music. Food. Peo -

“Everything ok?” Jason asked.

Sasha nodded. People. Laughter. Wine.

“Emma?”

“Yes.”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

Jason put down his cutlery. He adjusted his glasses. “Cyah get through one day without Emma, eh? Always Emma this and Emma that.”

“Emma was there way before you.”

“And she is before me in your life too. How will I even fit in as your husband, eh? In between you two? Look at the Martinique trip. I told you I woulda come. But you already had it all planned out with Emma.”

“Don’t put this on me. You’re the one busy with renovations and all kinds of things.”

“I coulda come for a few days, Sasha. I said that. It woulda been a good break for me and a good opportunity for the two of us to spend some time together. I dunno how to say...”

- *I let you know how I feel about you getting married. You insist on going ahead with it and I had to swallow my feelings as if they never were.*
- *I had to watch you plan a wedding. Try on a wedding gown! How the fuck you think that made me feel?*

“... tryna talk to you but you’re busy checking your phone. Sometimes you make me feel as if I have to grovel for your attention like...”

- *I believed you when you said you were determined to change - to stop ‘fucking around’ as you called it. I figured I’d just have to accept that we would never be. But you disregarded everything. Slipping away with Christophe and even spending the night with him, as if I didn’t exist.*
- *I feel sorry for Jason, more than I feel sorry for myself just cause he has no fucking idea what he’s getting himself into.*

“...fed up with you always putting Emma before our relationship. Sometimes you can be

really inconsiderate. You know that? You need to figure this shit out. All this childish nonsense about sleeping over and...”

- *I'm tired of you tossing me aside when you feel like it and picking me back up like I'm your toy. I'm not your toy! I HAVE FEELINGS, YOU INCONSIDERATE BITCH!*

“...listening to me?”

- *All these years I gave to you. Hoping and waiting. All these fucking years. For this. For nothing. And you don't even love the man. You just want his money.*

- *Who knows you better than me?*

- *Who can love you like me?*

- *Who can fuck you like me?*

- *No fucking body!*

Sasha shoved her phone into her purse, feeling as if Emma had ripped her soul and torn it to shreds. Heart thumping, she stood. “I’m sorry, Jason, but I have to leave. Emergency.”

There was a harshness in his stare, a tightness to his jaw. “Nervous breakdown again?”

“Dunno. Possibly.” She hurriedly gathered her things.

His ‘let me come with you’ fell on her back as she strode away.

*

Lightning flashed somewhere over the sea and a light drizzle glazed Sasha’s skin. She hurried to the side street where she’d parked, as quickly as her four-inch wedge sandals and tight knee-length dress would allow, thinking it was a good thing she’d driven herself to the restaurant. She considered the past week of fights and silences; with her sisters, with Emma and now, Jason. Jason would call her like he always did and they would sort themselves out. Her sisters were her sisters - they would find their way back to each other. But Emma was like an enigmatic jigsaw

puzzle that needed a certain type of energy.

Sasha was desperate to make their world right again, desperate for Emma's forgiveness. And it was in reading those messages that the intensity and magnitude of their world hit her. Fathoming a life without sharing her thoughts and feelings with Emma was hard, and the possibility of Emma's absence caused Sasha's eyes to well and her stomach to flip. As she walked, she wiped her eyes but she was powerless to stop the flutters in her stomach. It was as if they were churning the grilled fish and baked potatoes she had just consumed. Something was clogging up her throat, and suddenly the food was working its way to her mouth. Unable to suppress it, her meal flowed out of her into the gutter near her car and she coughed and coughed until her body was spent. Sweat rolled down her face in spite of the coolness, and water was running down her eyes, and Sasha wasn't so sure if it was from the retching or from her emotions. She retrieved tissue from her car and wiped her face and areas on her dress where vomit had splattered. She searched frantically for a bottle of water she'd seen for the past few days, and when she finally found it under the passenger front seat, she shook some in her mouth and spat it out. She did that until she felt somewhat clean again.

Sitting in the driver's seat, Sasha found stale gum in her glove compartment and chewed slowly, watching the drizzle trickle down her windshield. Her body felt cavernous after her episode, as if she'd emptied out all her organs. She checked her phone. There were no new messages from Emma or Jason. Inconsiderate, they'd called her. The two people by whose side she had stood. The two people who were supposed to understand her the best. Inconsiderate. How was honesty inconsiderate? She'd come clean with Jason before they were engaged - told him about Christophe, told him about her life as a student in Florida with Steve and their threesomes, and her same-sex encounters when Steve was no longer in the picture. Sasha remembered the hurt

in his eyes and she had reminded him that they were not yet an official couple; she was free to explore her sexuality. He had called her inconsiderate then, too. But it was an honesty he'd grown to appreciate, because over time, he'd found the girl-on-girl stories erotic and he became eager for the details. She withheld nothing, except that the girl was Emma.

Similarly, Sasha didn't see the need to confess anything about this latest tryst with Christophe; it was their last hurrah. No strings.

But Emma was taking it to another level, as if Christophe was a permanent thing, as if there was not another bride-to-be who had fucked an ex one last time. Sasha needed Emma to understand the permanence she sought was not in Christophe, but in their friendship. She knew gaining back their friendship and Emma's trust required Emma's forgiveness and that forgiveness had to come from a place of understanding. She needed her to understand that sex and love were not the same things; she needed Emma to understand that their bond was important to her; she needed her to understand that being with Jason meant having stability; that she loved him in a way that made her feel safe and secure without worrying about poverty or abuse or ridicule; she needed Emma to understand and remember what they had both decided: that they would keep their encounters private because that kind lifestyle was frowned upon in a society like Dominica; that this would have to end some day because as Emma continuously said, sex was not sustainable. Sasha needed to remind herself of their pact too, because something had changed and letting go was unfathomable.

Sasha started the ignition and her phone vibrated as she was shifting her gear in reverse. Thinking it was probably Emma, she quickly put the gear stick in park and took the phone out of her purse. Tessanne Tyson. Sasha flung the phone on the seat and exited the space.

She didn't know if it was Tessanne or Stoney calling, but either way, she did not want to

speak to any of them. Earlier in the day, Stoney had called her from Tessanne's phone telling her to 'come and remove all her wedding nonsense from his garage' and she had hung up on him when he started telling her that she was marrying a little sissy who was flaunting money he didn't work for. Stoney was such an asshole and she could not understand what Tessanne saw in him, how she could live with him, how she could allow him to touch her. She and Tessanne had never developed a sisterly relationship and never discussed personal things but she still wished good things for her sister. Sasha had no childhood memories of her; only a few pictures confirmed that Tessanne had been a part of their lives before she'd moved to St. Martin, when Sasha was just about two years old. By the time Tessanne had returned permanently, Sasha was already at school in the United States. She'd tried to reach out as an adult but Tessanne was in her own corner and that's where she wanted to stay.

Her phone vibrated again as she was driving along the bayfront. The drizzle had turned to a steady pour, falling light, like snow. Keeping her eyes on the road, Sasha reached across the seat for the phone. Josephine Miller. Sasha placed the phone in its place between the two seats. Perhaps Josephine was calling to trash talk Tessanne because she'd given in to Stoney and pulled their children out of the wedding party. Or perhaps she was calling to trash talk Tyani, who was hellbent on becoming a drunkard like Patrick. Or perhaps Jason had called her tonight and she was calling to trash talk her about treating the nice boy badly. She wondered if Jason was someone else's son, or if he didn't inherit his mother's wealth, whether Josephine would have liked him so much. Sasha shook her head. Her mother could be a pain in the ass sometimes. Funny she never trash talked her husband, Mr. Miller. Another asshole.

Sasha increased the speed of her wiper, glancing intermittently at the lightning show over the sea. Emma liked to see lightning storms and she wondered if she was watching the sky now.

Sasha imagined her sitting on the railing of her bedroom porch looking out over wet roofs below, taking photos of the lightning. Or perhaps she was in her room, working on a client's balance sheet. Or perhaps she was in bed, hoping Sasha was next to her listening to the drone of her voice or feeling the moistness between her legs like old times. A tremor ran through Sasha's body and she felt her throat clogging up again; this time it felt like a force that wanted to choke her, to punish her for saying things that should have remained unsaid, for discovering things that should have remained undiscovered. Some things you could never unlearn, no matter how much you wanted to, no matter what else you learned; and tasting Emma in that inebriated moment with Steve was one of those things. They'd wanted to taste more, explore more, and it didn't take long for Steve to realize he had opened Pandora's box and there was no place in it for him.

The force squeezed Sasha's throat as she parked outside of Emma's house and she hit her steering wheel when the force erupted from her mouth in a shrill, continuous sound, taking on a life of its own. The rain was more intense in Canefield, beating against the car's roof and all Sasha heard was the sound of the voice that was coming from inside her.

When the voice exhausted itself, a calm determination washed over her. She needed to gain back Emma's trust, she needed things to be as they were for the past year - with their friendship intact, and their sexual energy safely in a box that they had both decided to keep locked.

Sasha wiped her eyes and took her phone to text Emma. It vibrated in her hand. Josephine was calling again and Sasha declined it. She would not let her mother hear any anxious inflection in her voice to raise any kind of suspicion, to raise any kind of talk.

- *I'm outside your house.*
- *Need to talk to you.*
- *Please.*

Sasha waited for the reply, drumming on the steering wheel and looking at the phone's screen. She and Emma had been doing so well since she'd gotten engaged, keeping their hands to themselves. Until Martinique, when their bodies could no longer resist the urge to reacquaint themselves, being in the same space for days. It was the night before the final fitting, when Chidon had slept at his girlfriend's house and they were alone in his apartment, and rain was beating against the floor to ceiling louvers, and lightning was streaking across the sky, and the air hung heavy with their hungry energy, and their mouths claimed each other in a way that was urgent, insistent; and their hands rediscovered dips and curves and moisture; and their unsatiated bodies compelled them over and over to give, to take, to be themselves, to live; and their spirits sung with the satisfaction of being free.

Their hunger for each other had not surprised Sasha; neither did the ease they felt with each other, nor the way their bodies convulsed as they enjoyed places that only both of them knew. It was the tenderness and care that she'd found different, like holding something precious for the last time. It was the way Emma's eyes drank her in with a ferocious intensity. It was the way her own heart ached as she caressed Emma's body. It was the realization that Emma was her home.

Sasha did not know what to do with this epiphany.

So, she wrapped it, the epiphany, and secured it in a corner of her heart, because what do you do with feelings that crept up on you so stealthily? Especially feelings that were forbidden? She tried to ignore the epiphany she'd wrapped; she tried to ignore the longing in Emma's eyes; and continued to live as usual as if they would all go away, and things would return as they were, as they should be. Besides, she had not wanted Chidon or anyone else to pick up on their sexual energy; Chidon would tell Tyani and that would bring a slew of events she wasn't prepared to handle.

In the last few weeks, the epiphany had grown heavy, stretching beyond the confines Sasha had established, refusing to remain wrapped. It was demanding her attention and she did not know how to contain it. What she knew for sure, was losing Emma would be catastrophic.

Sasha placed the phone between the seats and went out into the rain. She unlatched the pedestrian gate that was next to the larger electronic one the family normally drove through. She traversed the pathway on the front lawn, past the dwarf coconut trees, past the dwarf mango trees, past the Wharton's living room windows, to Emma's bedroom. It was detached from the main house, connected by a passageway. There was light within and Sasha could see the flashing light of the television. Sasha knocked the white metal door, her mouth feeling dry and she wondered if her voice would fail her.

Six - Tessanne

“Use the little whisk to beat the egg yolk,” Tessanne said to Joy, who was standing on a bench so she could access the kitchen counter.

“I want to beat egg yolk too!” Jarvid climbed the bench and stood next to Joy, a toothless grin on his face. He pulled the bowl from his sister. She pulled it back and Tessanne took it from them.

“All-you gone take turns, or else no meat pie. Each of you count to twenty while the other stir.”

They said ‘yes Tess’ in unison and Tessanne placed the bowl back on the counter. As Tessanne worked her blender, she observed them, counting and beating the egg yolk, their bronze skin shining under the fluorescent light. Their eyes were like Stoney’s; close together, eyebrows furrowed with concentration. They were built like him too, slim and short.

Jodi was peeping over their shoulders, and after praising them for a job well done, she took the bowl from them. Pleased with themselves they skipped from the kitchen, and before long they were arguing about who was first sitting on a particular space on the couch.

Tessanne and Jodi smiled at each other and shook their heads. The twins would sort themselves out. They always did. Tessanne poured her blended herbs into a jar, while Jodi pasted the meat-filled dough with the yellow yolk liquid just the way Tessanne had shown her. After she placed them in the oven, she said to her mother, “I still want to be a bridesmaid in the wedding. Stoney is not my father you know.”

“Stoney not your father? But who feeding you?”

Jodi rolled her eyes. “So, y’all really gon’ let Aunty Sasha’s money go to waste like that?”

After we got hyped about dressing up?”

Tessanne tightened the jar’s lid, her back to her daughter. She poured the rest of the blend into another jar. She didn’t answer because she did not know what to say.

“You never let us go anywhere. You never take us anywhere.”

Tessanne spun around. “Go where, Jodi? Where you want to go?”

“I want to spend time with my aunties and my grandmother and Kyle. The last time Auntie Tyani invited us to a beach picnic you said no. Now we were all hyped up about going to the wedding and y’all saying no. Why?”

Tessanne couldn’t find an answer, except that Stoney did not like her family and did not want their children around them. She looked at Jodi’s pouted mouth, at the way beads of sweat formed on her nose and above her lips, just like her father’s.

“Is Stoney house, Jodi.”

“You’re an adult, Tessanne. You can find your own house so you can make your own rules.” She walked out of the kitchen as if she’d simply said that she was going to bed.

Jodi’s words clattered inside of Tessanne’s chest. They scattered around, heavy with disappointment, heavy with judgment. Jodi had never spoken to her like that and the truth was like egg in her face; raw and unpleasant. She could find her own house and make her own rules. But how? Jodi’s ingratitude bothered her too, as if nothing was ever enough. Didn’t the child realize how fortunate she was?

Tessanne held onto the flour-smearred counter, and she took deep breaths to calm herself. Then she poured a glass of water, her hands unsteady. She would go to Jodi’s room and remind the child of her place and her age. She would slap her face, hard, as she had never done before. But as stood there she decided that a conversation would probably be the best approach, because

she remembered, that's what she had most wanted when she was a child.

A memory came to her. She could not have been more than seven. She and Tyani were sitting on the couch in the house on Church Lane eating bread and drinking juice for supper. She was looking at her mother pasting her bread with a lot of butter, and devouring it like one of those homeless people they would see in the streets. Tessanne and Tyani were afraid of her because they had not seen her in a long time, and she was acting strange, looking at them with wild eyes and muttering to herself. Tessanne didn't remember exactly what she asked her mother, but she knew it was something along the lines of where she had been. It must have been the wrong question because Josephine had attacked her, hitting her so hard repeatedly, that her face burned for days. She remembered Patrick running into the living room and pulling Josephine off her. She remembered the floor being soggy with juice and wet bread. She remembered Patrick bringing her and Tyani into the bathroom to console them. And for years, Tessanne had thought about those slaps, confused about why her mother had been so angry.

“You know you was really disrespectful a while ago, child?” Tessanne said when she entered Jodi's room.

Jodi was sitting on her bed, her back against the headboard. She muttered an apology.

“You in a safe place, roof above your head, your own bedroom, free to turn on television, nobody to bother you. You know how much I wanted those things as a child an' as a teenager? Josephine could never keep up with the bills after she force Patrick to leave; we always had to be lighting lamp or candles, and carrying water from the stand pipe. When they ask us to leave, it was from one place to the next. Josephine getting evicted for non-payment, or stealing people tings. I can remember me an' Tyani having to sleep in people living room, or spare room; sometimes we were together, sometimes separate. An' so many times we was hungry - we couldn't touch the

people food, we couldn't go in their fridge - we had to stay hungry. Sometimes not even their lights they wanted us to turn on. You hear me? An' according to where we go, we had to curl up ourself a certain way an' harden our body so man wouldn't touch our pussy. You know what kinda life that is?"

Jodi shook her head. She was playing with her long nails, painted bright green.

"My father, God rest his soul, come down from St. Martin for me. He say somebody call him an' tell him what was happening. He take me out of one mess an' he bring me straight in another one. His wife was a piece of shit. Calling herself a Christian an' treating me like dirt. She used to call me street child. She used to cook food, feed her chirren an' leave me hungry. More than once she give away the nice clothes my father buy for me an' to lie an' tell him I ain't aking care of my tings. Her chirren used to lie to too, an' tell our father I was taking man. I dunno if he was believing them or if he just wanted to please his miserable wife but sometimes he would beat me bad. Child, I was so frustrated I wanted to kill myself. When my father get sick things get worse because he couldn't work again so he couldn't provide for me. That lady torment me so much I had to leave that house at fifteen. Fifteen. Your age. You hear me? I was living with friends, I was living in the streets. I was homeless until I meet your father. Homeless! You hear me? Praise God you dunno those things."

Jodi's head remained hanging, the perspiration on her upper lip and nose appearing again and again after she wiped them off.

"I miss my father," she said.

"I know, child. I know. I miss him too. Every day. Stoney not your father, but he take care of you. He ain't have to do that. You hear me? I refuse to carry all-you all over the place to feel uncomfortable or feel the burden that coming with homelessness."

They were silent for a little while, Jodi playing with her fingernails and her head still down; and Tessanne looking at her.

“I wasn’t saying to drag us everywhere or bring us to people’s homes. I was suggesting you find your own home. Yours.”

“But how I gon’ do that with no money? You know how much rent cost, child?”

“Well, you can start by getting a job. I can work too, after school and on weekends.”

“You want people to laugh at me outside there? I ain’t have no education, no experience, nuttin. What I gon put on the application? How I gon pay them bills? Jodi, lemme tell you something. You have erryting you need. You hear me? Cool out.”

Jodi nodded and wiped her eyes. “I really want to go to the wedding.”

“I’ll send the dress by Tyani an’ you’ll dress there. Make sure you ain’t tell Jarvid an’ Joy cause is war that. I’ll call Sasha.”

Jodi smiled through her tears and Tessanne hugged her. “Is a good thing you suggesting, Jodi. But I ain’t ready for that.”

*

After the children went to bed and she tidied up the kitchen, Tessanne went to her hammock for a smoke. The sky was a dark blanket and she could smell the moisture in the air. The crickets were probably smelling it too; their chirping was shrill. Tessanne pulled in the tobacco thinking about what Jodi had said. She wanted to ask her if she was unhappy, but she was afraid that Jodi would say yes. If Jodi said yes, she would have to think of a possible solution, she would have to think about starting new, which meant leaving Stoney and possibly losing custody of Jarvid and Joy. She couldn’t stomach that. Being with Stoney meant economic safety and she didn’t want to have the worries of being without electricity or water if she couldn’t pay the bills; she didn’t want

to worry about being hungry, or evicted if she couldn't pay the rent.

The clouds were tearing up slowly, releasing the rain light and soft, and the drops landed silently on the grass. It was too light for Tessanne to feel the drops, being protected under the canopy. Soon, the clouds would open wider and the raindrops would become more intense. They would most likely sting her skin, but she remained on her hammock, happy for the cool air.

Tessanne fumbled around for her phone and found it in the pocket of her shorts. She released the smoke she'd been holding and dialed Sasha's number. She was feeling bad about pulling the children out of the wedding party and Jodi's accusatory look tonight made her feel worse. She wanted to stand up to Stoney, to tell him the wedding was important to her sister and the children, that everything was not about him; but it was so hard for those words to leave her lips. She remembered how she used to stand up to her stepmother and how she had started arguing with her father when he accused her, but she had lost that part of herself somewhere along the way. She'd lost it with Power, her lost-at-sea husband. She'd lost it because she had had no reason to use it.

Sasha's phone rang out, and Tessanne placed it back in her pocket. She couldn't blame Sasha for not wanting to speak to her. She had every reason to be upset.

A drop of rain put Tessanne's cigarette out and she took that as her cue to go indoors. She strolled along the walkway through the lawn and considered staying in the rain like she and Tyani used to do when they were little, when Patrick was around and things were good. She smiled as she remembered Patrick, a light skinned man with blue eyes, just like Sasha's; and curly black hair that tumbled down his forehead. Sometimes, when he had too many drinks, he would play his harmonica or he would sing a song in creole and they would sing along with him, clapping their hands and stamping their feet.

Mwen ké mayé èvè 'w, doodoo-mwen

Mwen ké mayé èvè 'w

Lè gouvèlman ké ba nou kai-la

Mwen ké mayé èvè 'w

Ép, ép, ép, épa!

He used to sing that song to tease Josephine. It was a love song, telling her he would marry her when the government gave them a house. Tessanne was laughing out loud and she laughed and laughed in the pouring rain, until she started to cry like a deranged person. She wondered what life would have been like if Josephine had not insisted that Patrick leave. He had cleaned up so well after the people had taken Josephine from the house and she had gone to England. He used to take them to school, and cook their favorite food. He used to take them to the library, he would read to them at night, and tell them stories during thunderstorms. He was nice, until Josephine came back, and he started drinking again. Tessanne often wondered what had become of him, why he never returned. She wondered if anybody knew where he was.

Drenched, Tessanne entered the house, water trailing behind her. Conscious of the slipperiness of the ceramic tiled flooring, she tip-toed carefully to the half-bath downstairs and peeled the wet clothes off her body. It was spacious for a half-bath and she always wondered if the architect had initially meant to put a full bath there, but the owners decided otherwise. She heard the phone fall to the floor, its rubber casing making a dull sound amid the wet fabric. She dug into the pants pocket for it, hoping it was still functional after the rain bath. She wiped it with the hand towel that hung from the towel bar and checked the screen for any signs of water damage. There was none, and she thought how resilient her Nokia 6220 was. Her screen showed three missed calls. Sasha must have called her back, she thought. Excitedly, she unlocked the phone to call

Sasha so she could tell her that Jodi would still be part of the wedding party. But when Tessanne unlocked the phone and looked at the missed calls, they were all from Stoney. She had done nothing wrong, yet panic coiled itself in her stomach and she felt it slithering around her navel. Forty minutes had passed since his last call. She would tell him that she was outside and had forgotten the phone on the kitchen counter. She wiped herself quickly, as best as she could with the hand towel, and decided to head to bed soon, so she would not have to deal with Stoney when he came home. He would probably quarrel with her about not taking his calls, and she did not want to deal with any more arguments.

Tessanne threw the wet pack of cigarettes into the bin and on a whim dialed Tyani's number. They'd already had their squabble about Stoney's decision to pull the children out but she wanted to tell her that Jodi would participate. And she wanted to ask her about Patrick. Tyani's voicemail came on after a few rings.

"Uhm, call me tomorrow. I want to talk to you about something. Well two things."

She ended the call, and with the wet clothes to her chest, pulled the bathroom door open. She screamed and dropped the clothes as she came face to face with Stoney standing right outside the door. His face was a scowl, his small, hooded eyes were on fire and Tessanne felt the panic convulsing inside her stomach. She did not know if he had heard her on the phone, and she did not know what he was thinking, as he glared at her. Something was different in his eyes, more sinister as if he was possessed. Tessanne wanted to move but her body felt stuck there, shaking on its own accord, in between the opened door and Stoney.

Her hands formed an X across her rising and falling chest, and her wet high-waist boyshorts clung to her stomach and her hips. She felt exposed, naked, and the chill of the night caused goose pimples to rise on her body. Tessanne expected Stoney to raise his voice, probably to bring

back their earlier disagreement about her hiding the children's clothes for the wedding so he wouldn't know they were participating. She expected him to raise his voice, probably to argue about her not answering her phone. But he stood looking at her, like a possessed man carrying another man's spirit.

Tessanne swallowed air; her mouth was so dry her tongue could carry no saliva. A slap landed on her cheek and her ear and Tessanne yelped from the suddenness and the force of it. She reeled, moving a step back, back into the spacious place.

"I know you sneaked off tonight. You were so busy whoring yourself you couldn't answer my call." She heard him as if he was at a distance, as if glass panels separated them.

Unable to speak, she shook her head. Her face burned from the impact and her ears rang, like someone had crashed cymbals on both sides of her head.

"Don't deny it! You walked in the rain from the main road. That's why you're so wet! Don't fucking deny it!"

Tessanne shook her head again and put out her hand to stop him. The next slap was in the same position like Stoney had measured her face. Tessanne cried out and found herself further in the half-bath, holding the side of her face.

"That's for those fucking plans you're making behind my back, waiting for me to leave the house, so you can make your calls and sneak out. You think I didn't hear you on the phone just now? Ungrateful bitch! You like being a whore? You like being a fucking whore?" He was unbuckling his pants as he was speaking, moving closer to her.

Tessanne turned her body and shook her head, knowing what was coming. Stoney grabbed her head with both hands and forced her to face his crotch. Tears rolled down her face as he thrust himself into her dry, swelling mouth, all the while calling her a filthy whore.

Seven - Tyani

Tyani walked into Kyle's room; folded clothes piled on her forearm. Brent was reading one of Kyle's favorite *Thomas the Tank Engine* stories, mimicking the sound of the trains and sending Kyle into fits of laughter. Tyani placed Kyle's clothes into their respective drawers, wishing that the reading of bedtime stories would become more regular, more permanent. She observed them, as she had for the past few nights, at ease with each other in their own little world, Kyle's feet resting on Brent's lap.

She made more trips into the room, bringing in more laundered clothes, placing what needed to be on hangers into his wardrobe. After putting the clothes away Tyani sat on the bed next to Brent and they watched the gradual droopiness of their son's lids. She bent to kiss him good-night, as did Brent and before long he drifted off to sleep.

Brent took Tyani's hand and pressed her palm to his lips. "You're doing a great job with Kyle. Thank you."

"Well, he's my son too."

He nodded and kept her hand in his as if he wanted to say something important. Tyani tried to keep her expectations low, remembering what Maya had said. She had asked Brent if he was seeing someone else, and he had said no, but she had not mustered the guts to mention Ava-Lyn's name because saying it out loud would be too real. She wanted to delay her ignorance in hopes that the mud would dry up. Why was it so hard to face life's truths? Why was it so hard to let go?

"I'm going to shower," he said.

Tyani nodded and watched him exit the room not knowing how to process what was happening. He was behaving like old times, as though he had not been absent for weeks. She did

not know if she should chide herself for feeling unsettled or silence the warning bells that were sounding in her mind. She did not know whether she should embrace his boldness and his familiarity. But his familiarity had become unfamiliar, and she wanted the ease that she used to feel. She kissed Kyle again, his sleeping face relaxed and perfect, his breathing rhythmic. Tyani switched off his light and went to the kitchen to make some mint tea to calm her tangled mind with its disparate thoughts.

As she sat at the round table waiting for the brew, Sasha came downstairs, wearing white shorts and a blue tank that stretched across her breasts. Same light-blue as her eyes. In her hands were her keys, her phone and a small overnight bag.

“Sexy PJs for your man?” Sasha asked Tyani.

Tyani didn’t know if she was making light conversation or making fun of her. She said, “all my pronounced parts are covered up. I’m not half as sexy as you with your half-naked self.”

“Lighten up Tyani. I’m not judging you and your romanticism. If you believe in you and your man, then you believe in you and your man.”

“Well, if you don’t believe in you and your man, that’s too bad,” Tyani retorted. “Maybe if you spend some time with him you will believe in him.”

“Tyani, learn to mind your own damn business.”

“You, mind your own business, Sasha. Or else you might just lose a good man for nothing.”

“For nothing? What is nothing to you might mean something to me. You ever thought of that? I know Jason called you to trash-talk me because I left him to go check on Emma. But she’s important to me and I will be there for her while she’s going through her shit. You sitting here minding my damn business and judging me while you entertaining a man who keeps disappearing and reappearing in your life as if he’s a fucking magician.”

Tyani couldn't find her words. She watched her sister smirk. Just as Sasha opened her mouth to speak again, her phone rang. She quickly answered and Tyani barely heard her "coming now, Em" as she walked towards the living room and shut the front door behind her.

Disappearing and reappearing. It was the truth, but who was Sasha to judge? Inconsiderate, Jason had referred to her. And although Tyani had tried to defend Sasha, a part of her had to agree. Her relationships were so strange. Sasha and Jason were worlds apart and Tyani had a feeling he clung to her because he had no one else and their family was his only link to his dead mother. It was mind-boggling how their relationship had survived so much friction, and Tyani wasn't sure if their marriage could bear the weight of their differences. Tyani sometimes asked herself if Josephine's glowing thoughts of him had influenced Sasha's decision to date him. Perhaps not. Sasha was free spirited with a mind of her own.

She and Emma were like night and day too, yet they'd been inseparable since childhood. Emma was depressed, Sasha said, and she was helping her through it as though she was a therapist. Like Jason, Emma clung to Sasha. Tyani wondered if her depression was because of the wedding. It would be interesting to find out how Emma really felt about it and what that would mean for her, being so introverted. Tyani hoped it would force her out of her shell a little; perhaps she would find new friends; perhaps she would find a man. Or a woman.

*

The scent of mint took over the kitchen and Tyani got up from the table to pour her tea. Her phone was on the counter. There was a missed call and a voicemail from Tessanne. Strange. Tyani was curious about why Tessanne would call. Just the day before they'd had a heated conversation about removing her children from Sasha's bridal party. Well Tyani was heated, not Tessanne. Tessanne was indifferent. Just like how she was indifferent about her mother's sudden

bout of high blood pressure. The call had come in less than five minutes ago. Perhaps it was vibrating when she was talking to Sasha. Tyani listened to the voicemail Tessanne left.

“Uhm, call me tomorrow. I want to talk to you about someting. Well two tings.”

Tyani called anyway, disregarding the ‘tomorrow’ aspect of the voicemail. She called several times but the phone kept going to voicemail.

*

That night, in the dimness of Tyani’s room Brent reached for her, pulling her reluctant body to him. Without effort her frame molded into the familiar contours of his. His skin was warm, his hands gentle. He stroked her hair like he used to do. “I will always love you, Yani.”

His voice, though in her ear, sounded a long way off as if she was imagining it. She wanted to believe in him, to trust his words. But what were words devoid of action? Tyani remembered something she had read somewhere. *Inside of every man lived another man; a stranger, a conniving man.* And she wondered whether it was the voice of the conniving man that she was hearing.

“Then show me that love, Brent. Move in with us when Sasha leaves. I feel like I need you more than ever right now, being in this situation and feeling so uncertain about everything. And you know how I feel about moving.” Tyani heard the desperation in her own voice, and conceded that there was another woman inside her as well, or perhaps several women. The one who spoke now was the one with the loudest mouth, who unabashedly asked for what she wanted. The other woman inside of her was passive, the one who allowed Brent’s hands to roam the roundness of her hips and the thickness of her thighs; who surrendered to his warmth, to the words in her ear. It was this passive woman who permitted Brent to take her body into a place familiar to them, even if she no longer felt happy there. She had no voice, this passive woman. Time’s tedium had sapped her

language, for she had held her arms outstretched for too long, aching from the need to be desired. It was she, this woman with no language, who continuously allowed herself to be swept into that space of need; an impractical, compelling need that forced her onto an extensive field, alone, trying to dry up the mud beneath her and Brent, to no avail.

Later, when Brent withdrew from her body, the woman without language felt no satiation and the one with vocal bravery felt no inclination to speak. Tyani rolled onto her side, remembering the times when their post-coital bliss was brimming with emotional security. Now, the experience curdled like cows' milk that had stayed out too long. The bitterness of their coupling settled over her as if it was a soiled blanket, cloaking her in disappointment and regret. She needed to remember that being desired and being valued were two different things.

“Somebody told me about a house in Elmshall,” Brent said. “I can pick you up some time this week so we can go and look at it.”

With her back to Brent, Tyani said, “I find it so strange how you can feel comfortable helping me to look for a smaller place, yet refusing to move in with us. Where the hell is your conscience?”

“Tyani, I thought we were not talking about that living together business anymore. Maybe you should use this opportunity to face your anxiety of moving. Try to get past that, baby. You're an adult, you know?”

“You ever heard anxiety has respect for age? I expected your support right now Brent, not your indifference. You say you care. You say you love us. But your words and your actions don't match. I'm at my lowest, my lowest.”

Brent released air through his nose, rapid puffing sounds, as if he was the one hurting.

“Tyani, I love you. I love Kyle. But I really cannot focus on moving in with you right now.

Too many things going on with the expansion at work and whatnot.”

“You say things, Brent but what things? What could possibly be preventing you from moving in with us? Even if we don’t get married yet, living together is the logical thing to do.”

“Logical thing for you, Tyani. I’m discussing some new opportunities with my boss, and I dunno where they will lead. I’ll let you know when I have more information, baby.”

“Dunno where they’ll lead? So out of town? Overseas?”

“Dunno yet. Maybe St. Lucia.”

St. Lucia. Lights flooded Tyani’s mind. Her intake of breath was sharp, her eyes wide, and she lay there, the thought ruminating in her mind. It struck her that Brent’s disinterest was because he did not want to send the wrong message. Moving in would give the impression of long-term commitment. It wasn’t that he was not ready for marriage at this time. It was just that he had no intention of any life-long commitment with her.

Tyani heard his body rise from the bed and within moments he kissed her forehead, fully dressed. So many parts of him had become unrecognizable to her, like withholding information about his job, like leaving in the dead of the night as if daylight would reveal his true form; the man who lived inside him, the conniving man.

“Busy day tomorrow, baby. I’ll call you.”

“I know you're seeing Ava-Lyn, Brent.”

Tyani had not meant to say it, not now. She didn't know exactly what was going on but she trusted Maya. Either way, it was out there and it was real. Ava-Lyn was real. St. Lucia was real. Nothing spilled from Brent’s mouth. He was motionless, knotted, his breathing incapable of concealing his shock. She wished the light was on so she could see his face; maybe it was his real face he was wearing now, angry at her accusation, angry that she had figured him out. But perhaps

if the light was on, she would see his conniving face, the crumpled up one that would try to elicit sympathy. But that wouldn't work. Not again.

"Yani I. I. Look I wanted -," he sighed. A heavy sigh as if life's weight had suddenly descended on him.

Tyani brought herself to a sitting position, her hand on her chest, afraid of the way her heart was leaping. Brent was mumbling about Ava-Lyn not meaning anything to him. He was sorry. He shook his head as if the memory of the woman could be dismissed with that simple action. A shake of the head. "Come on Baby. It's nothing - "

He sat on the bed, and Tyani anticipated his movements, arm around her shoulder, shifting her head so he could plant his lips on hers. Try to reclaim his space through sex. He was holding her upper arms tight, as though the tighter he held on the easier it would be to bring Tyani back into his fold.

"Why Brent? What am I lacking?"

"Nothing Tyani. You-you lack nothing."

"All I ever gave you was love. Love. We have a son, Brent."

Brent sighed again but remained silent. His grip loosened on her arm and he stood.

"Now you have this whole other relationship going on and trying to fool me into believing it's nothing when I can bloody well see how different you are. You're trying to make me think I'm paranoid about you staying away, but I knew it wasn't only work that was keeping you away. Seriously, I'm not doing this anymore."

"Tyani. It's not -"

"Shut the fuck up Brent! I'm not a fucking tool that you can pick up and pack up when you ready! Go and meet your Ava-Lyn and leave me the fuck alone!"

She hated him at that moment, for not prioritizing them; for going back to a woman whom they'd fought over; for reopening that wound that she was still healing from. She hated herself too, for refusing to listen, for refusing to see.

"Go." Tyani tried to sound commanding. Instead, her voice shook, and her body shook as sobs racked her.

"What are you saying?"

"Just let me be. I'm done."

"Where is my Tyani?"

"You don't have a Tyani." She got up from the bed and opened her bedroom door.

Tyani saw the drop in Brent's shoulders and she knew this was their end. He watched her for a little while and without another word, vanished into the night.

*

Monday morning. Tyani ended the shrill sound of her six o'clock alarm. She was sitting up in bed, laptop on her thighs, looking at gold and blue upholstery fabric online, and wondering where on her small island she would find similar patterns.

There was a pattering of feet in the hallway and she looked expectantly at her door before she heard the knock. Kyle.

"Where's Daddy?" he asked, as they cuddled.

"He had to leave early, son." She heard the crack in her voice and she swallowed to keep the tears at bay. She'd cried enough in the last few hours.

He wrapped his small hands around her neck and kissed her face before saying he was hungry. Tyani dragged herself out of bed and was surprised to see Sasha in the kitchen blending herbs for her green juice. They barely acknowledged each other as Tyani prepared Kyle's

breakfast.

Tyani was getting used to her new routine, waking at six to prepare Kyle for school and sending him off with Sasha. Sometimes she headed back to bed for another hour or two. She picked up Kyle from school when Sasha could not, and it felt like such a gift to spend so much time with him. Occasionally, they went to the beach after school or to the Botanical Gardens, or for ice-cream. These activities felt strange and different. But they felt good too, really good, as if the universe was telling her this was what she needed all along - to slow down. Some days she immersed herself in fiction, or in her school work, or chores, or sewing. She embraced the change.

After Sasha and Kyle left, Tyani went back on her laptop scouring local and regional websites for job opportunities, and trying not to think about Brent. She emailed a few places she found interesting keeping her fingers crossed but her expectations low. Later, she would call the real estate agents and the homeowners that her friends had recommended. It was tiring, haggling about overpriced two-bedroom or one-bedroom spaces. Funny how life could flip; for years she'd been on the other end of those conversations; now she was the client and the experience was unpleasant, to say the least.

Tyani switched back to the tab with the patterns. This was her first official upholstery job and she experienced a new sense of purpose, a new sense of freedom being part of Maya's rebranding project.

Her phone vibrated and she hesitated to check it, thinking it was Brent. Non-committal Brent. Conniving Brent. She let it ring and when she heard the voicemail alert she took the phone, preparing herself to listen to his pleas for forgiveness. But it wasn't him she heard, and she groaned as her former colleague's voice filled her space, asking her to serve on the Goodwill Reunion Committee. She was disappointed that he had not called her or texted her. But there was clarity in

that non-action. He was not fighting for her because he did not want her in the same way she had yearned for him. Pity, she'd taken too long to recognize the futility of her hope.

She pressed the keypad for the next message and listened again to Tessanne's voicemail from the night before. "*Uhm, call me tomorrow. I want to talk to you about something. Well two things.*" She called, and was mildly irritated when after three attempts Tessanne did not pick up. Tyani sent her a text.

- *Hey, trying to call you since last night. Is everything ok? Call or message me when you get this.*

Tyani rolled the wheel of the blackberry up and down, as the people in her life flashed through her mind similar to the way images had flashed across the View Master that Chidon had brought from Martinique when they were children. At least the images the View Master offered were beautiful and transformative, and she used to imagine herself in the red and gold gardens during fall and on the snow-covered slopes during winter. But the images on her mind now, were burdensome and she longed for the day when her world would be peaceful, happy.

Tyani dialed Josephine's number. Her mother was still being evasive, even with her golden soon-to-be son-in-law. Why was Campbell's release making her so nervous? Why didn't she want to talk about the night of the accident? Now they had to deal with her fluctuating blood pressure and Tyani was concerned that whatever she was hiding would explode inside her.

"Good morning." Josephine's voice came over the phone, sleepy.

Guilt stabbed Tyani's chest, hearing her mother. She had teetered on the edge of life's precipice a few days before, cheating the ubiquitous hand of the man from yonder. It frightened Tyani how quickly things could change, how fragile time was. One minute they were on the phone speaking, and the next minute, she was squeezing her mother's hand, her heart pounding and her

mind reciting fragments of prayers she had learned at Convent High School.

“Still in bed, Ma? I just call to see how you doing today.”

“Well, doc say to rest, so I resting. Miller outside there making so much noise in my head with that old car, but I better than yesterday. They give me medication to bring down de pressure.”

“Make sure you drink a lot of water like the doctor told you,” Tyani said. "And I'm really, really sorry."

It sounded corny, she knew. She had apologized many times over the past few days. But she was sorry. At the hospital, Miller had shot accusatory looks at her, conveying without words, that her mother's blood pressure had suddenly spiked because of her.

Tyani had never seen her mother worry so much. Not when Patrick left. Not when people were talking about her marrying a man who could be her father. Not when they - Tyani and Sasha - would complain about or quarrel with Miller, or when he would insult them. Josephine did not worry as much as this when she had been diagnosed with breast cancer and had a mastectomy. Her pressure had been fine then. But Tyani had asked her a simple question on the phone and her pressure had skyrocketed. A simple question:

"Which friend was with Sue when she died, Ma? You?"

“Who say a friend was there?”

"Maya said her uncles were discussing it. They said other people were in the house when it happened."

"People like to talk about things they dunno nothing about!"

She had slammed her house phone in Tyani's ear and within fifteen minutes, Miller called to say they were at the hospital. Tyani felt as if she was going to collapse, as if oxygen had disappeared from the room. Sasha had given her water, and they had rushed to their mother,

panicked and praying.

That Monday morning, Tyani and Josephine talked some more, about the wedding and what it would look like without Tessanne's children; about Tyani's lack of persistence to find a place to rent; about Maya's rebranding, and about Michelle Obama's outfits. When they hung up, Tyani put the phone on the bed next to her, hoping her mother would be alright and wondering what had really happened on the night Sue died. She had never been keenly interested before but now it was all people talked about and her mother's behavior begged for more digging. She had asked Tantie Hershie and her uncle Shane. They only repeated things Tyani already knew, but they were holding back. She knew it. And she had a feeling it was not pretty.

Tyani shut her laptop and was about to get out of bed when she glimpsed part of a t-shirt sticking out from under her lightweight comforter. Brent's undershirt. Tyani took it and inhaled Brent's masculinity, a mixture of Old Spice and lemon. Something clawed its way into her stomach and a fresh wave of tears streamed down her face. Despite the discouragement from Sasha and Maya, Tyani had hoped for some kind of restoration; she had hoped that the mud would dry up, even if Brent was not ready for marriage.

That Monday morning, Tyani flung the lightweight comforter from her body and sprang from the bed. She shifted her curtains and opened her sash windows, blinking at the brightness of the day. She stripped her mattress and threw the linen, his t-shirt and the pillows onto the floor. Looking at the mattress brought disgust, knowing that Brent's DNA rested in every foam and fiber, and she wished she was more financially stable so she could purchase a new one. Tyani flipped it, its heaviness straining her hands, her breaths quick and short. She went through her closet and her chest of drawers and threw every article of Brent's clothing onto the pile; his underwear, his socks, t-shirts, work shirts, work pants, a pair of sneakers. Satisfied that she'd found them all, she gathered

the items on the floor into a bundle and marched down the steps into the day's brilliance, bare feet, a new determination taking hold within her. It was already sweltering outside, and the trees stood there, lethargic, too dehydrated to stir. Her neighbor's radio was on its usual station, DBS Radio, and Tyani heard the familiar signature music of the popular program, *Talking Point*. The neighbor called good-morning from her backyard, and Bruce barked as if he too, was saying good-morning.

"Good-morning Mrs. Willa!" Tyani called back. Armed with a shield of fortitude, she stomped across the freshly cut grass, and placed the bundle into a metal drum which they sometimes used to burn things. She retrieved the kerosene and matches from the tool shed.

"Clean-up project today?" Willa asked, her British accent turning 'today' to 'to-die.' She was moving closer to the chain linked fence, a cigarette between her fingers, and her shoulder-length white hair gleaming like silver in the sunlight. As she walked, her untethered breasts swayed, reminding Tyani of her own state of undress.

"No, no. Just burning a few things," Tyani answered, setting the bedsheets and pillows ablaze. "Smoke will be gone soon."

Tyani ran upstairs and gathered all her Waitukubuli Realty branded clothes that were hanging in her closet, as if waiting to be worn again. She hurried into the backyard with the bundle, threw them onto the pile and went to join Willa at the fence. She had recently lost her husband of forty-three years to a heart failure, and Tyani and Sasha checked on her from time to time.

"Good sheets and clothes you're burning there, miss," Willa said, shaking her head, and pulling on her cigarette. Her voice was throaty, like someone who was perpetually aroused. She blew smoke away from their faces.

"Yeah," Tyani said, her voice feebler than intended.

"Next time, instead of throwing away usable things, donate them to St. Vincent de Paul.

Poor people want those things, you know.” She looked at the fire with longing, as though she wanted to save the items from their ruin.

Tyani almost said she was poor too but she banished the thought, telling herself to channel only positivity into the universe. She said to Willa, “Yes, Ma’am. I’ll remember that.”

The smoke climbed into the cloudless sky until it dissipated in the atmosphere. There was a young guava tree pushing its way into the world, its supple leaves not too far from the fire. Tyani watched them furl and blacken and she felt a little bit of guilt for retarding the tree so early in its growth.

“Burning things is a kind of rebirth, but it is important to let go here too,” Willa said, placing a finger at her temple.

Tyani looked at Willa through the chain linked fence, her face all knowing, and she marveled at the way older people could be so discerning.

“When I was training to be a nurse, I was seeing this gorgeous postal worker. My God! I was madly in love with him, you know? In those days my girlies were full and perky, and my thighs were like silk. This man? He could turn my body into putty!” She laughed and coughed as if it was the sweetest joke, and Tyani laughed with her.

“But he was married and I couldn’t dare to be seen in public with him. You know how it was in those days. He kept promising to leave his wife, but after three years, I wanted more for myself, you know? It was really, really difficult letting him go, but I had to start here.” She placed her index finger at her temple again.

Tyani nodded as she watched Willa pulling in more smoke. Head bent back, she expelled it from her body. “Can you imagine I met my Gilbert soon after? He was living in the same building as me, right there under my nose. If I’d stayed with the postal worker, I would have had no space

for Gil, you know? One thing I learned, which you ought to remember, is that it is only when you completely, completely release the old you can make space to welcome the new, the better. New experiences. New ideas. New people.”

“Thank you, Miss Willa.” Tyani wiped her eyes and smiled at her neighbor. If the fence was not between them she probably would have hugged her. They stood like this for some time, watching the roar of the fire, orange and beautiful, rendering Tyani’s old chapter to ashes.

*

Upstairs, Tyani looked at her reflection in the mirror, her wet hair hanging in waves down her back and her body freshly scrubbed of Brenton’s sweat. Her eyes were puffy and red, a statement of their own, and probably it was her eyes that had prompted Miss Willa to offer advice. Aloud, she said, “I will not be used again. I am love and light. I am intelligent and well-meaning. I deserve and welcome happiness and stability.”

Grabbing the day with a renewed sense of self, Tyani was tempted to let her hair loose, but knowing it would make her uncomfortable in the heat, she braided it, not at the nape like she usually did, but towards the side, so the braid draped over her breast. She decided against her usual denim and slipped on her burgundy skater dress that Sasha had brought her from one of her trips. She strapped on matching gold accessories and gold sandals. A touch of make-up later, Tyani experienced a feeling of reinvention, a metamorphosis.

When the thought of Brent seeing her beautiful like this invaded her mind, she spat it out, like poison.

Tyani prepared to leave, ensuring the fire was completely out and the back door was locked. As she did so, she dialed Tessanne’s number and as the phone rang out, something akin to panic started creeping in. What if something had happened to Tessanne? She listened to her voicemail

once more. *“Uhm, call me tomorrow. I want to talk to you about something. Well two things.”* It wasn't that Tessanne's voice held desperation or distress, but it was flat, and she couldn't determine her sister's mood.

In town, Tyani basked in the compliments that strangers and acquaintances offered. There was a new lightness to her step, a new confidence. *You on vacation?* Everywhere she went people asked her that, and Tyani couldn't help but think that Dominica was too small. Everybody knew everybody. *Yes, I'm on vacation,* she answered them, wondering which ones already knew that she no longer worked at Waitukubuli Realty.

Thoughts of Tessanne kept popping into her mind and she did not like the feeling she was getting. It was as if something was compelling her to find out what was happening with Tessanne. After Tyani exited the store where she bought spray paints and staples, she tried calling again. Still no answer. She considered sending her an email but Tessanne was not an email kind of person. She was resisting the panicky voice that was telling her that something probably had happened to Tessanne. Perhaps Tessanne had simply gone out and left her phone at home.

She texted Sasha, half expecting no reply.

- *Hey. Been trying to call Tessanne since last night but I cannot reach her.*
- *So?*
- *How you mean so? I'm concerned because she asked me to call her.*
- *So what? She was probably feeling bad about the wedding. Maybe she's away from her phone*
- *From since last night? I have a bad feeling.*
- *Tyani you always have a bad feeling. Go check on her if it will make you feel better. Personally I would not step foot in Stoney's house. Anyway, going to a meeting*

now... out of town so pick up Kyle from school. ttl.

Tyani hurried to the bayfront, where she had parked, wishing Sasha and Josephine would show more concern for Tessanne. She wished Tessanne would show more concern for them too. Sometimes she behaved as if her actions did not have consequences, like agreeing for her children to be part of the bridal party and pulling out after Sasha had purchased everything the children needed. It was concerning how she was reluctant to stand up to Stoney; the children were hers too. Tyani chided herself. Who was she to judge Tessanne? Afterall, didn't she stay with Brent for nine years, hoping that he would see her, value her? And who was she to judge her mother and Sasha? If Tessanne had not left a voicemail, most likely she would have gone about her day, without trying to contact her. She was no different from Josephine or Sasha. Her stomach clenched, because she had made up her mind that she would try to change that. She would bridge those gaps, and be there for her sisters in a more meaningful way. They were family, and families were supposed to look out for each other; and if they all kept their distance, how would they look out?

Tyani put her plans about looking for the gold and blue fabric on hold. She drove along the bayfront, passed Fort Young Hotel and DBS Radio, onto High Street, onto Bath Road and through the Botanic Gardens. The hot season had scorched the usually verdant grass to a dull brown, and the trees stood still. She crossed the Bath Estate bridge into the Roseau Valley, and glimpsed the river gliding around the bend, clear and inviting. The thought that something bad may have happened cemented in her mind, causing knots to form in her stomach. Tyani's heart pounded as she drove through the valley, the river now alongside the main road, going in an opposite direction from her. She glanced at the clouds that sat above Laudat and Trafalgar in the near distance, a usual view given their altitude above sea level.

Cool breeze from the mountains rushed into the car as Tyani traversed the narrow, winding

roads, wishing there were fewer corners. When she got to the short stretch of road in Copthall, she dipped her accelerator and gripped the steering wheel as she lurched forward. She probably should have realized sooner that something wasn't right. Since when did Tessanne call her twice in one week, much less for twice in one day? She should not have wasted time burning clothes and giving so much energy to her situation with Brent. Conniving Brent. Tyani sucked her teeth. She shifted her automatic stick into a lower gear as she approached Tessanne's gap, and inhaled deeply as the vehicle slowed and she drove off the main road onto the slight decline that led to the Adlers' driveway. She did not pause to admire the house like she had done on the rare occasions she had been there nor did she remain in her vehicle to compose herself or think about how she would deal with Stoney. Without switching off her ignition, without closing her car, she ran to the front door and pounded on it. She had never been to this house uninvited, and a cloud of shame and regret settled above her head. They really needed to improve things.

Nobody answered the door, and Tyani looked around her. It was so quiet, unlike her community that carried voices and sounds throughout the day. Tessanne's house stood on its own, secluded on forty acres of land, and Tyani could not identify where the closest neighbor could have been, because of the dense vegetation. The car that Tessanne usually drove was in the garage, dusty, its tires missing air. Stoney's car was not there and Tyani reminded herself it was Monday morning and most people were at work. But what if Stoney had returned to the house and he was in there waiting for her? A cold shiver ran down Tyani's spine as she imagined him crouched somewhere, a sneer on his scarred face.

Tyani dismissed the thought and she banged the front door again, with closed fists. "Tessanne! Tessanne! You there?"

Moments later, Tyani walked around the house, listening for any sound within. The place

was quiet, like a cemetery. She went back to her car and switched it off so she would hear if Tessanne called out. She had not replied to Tyani's text and she still was not answering her phone. Tyani sat there wondering whether she should call the police. But what would she tell them? That she could not reach her sister whom she barely spoke to? What if they asked about Tessanne's routine? What would she say? The idea of calling faded; it sounded ridiculous, even to her. Tyani was thinking about calling Stoney too, but she knew him well enough to suspect that whatever was going on with Tessanne may have had something to do with him.

Tyani locked her car and went around the house, to the side facing the river. She tried the side door there, and to her amazement, the handle slid freely along its spindle and just like that, she was within the walls of the house. For a moment Tyani felt like an intruder and panic rose in her throat, feeling as if Stoney was sitting somewhere looking at her. She gingerly stepped onto the threshold that separated the kitchen and the dining room, her heart racing within her ribcage.

"Tessanne?" Her voice was tentative. She observed the kitchen, bits of cereal trailing on the countertop, an opened can of milk near the sink. A teapot was on the stove, the used tea bags still inside it, crumpled and wet. She looked at the table where two plastic bowls sat, the Ninja Turtles bowl almost empty, the one printed with Princess Tiana barely touched.

Perhaps she was overthinking things, and Tessanne and Stoney had gone out that morning, perfectly content with their lives.

"Tessanne?"

She climbed the stairs, still feeling apprehensive, but calling Tessanne a little louder as she went. Tyani tried two different doors before she got to the master bedroom. She saw Tessanne curled on the bed, naked, and she stifled a scream when she saw her sister's disfigured face.

*

The grey walls could hear the blood pumping through Tyani's veins. She was sure of it, just as she was sure that the utterances coming out of Tessanne's swollen mouth were lies. The otolaryngologist knew it too, because he asked her to explain again how she had slipped on wet tiles and banged her face on an open door. His bushy eyebrows were raised, his expression stern, and Tyani hoped he would file a battery report, in spite of Tessanne's lies. Her right eye was so small and red, Tyani wondered if she could see with it. Looking at Tessanne's clasped hands shaking in her lap, Tyani's heart raced with a mixture of sorrow, pity, anger and regret, feeling like she should have been more in touch, paid closer attention. Tessanne's bulging face was almost unrecognizable, as though she'd stuffed her mouth with cloth. Tyani understood now why people referred to battered skin as black and blue because that is how her sister's face looked - black and blue. And purplish.

"Can you give us a moment alone, sis?" the doctor asked Tyani.

Tyani wanted to tell him to stop calling her 'sis' and anything he had to say to Tessanne could be said in front of her, but she nodded and stepped out of the room. His name was Dr. Delaunay, a local, and she wondered how come there was no ring on his finger, no sign of having worn one, considering how good-looking he was.

She walked the short corridor to the reception area and found an empty seat in the lounge. Mere seconds later, she went to stand near Dr. Delaunay's office, and when she did not find any solace from standing, she paced the hallway. Her footsteps were light, deliberately so because in the silence of the space, the squeaking of her sandals on the ceramic tiles was amplified. There were two doors on either side of the hallway and one at the end; plain white doors with name plates inserted into hard plastic holders. Examination Room 1. Examination Room 2. Restroom. Staff Only. Surgery. A light bulb flickered above her and she looked up at the encased lamps. They were

similar to those in her office at Waitukubuli Realty. Not her office anymore, she reminded herself. Her office was now her back patio.

“Excuse me,” a hoarse voice startled Tyani. “Hallway is not a place to loiter.”

Embarrassed, she stepped aside as an elderly lady shuffled to the washroom. Tyani paused by Examination Room 1 where Tessanne was. How did hitting her face on the door cause so much disfiguration and discoloration? This had to be Stoney’s doing, and Tyani wondered what was going on in that house in Copthall. She wondered if this was a onetime incident, if Tessanne and the children were safe. She got her Blackberry out of her purse and searched for Jodi’s number. Her finger hovered over the call key, and she put the phone away, feeling a certain sense of guilt for considering initiating that conversation with a fifteen-year-old. She needed the answers from Tessanne. But Tessanne was protecting Stoney and Tyani did not understand why.

Tyani went back to the waiting area and sat near a small aquarium with two fish swimming among fake leaves and pretty stones. One fish was orange and one was black. She thought of the aquarium they kept at Waitukubuli Realty. It was a good thing she wasn’t at work anymore, a good thing she was available to check on Tessanne. When Tyani had found her earlier, she was groaning and mumbling, barely able to communicate that she was dizzy. Tessanne’s gait was so unsteady, Tyani was afraid she would hurt herself again, and she guided her into the shower stall and gently washed her body. She flinched often, and Tyani didn’t know whether it was out of habit or whether she was protecting her bruised face. Her hands shook too, as if uncontrollably.

“If Stoney did this I can take you to the police station right now to file a report,” Tyani had said to her.

“R-por?” Tessanne answered, unable to articulate her words.

It took Tyani a while to understand that Tessanne had not processed what she’d said,

because she had not heard her properly. She repeated herself, louder. But Tessanne shook her head. No. It wasn't Stoney.

“So why didn't he take you to the hospital?” Tyani pressed, shouting above the water's hiss.

“Wan' there.” Tessanne's voice sounded distorted, like a tape recording someone had altered to make a voice unrecognizable.

Tyani could see the effort it took for her to speak but she still wanted to know more. “Why didn't you call him? Or one of us?”

Tessanne did not answer, and winced as Tyani patted her dry.

“When did it happen?” Tyani pressed.

Tessanne remained silent and Tyani let her be. Although she was fuming inside, she dressed her sister in silence, a shapeless cotton dress that was easy to slip on and off. They drove to the doctor's office in silence. It was pure luck they had gotten squeezed in, because Sasha was the secretary's friend and she had texted her. Tyani wondered if Tessanne would have reached out to them at all, or if she would have stayed at the house on her own in such distress.

In the waiting area, Tyani sat twisting the end of her braid. She observed the fish swimming, content in their contained space, and oblivious to the wider world. Some human beings were like that too - content in their contained spaces, oblivious to the rest of the world. Tessanne was like that with Stoney, in a contained space. Maybe she too had been like that with Brent. And maybe it would not be such a bad thing if they were content in these spaces, if they were safe in these spaces. But was being oblivious to the rest of the world a good thing? Was being so nestled in spaces, though safe, a good thing? Sasha wasn't so nestled and she seemed happy. Sasha was like a butterfly; she did not relish the idea of being cocooned like Tyani and Tessanne. She allowed

herself to roam and explore the wider world, refusing to be contained. Yet, she was the one getting married. Wasn't marriage containment? Perhaps she and Jason had their understanding and her containment would be a content one; or perhaps their understanding was one of no contained space, but a contented freedom.

Tyani massaged the space between her brows. She was happy for Sasha, she was. She just couldn't help the pang of envy she felt whenever her mind strayed to the upcoming wedding. Her contained space could have been a content one, if only Brent would allow himself the freedom to enjoy it. Or perhaps there was no contentment to be gained in containment. Perhaps the happy people were those who permitted themselves to be free.

Tyani was about to go pacing again when Tessanne emerged from the hallway, wobbly on her feet, and a small paper in her shaking hand. Maybe a prescription. Dr. Delauney was behind her, imposing, his body taller and broader than Tyani had realized. He guided Tessanne to the receptionist's desk and gestured as he spoke in low tones.

Tyani stood and remained where she was, unsure of approaching the desk, not knowing whether she was privy to the conversation. Would Dr. Delauney report the incident to the police? She wanted to know what they were discussing and wondered whether Tessanne could hear them well enough. She wished she could see her sister's face so she could read her expression, but Tessanne's back was to her and Dr. Delauney's countenance gave nothing away.

Tyani realized she was playing with her braid and released it. Her eyes found the doctor's and she shifted her weight from one hip to the next as his gaze held hers. When he said 'come, sis' Tyani feigned nonchalance as she walked across the floor, self-conscious, his charcoal black eyes fixed on hers.

"We have set an appointment for one week from today. Tessanne said ten o'clock is good

for her. Ok?”

Tyani nodded. She would take Tessanne herself.

The doctor asked his secretary to pencil in the appointment. He spoke to Tessanne. “Remember, cold compresses and pure aloe for our face. We will need to avoid loud sounds or noise in the next few weeks. And no water should get into the ear.” He spoke in a collective voice, as if he shared in the effort. His eyes shifted to Tyani’s. “She’ll regain her hearing over the next few days considering she sticks to what we discussed.”

Tyani did not fully grasp what was wrong with Tessanne’s ear, but nodded anyway. She was more concerned about the swelling and discoloration on Tessanne’s face and whether Dr. Delauney would file a report.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” Tyani found herself asking, hesitant to speak in front of the secretary, and the other patients.

He said sure with a lop-sided smile, showing no teeth, and they stepped away from the desk, to the hallway.

“I - um - I. What exactly is wrong with her ear?” she asked.

“Her eardrum has a slight perforation, a tiny rupture, most likely from the trauma, but it will heal within the next few weeks, with antibiotics.”

Tyani felt as if he’d reached inside her stomach and twisted it. A ruptured eardrum? How on earth does someone get a ruptured eardrum? The swelling and discoloration seemed insignificant in comparison.

“I am not very worried about it. It will heal soon enough. It’s what caused it that I am concerned about.”

Tyani lowered her voice. “Do you report these things?”

“Depends. She says it’s the door.” He interlocked his fingers and lowered his voice too. “Is Tessanne in a precarious situation?”

Tyani shook her head and raised her shoulders. “I really don’t know.”

“I suggest you keep your eyes open, Sis.”

“Yes,” she said. “And my name is Tyani.”

He smiled. A full smile showing a small gap between perfectly straight teeth. He held out his hand. “Nice to meet you, Tyani. I’m Ryan.”

Tyani shook his hand. “My pleasure.”

“See you next week?”

“Mm-hmm. Bye.”

“Bye Tyani.”

Tyani walked to the receptionist’s desk to meet Tessanne feeling something like sexiness, a feeling she had not experienced in a long time. At the same time, it was a feeling of excitement and before she reached Tessanne, it was a feeling of guilt and shame. Did she just throw herself at a man she’d just met? It was something Maya would have given her a high-five for, because Tyani’s flirtation with someone else would mean that she’d forgotten about Brent for just a little while.

The disfiguration gave Tessanne’s face a perpetual scowl making it difficult for Tyani to read her expression. She refused Tyani’s offer to help her walk out of her office to the car. Tyani watched her grip the metal railing as they descended the stairs, afraid that her vision was so limited that she would miss a step.

In the car, Tessanne was quiet. It must have been difficult for her, being in public with her face so disfigured, her speech and hearing impaired, and being questioned about her situation.

Tyani was itching to question her further and although she realized she needed to bide her time, she felt a discomfort there, as if asking Tessanne about personal matters was invasive.

“Are you and the children going to be ok at your house, Tess? You can come by us if you want.”

Tessanne was looking out the window, and Tyani almost missed her reply, “we good” because it sounded like ‘wigoo.’

“I’ll take you to your follow-up visit next week.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Their disconnect was palpable. It had marinated over time in silences, grudges, neglect, pride and all the elements that had shifted their dynamic. Tyani wanted to remove those elements and to feel again what she’d felt long ago, a love that was pure and requited. As she drove, the compulsion she’d been feeling to fix things solidified within her, and suddenly, she understood what it must feel like to be called.

“You can contact me, Tess. If you - you know - if you want to talk.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Where is your phone?” Tyani asked, suddenly realizing that she had not seen Tessanne with her phone at all.

Tessanne lifted her shoulders and gestured that she didn’t know. A sick feeling washed over Tyani, and her gut was telling her that Stoney had probably taken Tessanne’s phone.

When they got to the house, Jodi was already home from school and she shrieked in horror when she saw Tessanne. Tyani fought tears as the child gently folded herself into her mother’s body like a chick under a hen’s wings.

“W’appen to your face Tessanne?”

“Door,” Tessanne repeated, sounding like ‘or.’ She disentangled her body from her daughter’s and tarried up the stairs, leaving Jodi dumbfounded.

Using a paper towel, Jodi wiped the beads of sweat on her face. When she was somewhat recovered, Tyani asked her about the twins.

“They have karate today. Their father will bring them home.” She looked towards the stairs and then she whispered to Tyani as if in conspiracy. “Something nuh right with Tessanne because just a few weeks ago she had an accident. It wasn’t as bad as that but her eye was black.”

Tyani struggled to swallow. Her mouth was dry. Tessanne was in an abusive situation.

“Do you - do you feel safe here?” She was hesitant to engage Jodi in that type of conversation but she was compelled, as if she had no choice.

“How you mean?”

“Like, do you feel threatened by Stoney?”

“No no. My mother, maybe. Because they argue a lot. But not me. Most times I’m in my room so we hardly speak. And he is really protective of Jarvid and Joy.”

Tyani nodded. “Take care of your mother this week, ok? And help her to look for her phone please.”

“Yeah,” Jodi said and she moved on to another topic that held more excitement for her, filling in Tyani about Tessanne’s decision to let her be part of Sasha’s bridal party.

“Ok,” Tyani smiled at her niece, wondering if this was the reason Tessanne had called her back. They chatted some more and Tyani left, feeling somewhat comfortable with Jodi’s responsible nature.