When We Lost Our Crowns

by

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**THE BEAUTIFUL GAME**

“Is she ignoring us? Hello, ma’am,” Papi tried his best to flag the waitress down. The waitress was clearly busy, overwhelmed by the influx of customers that arrived soon after the ceremony. Papi’s expression screamed indignation that someone would dare ignore his family at the celebration dinner for his son’s graduation. Papi smiled at his children, trying to pretend he had the valuable patient value his children should inherit.

Papi was emitting a predatory optimism that made Delen nervous. Was Papi over-compensating for the inkling of doubt he had about his son’s future success? The seed of doubt made possible by the less than perfect execution of Delen’s plan?

Gloria’s stoically bright expression remained tattooed on her face while Belind stared at Delen with an investigative glare. The Korean restaurant’s giant menu served as the perfect shield to any facial clues that might give away Delen’s secret.

The waitress finally arrived at their table with a pad.

“What can I get you?” she asked.

“I thought you’d forgotten about us,” Papi said removing his glasses, which he used to read anything below twenty-four point font, “do you have any spicy fish dishes?”

Delen had already pointed out all the fish dishes on the menu, but Papi was skeptical of Delen’s ability to decipher the Hangul, despite the English translations directly under the Korean. Anything under twelve point font must be read with skepticism.
“Yes our--,”

“Mackerel and jjampong,” Belind interrupted the waitress glaring at Papi with a stare that said ‘yeah, she’s going to tell you exactly what we told you five times’.

“I’ll take the mackerel then,” Papi said handing over the menu. Immediately after the last syllable left Papi’s mouth, Belind gave her order.

“I’ll take the jjampong,” she said.

“Uhhh, I’ll get the bulgogi and some shrimp tempura as an appetizer for the table,” Delen said.

There was a brief and awkward pause as Gloria took a breath as she deliberated on her order.

“I’ll take the….actually, I’ll just share Delen’s bulgogi,” Gloria seemed to regret her decision as soon as the waitress reached for the menu. A mini tug-of-war ensued until Gloria acquiesced and gave a performative satisfied smile.

“And hurry please,” Papi said as the waitress turned around.

“Ahhh, it’s so good to be here with all my children,” Papi said pinching Belind’s cheek, “You’ve lost some weight. Good, you don’t look good with a round face. I hope you lose some more with all the New York City walking. And you’ve gained some weight Delen. Looks nice. Just make sure you’re adding muscle weight, not fat.”

It was supposed to be a compliment, but Delen and Belind could only look at their laps with a sense of shame about how much their father was concerned about the
aesthetics of his children. At twenty-four, Delen thought it wasn’t appropriate for a parent to be so invested in the muscle/fat ratio of his children. When they went to soccer games as kids, Papi would remind them how lucky he was that his children looked normal and not as ugly as some of the kids they played with. For his part, Papi kept a perfectly toned body that rippled with muscles on his chest and arms. Hence, the fish to help maintain the protein and carbohydrate balance.

“What about me?” Gloria, the youngest one, beamed.

“You’re perfect mon cheri,” Papi said pulling at one of long curls that hovered over her shoulder.

“So Papi, how’s work?” Gloria said dipping into the plate of shrimp tempura that just arrived. Gloria had always been his favorite, for reasons still unknown.

“Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’ve been promoted!” Papi exclaimed expecting a vibrant response from his children. After a delayed processing, the kids gave a series of ‘congratulations’, ‘félicitations’, and ‘promoted to what’.

“Thank you, but my promotion includes a surprise! Guess what?”

“I don’t like guessing,” Belind said.

“I’m getting an awesome graduation gift?” Delen inquired.

“You got us a car!” Gloria said more as a statement than a question.
“None of those. I’m moving back to Haiti!” Papi said shoving a shrimp tempura in his mouth. Belind opened her mouth as if to say something, but then closed it. Delen mouthed wow and Gloria asked the question most relevant to her.

“Wait, so what am I supposed to do for school breaks?”

“We’ll figure it all out, but I just closed on the house and will be in my new house in Haiti in two weeks.

“TWO WEEKS?!”

“You sold the house? We didn’t even know you were selling it!”

“Are you serious?”

“Very serious. Look, it’s important to return back so that I can give back to our people.”

“But what about us?” Belind asked, showing for the first time fear about their father’s move.

“Stop being so selfish. You have to learn that somethings in life require sacrifice. Yeah, it’ll be uncomfortable for a little bit, but it’ll be great. Now you don’t need to take separate vacations to visit me and everyone else in the family.”

The news made Delen think that all the struggle he went through to fake his graduation was futile. He waited in an airport for his fake baggage for Christ’s sake. Delen let out an exasperated sigh.
“Okay, but Papi, how does moving to Haiti mean you’re getting a promotion?” Delen asked.

“Good question,” Papi said wringing his hand in that nervous way that indicated he was about to tell a huge lie.

“Turns out the bank needs someone who can speak Spanish, French, and Creole to facilitate the commercial business loans on Hispaniola. It turns out that I have the perfect qualifications, so I applied and voila! I got the promotion.”

“Are being paid in goudes or dollars?” Belind asked.

“Goudes,” Papi said, knowing that Belind was able to infer what the promotion really meant.

“Okay, but you still haven’t answered my question about school vacations,” Gloria whined. Papi ignored her.

“So kids, I’m going to need your help cleaning out the house. The new owners want to paint it before they move in, so tomorrow morning we’re going to drive to Ft. Lauderdale and get everything sorted. I also want to know if one of you can help me download all the CDs to the internet.”

“Songs aren’t downloaded to the internet, they’re converted to digital files and then available to download on your computer or your phone,” Belind corrected him.

“So are going to help me do that or……,” Papi eyes noted his dissatisfaction at Belind’s newfound adult boldness. Belind bravely returned the gaze with a hard stare, then her features relaxed.
“Actually, there might be a pitch in there. Yeah, I’ll do it,” Papi nodded like he knew what a pitch was and why it was relevant to downloading CDs.

Suddenly, Sebastian, Delen’s roommate, burst through the restaurant door. The Orlando sun seemed to block out his wide figure until he was directly at the table staring at the family. He wore a crooked graduation cap and an open robe that revealed a dirty sweater and sweatpants ensemble.

“Wow, what a coincidence to see you here Delen. I was just telling my girlfriend how great of a graduation meal Bimbop was and how shocking to find you here as well, graduated peer,” Sebastian was panting as sweat threatened to fall from his brow. A patch of cat fur floated around Sebastian’s neck. Delen made hand gestures to Sebastian so he would calm down on the graduation act.

“Sebastian! Nice to see you. I wish you were an engineer too so I could have seen you walk. Here have a seat while you wait for your family,” Papi said making invisible room for Sebastian to sit.

“Thanks, Mr. Moreau, you’re such a generous and understanding gentleman.”

“What a natural speech pattern you’ve acquired there Sea-bass,” Belind said as Sebastian squeezed his way onto the table.

“Yes, Belind, I am delighted to be here at a graduation celebration with my best bud, Delen,” Sebastian gave Delen a kiss on the forehead which proved all too much for Belind.

“Papi, are you not seeing any of this, doesn’t it smell fishy to you?”
“Yes, my mackerel is here!” Papi exclaimed as a hot plate of a whole fish and vegetables was placed in front of him. Delen snuck Belind a middle finger which Belind returned with double middle fingers.

They finished their meal with minimal conflict. Gloria remained uncharacteristically quiet throughout the whole affair, while Belind simply looked annoyed. Sebastian and Delen exchanged congratulatory glances, feeling on top of the world for having gotten away with their white collar crime.

After the dinner, Delen drove Belind and Gloria to see their mother at her apartment. Mummy had already cut out the graduation announcement and was trying to fit it in a too small frame. Gloria helped Mummy while Delen and Belind packed their things.

“You’re so full of shit,” Belind spewed as soon as they were out of earshot from Mummy.

“Yeah, well at least I’m making good money and not wasting time trying to be an artiste,” Delen said artist as if it were a slur.

“No, you dumbass, I’m not trying to be an artist. I am carefully balancing my passion for writing and a career in a more lucrative career in marketing or art business. At least I can show potential employers a diploma to prove my credentials.”

“That diploma doesn’t mean much when you look at your bank account, now does it?”
Belind rolled her eyes and walked to the other side of the room. Delen knew the war wasn’t over, but for now, at least he won the battle.

Delen drove back to his apartment in downtown Orlando. Downtown Orlando screamed of a wanna-be Wall Street, trying to contrast as much as possible with the gaudy decor of the theme park neighborhood of the city. Upon arriving in his apartment, Sebastian greeted him with a huge hug.

“We did it!”

“Barely,” Delen said collapsing into the couch.

“Yo, your pops was so fooled. He was all about that kiss-ass action too.”

“Sea-bass, don’t say that. That doesn’t sound right.”

“Yeah, yeah, but dude, like you’re free. You’re really really free.”

Suddenly, Delen stood up and looked for Gambino, his cat.

“Hey, where’s Gambino?”

“He’s been hiding in the cat tree since I got home. Won’t eat or play, just sitting there.”

Delen went to peek into the cat tree where the kitten smashed its face into the carpet interior of the fixture. For a minute, Delen was convinced Gambino wasn’t breathing, but then a small rise of the chest gave the sign that Gambino was still alive.
“This morning was so crazy, I really thought we’d lose you buddy,” Delen said petting Gambino’s head. Gambino burrowed his face further into the carpet.

The plan was simple. Pretend that Delen had a business trip in Dallas that conflicted with his graduation that jeopardized his attendance. Except the morning of the fake flight, Gambino got caught in the shoelaces of Delen’s work shoes. Usually Delen did a good job of making sure his shoes were in his closet, but that day he was so nervous about the graduation that he just kept them at the door. The cat woke Delen and Sebastian with a loud life-threatening scream. Already half-awake, Delen rolled out to find Gambino in an impossible fight with the complex knots of his shoe laces. The cat moved too much and made it impossible for Delen to set him free. Scratches marked his struggle along both his forearms. Sebastian gave it a try and managed to only make matters work, as the cat began visibly asphyxiating.

Delen’s final solution was to take the cat to the local veterinary office. Sebastian ripped off his sweatshirt and wrapped the kitten in it, while he ran out the house shirtless. The veterinarian seemed unsurprised to find a shirtless man, his black friend, and a nearly dead kitten in his office. Calmly and with one swift cut, the veterinarian set Gambino free. For a while Gambino just stared at the wall, as if surprised he was still alive. Then he let out a low-shaky meow that made Sebastian and Delen hug in relief. Delen had thought pet insurance was overkill, but after paying $543 for a doctor to cut some string, Delen made a mental note to sign up for pet insurance as soon as he could.

Since they were already close to the highway, Delen and Sebastian went to the airport to go through the motions of the fake flight. Sebastian stuffed Gambino into his
sweatshirt as they ate donuts at baggage claim. There was no use in pretending to miss the graduation. Delen had decided to fess up to his parents, but his family had somehow found a way into stadium even though he had not given them their tickets. He had to meet them at the stadium or he couldn’t confront them at all.

Delen forced his way into one of the seats, his classmates taking it in stride since he was a familiar face. Delen was only six credits away from qualifying for graduation, but had already taken six years to get this far. His parents were getting antsy and after delaying graduation for two years, Delen thought it might be easier to fake his graduation. But here he was, sitting in the chair, waiting for that awkward moment when his name wasn’t called and he had to go back to the seats and explain to his expectant family.

The M’s were called to stand up and Delen went through the motions of standing in alphabetical order. To his surprise his name was called. He heard a WOOP and saw Sebastian, just as surprised, yelling from his seat. Delen’s mother stood up like a dignified royal, as if she were the one being honored. Papi had always called her the Queen of Haiti. Papi somehow felt waving a Haitian flag was appropriate for this moment, though it had little to nothing to do with his graduation. However, upon reflection, the Haitian flag seemed to be the harbinger of news to come.

Delen knew that eventually he’d get around to actually finishing those nine credits, but in the meantime, he just wished he was able to tell his parents the truth. He was making more money than his sister who graduated from the Ivy League, and yet he still felt ashamed. Why? Ultimately, degrees were put on their pedestal for their ability to
provide financial mobility, so if Delen achieved financial success without the degree, what did it matter that he didn’t have one?

His resentment toward his sister fermented as he thought of her freedom to be mediocre and self-serving, while he was the family butler and mediator. It wasn’t fair that her SAT score absolved from being practical. It wasn’t fair that his hard work was seen as less significant than her barely trying.

“Hey Delen!” Sebastian yelled from the kitchen.

“Yeah?”

“A package just came for you.”

Delen went to the living room, where he found a large rectangle box. Maybe it was Papi’s graduation gift. Delen ripped it open to find pencil sketch of Pelé, the Brazilian soccer player. On the back of the canvas was a note that read:

I was scared the Megabus people wouldn’t let me take this, so I mailed it to you. I know you haven’t played soccer in a while, but you were such a legend in Ft. Lauderdale. I mentioned your name in class and some kid actually remembered you from the state semi-finals. Drew this at my new job and thought you might enjoy it. Congratulations Dele!

-Gloria

Delen looked at the sketch and remembered the last time he was respected. Really respected. He was the forward of his varsity soccer team and had scored enough goals to qualify his team for the state championship. The school’s sports program was poorly
funded, so the team became the feel-good story of local Florida news. People started donating so the team could pay for transportation, new uniforms, and shoes. They tied in the semi-finals and the game went to penalty kicks. Of course, Delen was given the task of shooting. The teams were 2-2 and Delen had the last shot. The crowd started chanting ‘Pelé, Pelé, Pelé’ and Delen felt pressured to properly dignify to the inventor of the beautiful game. Delen feigned an upper left shot that he morphed into an outside of foot ground shot. The goalie was baffled as the ball slowly rolled behind the white line.

The crowd roared. The underdogs had proved their worth. Delen was hoisted onto his teammates shoulders and water was dumped on his back. The following summer, Delen tried for the scouting circuit for the U-17 US Soccer team. The local feeder team, United F.C., held bi-annual invite only try-outs. The stamina, speed, and agility of the other contenders winded Delen. He left the try-out, his pride more damaged than his calves. He was offered an alternative spot on the team, because the coach thought his skills would be beneficial for team scrimmages. But Delen wouldn’t be able to try-out for the USA team, as only the top five starters were given the opportunity to try-out for the national team. He was suddenly at the bottom rung and the idea of explaining to his peers that while he was on the team, he’d never be on the field felt embarrassing to him. So he made something up about trying to focus on a more stable career, given the statistics of sports injuries, the low-salaries of even the most talented American players, ceci, cela.

Delen stared at Pelé, knowing that if he didn’t hang it up now, it’d just stay buried in his closet. Delen battled with knowing whether he wanted that painful memory of who he once was staring at him everyday. But then he remembered Papi’s smile of sheer joy.
when he scored that goal. The kind of smile that tells you that you are loved and that the person who is smiling will do anything they can to be by your side.

Delen removed the last of the wrapping and yelled for Sebastian.

“Hey, could you help me get this up?”
THE SONGS OF HAITI

Draft 1

The 700,000 to 2,047 songs are a conglomeration of the adventures I had heard from my father. The Septine albums were burned onto blank CDs labeled with smeared permanent marker that told of their beginnings in the basement dark rooms of barbershop peddlers-vendors that created value out of the duplications of stolen pirated entertainment. The CDs with pictures of voluptuous light-skinned white women on the beach heralding the sexuality of Konpa. And the Rastafarian locs framing the strong jaws of the Haitian musical artists.

Today, CDs have become nearly obsolete. They are remnants of a close past that passed quickly and vanished without warning. My father now sees the efficiency in the new MP3 lifestyle that his children had acquired in their early teens. He has requested that I, his chore reluctant resentful envious technology-impaired daughter, download all the music from his CDs into digital files as insurance should anything happen to his CDs during his move to Haiti.

My father’s return to Haiti serves as an omen of a homecoming, not only for him, but for his ego as well. The one step removed from migration that makes me first generation becomes half a step, as now when I tell people where I go home to I say Tampa Fort Lauderdale New Jersey Satan’s Hell Haiti.

I thought downloading the songs would be annoying as fuck easy, but since none of the individual songs are labeled digitally, I had to listen to most of the tracks to ensure they were labeled decently correctly accurately.
With each track, I realized how the songs were a part of my father’s obsessions hypocrisy narrative. How those long road trips that were cheap unscheduled mini-experiments of survival of the fittest listening to the eclectic music selection enhanced our connection to my father and to what he portrayed believed.

Michel Sardou’s crooning French arias reflected my father’s formal French education from the order of Jesuit priests who had been in Haiti since French colonization. Sardou was both aware and ignorant to the power of vibrato, never knowing when it was ‘too’ much.

Bob Marley sang black liberations anthems that white people used as background noise to get high to my father used as maps to his foolish redistributive and generous habits. My father was willing to share everything he had until he had nothing to share to further his quest equalize our people. Our house was always open to the abusive cacophony of cousins who were children of the never-met fifteen brothers and sisters of my parents. I wondered if the ones who simply existed as Haitian voices over the phone even existed.

Belind heard the faint arguing of her landlords upstairs Their argument randomly crescendoed to a loud cymbolic yell. She had already pitched this idea for an article to an editor who showed lukewarm interest. Belind felt again that this writer’s attempt to conjure relevant stories from thin air was forced and self-indulgent. The type of self-indulgence that her father had always scorned as one of the flaws of American culture. Was it true that Belind’s father had asked her to download all his CDs into digital files?
Yes. Was it true that Belind loved Haiti and all the invariable side effect of living there? No.

Belind’s positive memories of Haiti only extended as far as the food, sane family members, and consistent weather provided. Her last memory was of the summer before, when the overcrowded Touissant airport had three-hour security lines and over four-hour delays. The flight attendants looked at the Haitian passengers with disdain, as sweat soaked through their Sunday best attire. The airline refused to give anyone water until the plane was in-flight, claiming that they had no responsibility for the horrible conditions of the airport from which they came. Belind had been on plenty of domestic flights in which flight attendants were more than happy to assist passengers as soon as they entered the airplane. But Haitians were regarded as though they had unnecessary entitlement to things like water and food.

It was this same disdain that embarrassed Belind. The attendants could not see she was American as she muttered Creole affirmations to the distressed baby waiting in front of her. That it didn’t really matter what passport she carried, because her genetic pool was made up of the blood of inferior people.

Beyond the shame, there was simply the pain. The pain of a mother whose distance was emotional, physical, and visual. A father who was constantly running away but holding tight as he could to his leash on his children. Dead bodies buried under bodies, under bodies, and then some more bodies, as space in the cemetery reached capacity. Of uncles who once pinched your face and traveled to the other side of Port-au-
Prince to get you favorite mangoes, only to be shot and killed in a vaguely described feud.

But God forbid she allow the audience of this random publication to know that. Belind curated her words to express the perfect balance of pride of pity that seemed to appease the emotional palates of self-described liberal people.

Belind could not shake the fact that this whole story felt like exploitation. She had no intention to share the story with her father or share the payment with him, or more importantly the Haitian people. Belind felt like she was writing an edited version of her pain in order to achieve recognition from a fickle industry. That writers in general were grasping at anything that differentiated them, rather than consider what the world really needed to hear.

Draft 2

This is where you place the burden on me to ensure you that Haiti is not a shithole. Where you ask me to list my accomplishments and the accomplishments of my nationfolk to remind you why we are worthy of respect. This is where I taunt you with the memories of beautiful tap-tap buses, waterfalls that flow into clear blue hot springs, and I praise the wonder of gryo avex diri ac souce poi. This is where I perform my token duty to make you feel some sort of proximity to Haiti that you didn’t have before reading this article.

And this is where my fellow Haitian-Americans roll their eyes at the performative scramble for everyone to suddenly remember their token Haitian acquaintance. This is where you tell me to temper my resentment and be more understanding of the people who
have no desire to truly understand me. This is where you tell me to temper my resentment and be more understanding of the people who have no desire to understand me.

Most of the people who open their mouth to say something spicy about Haiti have never been there. They have only interacted with Haitian people. Which means that all the yap about hating the state of the country because of its financial condition makes no sense. They hate the representatives. The Haitian people themselves. So yes, it’s only a shithole, but I assure, the only people who get to call it that are Haitians themselves.

Belind got a call. God bless, because this draft wasn’t going anywhere. Gloria, her little sister, was making her monthly plea. As embarrassed as Belind was to admit it, she was always happy to get these calls from her sister, even if it only amounted to a sheepish request for money.

“Hello?” Belind answered.

“Yeah, it’s Gloria,” Gloria’s disinterested affect hissed.

An awkward pause.

“So how’s the art thing going?” Gloria asked.

“Okay, how’s school?” Belind responded, afraid to share her emotions to someone who shared the same trauma.

“Good…..yeah, everything’s good,” Gloria said trying to force Belind to ask the question.
“You need some money?” the ice broke and the purpose of the call revealed.

“Yeah, Mummy hasn’t been answering her calls and Delen already helped me file a loan for last semester….“

“How much do you need?” Belind asked, opening a tab to her bank website to check her account.

“Just $200, so I can get through until my next paycheck. I paid the tuition bill with my savings like you suggested,” Gloria said referring to the year of the stalemate where both parents refused to pay tuition until the other admitted to financial indiscretion. The stalemate happened while Gloria was in her first year of college and Belind was in her last. Whatever funds available went to ensuring Gloria had settled into school, while Belind and Delen were forced to fend for themselves. Fortunately, they raked up money from working non-stop during the summer. The incident imbued Belind with the sense that anytime making money would provide for a necessity in the future inevitable emergencies.

Belind knew Gloria’s $200 request really meant $500, because Gloria had that pride problem too. The type of pride that made even asking for help feel like a sickness. Additionally, Belind was worried because Gloria had a lot more trouble with focusing than Belind and worrying about an ever-depleting bank account was not the comfortable vision had for her sister. Belind was acutely aware of the things she could endure that her siblings could not.

“No problem. Just give it a while to transfer over,” Gloria said typing $500 into the transfer amount she would give to her sister from her scholarship funds. Belind
regarded her money as an extension of the love and affection she lacked from her parents. The lack of affection she was incapable of showing to anyone.

Belind remembered that there was $200 on the line for finishing this piece. It was times like these that Belind wished she was capable of having that anxiety that ensured people stress about impressing and conforming to peers. Her anxiety only kicked in when her bank account balance got low.

Draft 3

*In the first chapter of American Psyho, the character Timothy Price laments that it was the “inept Haitian cabbie” that cause him and Patrick Bateman to be late for an Upper West Side dinner party. It’s easy to dismiss this brief anecdote as a literary tool used to describe the racist demeanor of Timothy Price, but Ellis could only write it because it was a true sentiment felt by many people who belonged in the upper echelon of American capitalism. It fascinates me that the old guard American elite have this fascination with Haitians. Whether a fictional wealthy character or the real-life President of the United States, old guard 18 Americans just fucking hate Haitians. And no, they don’t the poverty in Haiti. They hate the Haitians themselves. That is why they disparage their presence in America, even if they wear the cloak of middle and upper-class Americans. It doesn’t matter. The hierarchy in which Haitians have to exist at the bottom of the totem pole is an obsession. It’s almost as if they aware that when given a true equal opportunity, Haitians will pulverize their entitled asses in a meritocratic competition. Haitians do nothing but mind their own business and somehow they belong*
to this rhetoric of resentment by the people who have so much more power on a global scale. Why? What can Haitians do to earn respect? Steal back all that was stolen from them? How could half an island cause so much conversation?

Belind shut off her laptop. There was no fucking way she going to be able to write something insightful and ‘appropriate for the times’ about Haiti. Belind would ghost the editor with the same willingness the editor would feel in ghosting her. She put her alarm for 6:17am and went to sleep hoping her nightmares didn’t keep her too far from rest.

LIGET

Joseph removed his hat and wiped sweat off his bald head. He gave his prepared soliloquy to his business partner, Stanley.

“As you can see, there are many duplexes within the area. Currently residents have to travel as far as Hialeah to get groceries. Developing a strip mall here would bring automatic demand. It’s a little rough on the eyes now, but a property built here could change the whole dynamic of the neighborhood.”

“Why are you speaking to me in English? Ou pa frè’m?”

Joseph had spent so much time perfecting his accent. He realized pretty quickly upon arrival to America that there was little appreciation for strong accents coming from
dark-skinned men. At first he tried copying his neighbor’s accent, but soon came to realize that black Americans also had accents dismissed by the likes of powerful people. It was white people he was to emulate. And he brought his newfound white people accent to all his business ventures. Even meetings with high school friends.

“Mon fre, I like the property, but we already got something on 23rd we’re trying to flip. This might be too much all at once.” Stanley said kicking loose rocks.

“No, no. We’ll take out a loan using that property as collateral. Look, the developers in Miami are like vultures. If we don’t snatch this up now, it’ll be way out of budget later. And this is our town. If anyone should be flipping properties in Little Haiti, it should be us.”

A screech was heard at the edge of the property. Joseph’s oldest daughter, Belind, was lifting her baby sister, Gloria, up.

“Her fingers got stuck in the fence,” Belind said huffing to bring the baby to her father. His son, Delen, ran behind his big sister, doing his best to be of help. The baby had recently been given back to their care. Joseph’s wife thought it best to leave the newborn with her sister in Orlando for a two years so they could get their finances in order before being burdened with yet another dependent.

“Romi ever going to give you break with the kids?” Stanley said as Joseph picked up and comforted the baby.

“We share duties, Stanley. She works at the hospice on the weekends and her mother’s visa expired last month.”
Joseph conveniently left out the part where he was starting to feel anxious about relying so heavily on the help of other people to raise his children. Everyone else seemed to be adjusting to America so quickly, but he and Romi seemed stuck in vortex of less than sufficient jobs that made it difficult to even put a down payment on a house. Joseph considered himself an intellectual man and wasn’t satisfied with the teller positions he was getting at local banks. He went to the number one business university in Haiti, but that didn’t count for jack-shit here. Employers see Haiti and immediately consider the degree inferior. Joseph convinced Romi to allow him to enroll in an American university on a loan so that maybe people would take him more seriously in his job applications.

“Stanley, let’s lay out a game plan,” Joseph said giving the baby to Belind and taking out a small legal pad and pen.

“We buy this property. Then we push both properties to be developed by a contractor, but managed by us. By 2007, we should have the foundations down and then in 2008, we’ll work to get the spaces occupied for a grand opening. We’ll make nearly double return on investment and by then, the interest on our loan will hardly be at 3%.”

Stanley sighed.

“When you think you’ve got a good plan, there’s no convincing you. I’ll sign the contract.”

Joseph smiled with glee giving Stanley a firm and affectionate handshake. Joseph was on the brink of greatness. He could just feel it.
“Okay, I gotta go to class, but you’ll be at soccer later, yeah?” Joseph said to Stanley, loading his kids into the new Nissan Altima he leased for a bargain at the local dealer.

“Yeah, see you then.” Stanley turned to his beemer, made silly faces at the kids, and sped away.

In the car, Joseph turned to the kids.

“You know what time it is?”

“LECTURE TIME!” the kids yelled.

“You know the drill. Make as much noise and movement now, but when we walk into class - “

“SILENCE,” Belind yelled at the top of her lungs making her brother and sister laugh. Joseph turned the radio to the highest volume and made the kids point out whenever they saw an out of state license. It tired them out and made it easier to control them once he got to class.

Joseph ran into class only five minutes late, his children following him silently to the back of the lecture hall. Usually he’d keep the kids outside the class, but the baby needed more attention that he wasn’t quite ready to trust Belind with. He handed the kids their books and prayed to God for their silence. Today, the lecture was about financial derivatives and the examples of European and American call options.
At the end of class, the professor handed out test results. Joseph got a C. He flipped through the test to see what he did wrong, but it appeared he only got one question wrong, with most of the formulaic reasoning passing the bar.

“Let me see!” Belind said snatching at the test.

“Mind your own business!” Joseph snapped at her, burying the test under his arm.

“Whaddya get?” Delen asked mischievously.

“None of your business, but since you asked, an A.” Joseph ran down the stairs to catch the professor before he left, his children failing to keep up with him.

“Hello Professor, I want to begin with how much I appreciate your class and how great of a professor you are -”

“Thank you,” the professor said as if receiving the first compliment he’d gotten in months.

“But I am not quite sure why I received this grade on the test. By all means, your discretion is respected, but I simply want a better understanding of why I received a C.” Joseph whispered the C even though his children were only halfway down the stairs.

The professor flipped through the exam, then exhaled a knowing breath.

“Ah yes, you didn’t get this concept right, most likely because you missed that lecture on determining general portfolio loss and gain margins. I made the question count for more since I assumed more students would get this question right.”

“Oh well, certainly the mistakes I made didn’t warrant such a point loss -”
“Listen Joseph, I admire you. But you have to put things in perspective. Most of the students are failing this class. Getting a C would be a victory for them. And you’ve got kids to take care of. Just focus on graduating. And if you want to make sure you’re getting straight As, you wouldn’t take a class this hard.”

The professor gave Joseph a pat on the shoulder as his kids crowded around his legs. Joseph put the exam into his bag, determined to teach himself how to get the question right on his own. Then a question popped in his head.

“Professor, how’d you know I missed class that day?”

“Because it’s the only class I can remember where your kids weren’t screaming in the back,” the professor said quickly walking out the door to avoid follow-up questions.

Joseph looked at his children and their begging eyes.

“I told you you have to be silent. Silent!” Joseph left the hall without making sure his children were following behind him.

*****

At the soccer field, Joseph let his anger out on his opponents. Although he played defense, he let his power be shown by the sheer lack of space made available for the other team’s forwards. The informal pick-up soccer club contained the miniverse of South Florida’s immigrant elite including Jamaicans, Dominicans, Cubans, Bengalis, and of course Haitians. Five languages could be shouted at once as commands, each one filtered with perfect comprehension because no one hates being misunderstood more than an immigrant.
On the field, Joseph felt most powerful. He wasn’t young, but he wasn’t old either. He gained respect for taking care of the older players and giving life advice to the younger ones. He was admired for his stamina that only seemed to increase with the setting sun.

The other fathers also brought their kids, letting them play at the playground next to the canal that flowed through the park. A few players brought their wives, who would gossips on the benches lining the park. Some of the older kids played soccer with the fathers. Joseph couldn’t wait until Belind and Delen were old enough to join. He couldn’t wait to fight with the other fathers about why they should let a girl on the field.

Joseph did not want to raise push-overs. He saw these people, easily convinced by the degrading antics of those superior. Convinced that their collection of superficial credentials would be enough to protect them from the pain of those intent on harming them. Being made to feel unworthy of what they were entitled to. But he also wanted his children to wear the mask. To walk through life unencumbered by the burden of being considered difficult. To be able to recite the script of societal niceness without a hitch. And have the discretion to know when the mask must be taken off and their fortitude revealed.

At halftime, one his younger Jamaican teammates ran up to him.

“Your kids are fighting. Again.”

Joseph ran to the playground, seeing a mother yell at Belind as spittle fell from her lips.
“What wrong?” Joseph said pulling Belind by the ends of her cornrows that landed just about her shoulders.

“He called Gloria ugly!” Belind said pointing at the kid crying in his mother’s arms.

“And your daughter spit in my son’s face!”

Joseph stifled a smile and gave Belind a stern face.

“What did I say about hitting other people?”

“I didn’t hit him! I spit on him! I didn’t touch him at all. I swear!”

“Belind, you know what I mean.”

“But spitting and hitting are not the same thing.”

“But they have the same effect.”

“He doesn’t have a bruise this time. He can wipe it like this.” Belind said making the motion of lifting her shirt to wipe her face, making it seem like the simplest solution.

“Belind come here,” Joseph said pulling her by the ear and getting her out of the sight of the other parents.

“Punch me,” Joseph said as he fake tackled Belind. They settled into a fighting stance, Belind’s fist raised to her chest and the other fist hovering over her face for defense.
Belind let out a brief huff before releasing a strong punch that landed at the center of Joseph’s chest. The air was knocked out of him, but he took the moment to say a brief prayer for the future of his children, waiting for God to return his breath.

He finally inhaled and smiled brightly at his daughter.

“Good girl. Delen, you saw that? Now do the same.” Delen ran to his father. Delen was more afraid of hurting others. A hesitancy that confirmed Joseph’s belief that it was Belind who was starting all the fights at the park.

Delen landed a soft punch on his father’s stomach, giggled and gave Joseph a hug. Joseph gathered his children in front of him.

“If someone says something you don’t like, write it down. Then come to me and you can let out your anger on me. But never let other people see that you are hurt. They’ll use that and only sink deeper into what made you mad. Promise me you won’t get in anymore fights.”

“I promise,” Belind and Delen said in unison, with Gloria blabbering in response. Joseph made them go apologize to the child.

Joseph turned to return to the second half of the game, when Belind tugged at his shirt.

“Papi, you won’t tell Mummy?”

“I won’t.”
“Promise?”

“I promise.”

*********

At Wal-mart, Joseph let Belind and Delen explore on their own, the baby sitting in the child seat as Joseph roamed the aisles for groceries. Sweat dried on his skin, causing a sodium crown to form on his forehead. Eventually Belind and Delen found him in the dairy aisle, their arms filled with supplies.

“What are those?”

“Supplies for my science fair project, remember?”

Joseph looked over the pipe cleaners, cardboard paper, and paint that Belind dumped into the cart.

“Belind, why do you need two green and blue paints?”

“Well the green of the grass and leaves of the trees have to be different. Also the blue of water has to be different from the blue of the sky.”

Joseph picked up a pack of pipe cleaners and saw that it cost five dollars.

“You can get a pack of these for a dollar. Put this back and get a cheaper one.”

“Papi, no! This pack has the right shade of blue I need.”

“Belind, what are you even making?”
“A diorama of Lake Okeechobee.”

Joseph clicked his lips.

“Every kid in Florida is making a Lake Okeechobee diorama. You couldn’t think of a better project?”

“No,” Belind said defensively, “but that’s why I need different blues and greens. So my diorama stands out.”

Joseph thought of the mediocre results of Belind’s Okeechobee project when an idea popped in his head.

“How about a diorama of Massif de la Hotte?”

Joseph remembered being the head of his Boy Scouts and taking trips into the Haïti rainforest to learn about survival and leadership. He had a clear memory of the forest and it would certainly stand out at Belind’s science fair.

“No.” Belind said.

“Belind, c’mon, it’ll be fun.”

“Papi, everyone’s gonna think I’m weird. I’m doing Lake Okeechobee.”

“Then put these back,” Joseph said handing Belind the expensive pipe cleaners and the extra blue and green paint.

“Piiiiiiiii.”

“Beliiiiiiiiiiind.”
Belind took the items grudgingly. Joseph didn’t think she’d actually put them back.

“Wait, Belind. Put them back. I’ll help if you with the diorama if you do Massif de la Hotte. We’ll get pizza if you don’t win a prize.”

Belind looked at her father, clearly annoyed by his antics.

“Fine,” Belind said dumping the items into the cart.

Once they got home, Joseph printed and brought out all his pictures of Massif de la Hotte. He let Belind complete the rest of the project as he checked over his exam to fix his mistake. Before he knew it, Belind was done with project, which included a waterfall, Pic Macaya, and tiny replicas of the unique animals in the forest.

“Ahh, Belind, I think you outdid yourself this time.” Belind’s smile stretched from ear to ear. Joseph looked at his daughter.

“Glad you did this instead of Lake Okeechobee?”

Belind shook her head ‘no’ as she walked to put the diorama in her room. She slipped on one of the loose boards almost dropping the diorama. Joseph saved the diorama just in time, placing it on the kitchen counter.

“Eish, Belind, be careful of that board. Here, I’ll protect the diorama and keep it on the kitchen table. Remind me to fix that board before Mummy notices.”

Belind gave Joseph a kiss on the cheek and said good night. Joseph stared at the diorama, admiring how the different greens and blues really did add dimension to the
project. Then it came to him. He looked back down at his exam and realized he forgot to carry the 2 to the other side of the equation. Such a simple solution. Joseph laughed to himself, feeling as though he deserved to have all those points taken off for such a simple mistake. Feeling that some mistakes were meant to be made.

“She [Winnie Mandela] was called the Mother of the Nation, a term that, despite its nurturing connotations, she earned more by her strength and anger than the gentleness and diplomacy often associated with the wives of world leaders.”

Molly Olmstead in Slate

Vital Signs

The patient had left the room more than twelve hours ago, but their scent still lingered. A blue bed pan laid precariously on the bed’s metal railing, daring Romi to knock it to the ground. Lifting up the sheets, Romi noticed a distinct yellow stain. Although the smell was rank, she was more concerned about the former patient’s hydration levels because of how dark the yellow stain was. Romi theorized that day nurses purposely left the most gruelling tasks to the night shift. As if the pungent scent better-suited the time of night they had to work.

Romi had some empathy for the patients, considering most of them suffered from impairments that prevented them from considering the offense of their smell a priority. But beyond scent itself, cleaning patient beds was beneath Romi’s paygrade. A
consultancy had recently advised Hospital Corporation of America to reduce costs of operations by increasing RN efficiency. As if caring for eight patients a shift wasn’t enough responsibility. But HCA had to pay off all those fines from the Medicaid fraud investigation, so respect for their employees was not an option they could afford. Nearly a tenth of the staff was cut which made Romi feel like she should be grateful. But her gratitude was constantly at odds with her resentment.

Walking on swollen ankles, Romi brought the dirty sheets to the laundry room. The sterile scent of the hospital was compromised by Romi’s considerations for the antiseptic resistant bacteria growing exponentially on the walls. The art on the wall only exasperated the sense of impending doom. While the nature scenes were well drawn, they lacked the feeling of life. As if drawing a tree in the present eliminates it from existence in the future.

Romi knocked on the break room door out of habit. She expected the room to be empty. Instead when she opened the door, Romi found Mary still sleeping on the cot, a good thirty minutes past the time her break should have been over.

“Mary, levé, levé!”

Mary squinted at Romi, then sunk her head into the pillow.

“Break is over already?” Mary mumbled into the down feathers.

“Yeah, you’ve probably been sleeping for an hour now.”

“Merde,” Mary jolted up and put on her shoes, “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“That’s not my job. Just hope none of your patients are in a code red.”
“Frank! Eiisshh! I shouldn’t have taken a day-shift two days in a row. Makes it impossible to stay awake at night. My kids hardly let me take a ten minute naps.”

“How are your kids?”

“C’mon Romi, not now. Pita.”

Mary ran out the room and into the fluorescent flooded hallway. Romi didn’t want to talk about kids anyway.

Romi took the clean sheets she borrowed from the laundry room and placed them over the blue cot. Instead of sleeping, her eyes fixated on the ceiling, running through the list of things she had to do once she got off of work.

First, she would drop her kids off at school. That would require some wrangling, but they were usually awake by the time she arrived at the house at 8am. She then had to check if they cleaned their rooms to maintain the standard she had established so that the house never looked like chaos. She thought about making the kids food, since there was only so much rotisserie chicken one could consume in a week. Wasn’t there something Belind needed help with? Doesn’t matter, Belind would remind her about it. She always did. Then Romi had to remind their father to pick the kids up after school because she needed sleep for her shift that night. Usually their father was good about picking up the kids on-time, but sometimes he’d pick the kids up so late they’d complain about it in the morning. Not to mention she didn’t trust the type of people he might be bringing them around.
The screeching alarm went off just as Romi found a hypnotic rhythm to her thoughts. Gosh, what was that thing Belind had been whining about? Romi heard a creak when her foot hit the floor.

Probably just some synovial fluid.

Romi routed herself to Ralph’s room. He needed to have his vitals checked every thirty minutes due to artery clogs that constantly threatened his existence. At least on this earth.

Ralph didn’t like Romi at first. Apparently she didn’t talk loud enough. But it was really something about the way her vowels were rounded and consonants came too far forward. A “th” became a “d”. Her “H”’s became silent omens.

Ralph looked up at Romi when she entered the room.

“I could’ve died.”

“I missed you too, Ralph.”

Romi took out her stethoscope and put out her hand.

“Wrist, please.”

Ralph provided his veiny, age-spot sprinkled wrist. They went through the choreographed steps. Romi listened on her stethoscope to make sure Ralph wasn’t close to death.

Romi took out her red sphygmomanometer and wrapped it around Ralph’s arm. She squeezed the bulb and stared at the gauge.
“How are those classes going?” Ralph asked.

“Great, can you tell a difference?”

“Kinda.”

To avoid anymore situations where a patient requested another nurse due to “communication issues”, Romi resolved to take ESL classes. In nursing school, Romi was always good at those essays they’d assigned and had passed reading comprehension top of class. But her comprehension of English did not always match her speech, which gave Americans the impression that her slower English was a reflection of a slower cognition.

The appealing accent was a much considered topic in nursing school. Conflict brewed between Jamaicans and Haitians over who succeeded more in their adopted country. Jamaicans claimed that their proximity to English helped explain their greater recognition and respect in general society. They said things like “My English is straight from the queen of England”. But the Haitians counterclaimed their perseverance despite the potential language barrier. Romi thought it was a strange phenomena for people to argue about which immigrant was superior. But these conversations would always be evidence of colonialism’s victory.

“Alright Ralph, everything looks good...for now. Don’t ring unless you really think you’re dying and no more ordering Chinese to the hospital. Please.”

“I promise to keep at least one of those demands.”

“I expect nothing more from you.”
Romi left the room and continued to check on her remaining patients.

So many people thought that nurses loved this. Going from patient to patient, checking on their vitals, and talking to placate any anxieties they had. Empathy and compassion were often framed as an obligation for nurses. That every nurse was imbedded with the burning desire to wipe asses with a smile on their face. Which for some is true. But for many, they quickly calculated the return on investment of any higher education degree and realized that an associate’s in nursing provided the biggest return. That’s it. If you’re going to go into debt for education you should at least know that there is going to be some return at the other side of graduation. Only Americans had the silly belief that your work was a reflection of your passion and purpose. Haitians more practically saw money as a foundation of life itself. Because most Haitians grew up with a palpable absence of money. Americans never truly believe they won’t have money to live because the evidence of money was always around them.

“Romi, slow down. So glad to see you!”

Katie. The white lady who served as the RN supervisor and also living meme for the Caribbean women to joke about. Katie was married to a doctor in the cardiac division. She always talked about life as if it were a given that everyone had the same perspective as her. The women thought she was uppity, driving her white Cadillac to work and wearing ostentatious jewelry and bright lipstick. But Romi had a bit of admiration for Katie. If her husband was a doctor, certainly that meant Katie didn’t need to work. She could be what Romi wished to be: a nurturing mother focused on providing her children
emotional support while their father provided for them financially. But it was only a dream. An American Dream.

“Hello, Katie. I got a busy shift today. What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing much. That science fair today was so hectic. Had to stop by Staples to pick up extra supplies for Matt and now I’m here! But you know how it is.”

“Mhm.” Katie wasn’t getting the hint that Romi was not in the mood for optimistic jousting.

“I saw your daughter at the fair today. You probably already know, but Belind got second place. Really awesome kid. I don’t know if you helped her, but her diorama of the Haitian ecosystem was amazing!”

That’s it. The science fair. Romi remembered seeing a large bag of rainbow pipe cleaners, clay, paint, plastic moss, and other items blocking the front door. She told Belind to make sure to clean up any mess she made, but forgot to ask about the actual project she was doing. Her father was the creative one anyway. The one with the space and freedom to think of ways to enrich their children’s lives on a personal basis. He was probably the one to suggest making a diorama of the Haitian ecosystem. He was still obsessed with the idea of convincing white people that Haiti was more than just a poor country that their children made gift boxes for during the holidays.

“Belind is always like that. Liking the sky and whatever.”

Romi reached the door of her patient’s room.
“I guess you’re here. But hey, Romi, if you ever want to carpool or anything, I could totally help. I think Belind would be a great influence on Matt.”

Romi mustered the stiffest smile she could manage and said,

“I’d have to talk to my husband about that, but I’ll get back to you,” entering the patient’s room and signaling the end of the conversation.

Belind was not an object to serve as a positive influence for some other kid. Poukisa moun toujou tanku sa?

Romi finished her rounds and before she knew it, sunlight was spilling into the hospital. At 6:59AM she stood at the exit. And at 7:00AM, she was out the door.

Romi took her habitual fifteen minute nap before starting her commute. She burned some incense to rid herself of the stale hospital stench. After the nap, Romi sniffed alcohol wipes. Mary had taught her this trick to help stay alert throughout the day. Plus, it was easy to jack alcohol wipes from the supply closet. There were no costs involved unlike coffee or energy drinks.

Romi turned on her Haitian gospel music at full blast. She was practicing for her church’s Easter service. Even though she couldn’t make every choir practice she was good at memorizing the alto line from the CD.

Dieu éternellement Saint

Tu es juste, bon et sage

J’élève ma voix vers toi
pour te glorifier

Romi sung to herself and allowed her vibrato to match the pulses of the bass. Her pink plastic rosary swung back and forth as her car flew over speedbumps and potholes. The Broward streets were already full of commuters on their way to work. Large yellow school buses picking up kids in the farthest recesses of the city limits. When Romi first came to America, she marveled at the beautiful organization and rhythm of American traffic. Everything was easy. Everything was predictable.

Belind and her brother Delen were already peering out the window when Romi pulled into the driveway. Joseph had already taken the baby to the nursery at five in morning. Romi imagined that most of her children’s perception of her was contained in absence and discipline. That’s all Romi had time for. But they still always waited for her. A child has affinity for their mother that could not be explained by the amount of presence or absence of her in their life. Romi had been told that she should cherish their obsession because there would only be rejection once they became adolescents.

But habitual and moral foundations needed to be created now. The kind of discipline that Romi found so lacking in most American children. For example, Romi could already tell that her kids hadn’t eaten or brushed their teeth yet. Belind’s braids were frizzy and Romi knew she’d have to fix them before Belind went to school.

Romi became a drill sergeant as soon as she walked into the house. The kids gave their obligatory kisses on Mummy’s cheek then scrambled to their rooms to complete their morning tasks.
“Si mwen wè rad ou yo pa deja établi ou nan gwo pwoblèm!” yelled as she took out a pot to make breakfast.

Romi quickly prepared breakfast while the kids finished their tasks. A green object suddenly fell into the pot. Romi looked up to find a dark green stain on the ceiling.

“BELIND!”

“Yes, Mummy!” Belind came running in her socks as she buttoned her uniform top.

“What is this?” Romi said pointing at the ceiling.

“The pressure cooker blew up while cooking the sauce pwa.”

Romi suppressed her brief and intense flash of anger.

“So you can win a science award, but you can’t manage a pressure cooker?”

“Sorry Mummy. Papi said he’d buy a new one today. Do you want to see my science award certificate?”

“Not now, Belind. You need to get ready for school!”

Romi knew their father was somehow involved in this mess. Romi gave her children small bowls of oatmeal and fixed their hair while they ate.

The wrangling was almost done. Romi stepped outside and started the car. Delen came. But Belind was no-where to be found.
Romi got out of the car. She went down the hallway to find Belind in her room frantically looking for something.

“Belind, I told you we have to leave now! Why are you still in here? An alakonya!”

“Sorry Mummy. I lost my homework. I can’t find my homework.” Romi didn’t want Delen getting in trouble for being late to school again. Belind was just going to have to sacrifice her homework today. She’d make up for it somehow. Belind always found her way.

“That’s why it’s important to stay organized. I guess you have no homework today. Now get in the car. Vit, vit, nou pa genyen tan!”

Then as Belind ran around the corner to get to the living room, her foot fell on one of the loose wooden panels. Her body lunged forward and her chin hit the floor directly. Chin to wood. Wood to chin. Before tears fell, blood spilled. Black grout lines turned into red rivers. And as Belind looked at her mother in dire pain, Romi remembered she never wanted kids in the first place. She never wanted to sacrifice this much of herself.

Relieved, Romi noticed no blood got onto Belind’s uniform. Sure, she’d have a cut on her face, but what eight year old didn’t? The metallic scent of blood filled the house. Romi knew she couldn’t bear to have the scent stay.

Belind’s mouth moved, but she said nothing between her sobs. Because there was nothing to be said. Romi decided to continue with her commands to ensure the kids still got to school on time.
“Clean your mouth. And spray parfum behind your ears. You can go to the nurses’ office for a bandage when you get to school.”

“Aren’t you a nurse? Why can’t you help me?”

Romi looked at Belind. Belind’s gaze didn’t shift. Her eyes emitted a fierce fortitude that could only be the result of genetic inheritance. Didn’t Belind know that Romi was a nurse just for the money? Didn’t Belind know every second of Romi’s life was dedicated to the care of her children? Didn’t Belind know that a stranger’s hand might feel more caring?

“Belind,” Romi almost whispered, her best attempt at an apology for wrongs that could not be defined. Then Belind obeyed, washed her face, collected her backpack and followed her mother to the car.

Belind smelled like warm vanilla sugar. Romi was relieved. The vanilla scent whiffed through the car like a white flag of innocence. With a sense of obligation, Romi nodded toward Belind without looking her in the eye.

“I’ll look for the science certificate and your homework while you’re at school, okay?”

Belind said nothing. Because both Romi and her knew, neither of those things would happen. Romi had to go to work that evening.
“African heritage can’t just be in European private collections and museums.”
France Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron in Burkina Faso

PROVENANCE

Belind did not consider it stealing, but rather alternative compensation. Arriving at the office thirty minutes before everyone else ensured her ransack occurred inconspicuously. The office hummed with the steady blow of the heaters. Cubicles stained with remnants of desk lunches created the labyrinth that sent Belind on her journey to the supply closet. Delighted, Belind found empty Amazon boxes laying on the floor outside the closet, indicating that it had recently been restocked. Belind pulled at the door to find it was locked.

Due to the neglectful office upkeep, Belind thought the stuckness of the door was due to her failed attempts at properly pulling the knob, but low and behold the door was truly locked. Belind put her hands on her hips and stared at the door. What if there was an emergency meeting and someone needed folders to provide lot information for a client? What if a catalogue citation needed to be corrected and an exhibition was set to open within the hour and all man-power was required to use permanent markers to correct the mistake? What if the CEO insisted that everyone in an executive meeting had highlighters to note the initiatives that must remain in the event of bankruptcy and he was done talking by the time a zealous intern had run to the closet, figured out who had the key, and attained the highlighters?
None of these things were applicable to Belind at the moment, but Belind felt it necessary to bring up these scenarios when talking to the person who came up with the idiotic idea of locking the supply closet. There had already been a brief moment when her printing privileges had been revoked because one of the administrators had noticed that the hundreds of pages Belind printed a day were PDFs of free books she found online and not presentation notes for high level colleagues.

Belind decided that a healthy compromise to the locked supply closet was to take an extra hour at lunch. She had been meaning to try out the cafe the Lycée kids were always flocking to. Belind’s resentment for her work had recently hit peak. When Belind learned that her half as productive coworker was getting paid more than her, her plan for corporate rebellion commenced. She’d arrive thirty minutes to an hour early so that she had first dibs on any office meeting breakfast. She went to each floor searching for a fresh croissants, parfaits, and coffee. She would then walk to her “office”, which was more like a library closet, to properly conceal the treats in her desk drawers.

Belind then spent approximately an hour doing work diligently so that when her boss came in to say good morning, it looked like she was working hard. However, after that hour, Belind made it a point to take a mid-morning nap before preparing her lunch. She brought raw ingredients to the executive kitchen, which she did not have explicit permission to use, and cooked something with just enough onion and garlic to let the whole floor reek with the stench of her mediocre cooking. Then she would recede to her office, close the door, and play the smooth sounds of the White Stripes on speaker. After lunch, Belind would go to the local library to catch up on readings and then return to the office to complete whatever tasks left for her to do. Belind felt that her work ethic
matched the direct deposit she received every week, which was abysmal and unable to even cover rent on its own. Belind would not allow herself to be devalued for the sake of increased profit margins for C-level executives and higher dividend returns for shareholders.

This was the price Belind paid for believing that art business could properly compensate her before she made it big time. It was the compromise she gave to herself and her family when she told them that she was going to be a writer. Belind found out that there was no middle ground for an artist. You were either million contract dollar balling or penny pinching skimping. The only other option was to have a partner that was willing to support you while you pursued your art. And Belind was too capricious to ever attract someone willing to make that big of a sacrifice for her.

Belind took a walk around the office to see if anyone had left the closet key on their desk, but she found nothing. She reached the lobby just as the Caneberry signed outside flickered on. The hoard of colleagues was soon approaching.

Against her better judgment, Belind worked at a corporation that had existed since slave trade was a thriving industrial pursuit. Caneberry’s was the oldest publicly traded company in the country. The business model was simple: wait for rich people to die, go into debt, or a nasty divorce and sell their most expensive art, jewellery, furniture and any other fancy knick-knacks at auction. Revenue was made by charging a buyer’s premium on every unit sold. Belind thought the whole premise was stupid and apparently some shareholders who conducted a hostile takeover thought so too.
Hence, Belind’s presence at the company. The company was trying to diversify its revenue stream and believed owning the the most comprehensive digital database in the art world would provide another service to sell to middle market customers (you still had to make big money to be considered middle market at Caneberry’s). So all the catalogue raisonnés of all the artists that sold for over $1 million were being typed up. And Belind was one of the many cogs in the machine whose job it was to type up the catalogues and determine designation text.

Needless to say, the HR model didn’t stray to far from the business model. Heirs with trust funds larger than the GDP of small countries were promoted quickly so that stories of dissatisfaction could not taint Caneberry’s client relationships. Everyone who did not have dynastic ties to money was constantly reminded of their expendability. And as the daughter of Haitian immigrants with a negative net worth, Belind’s only claim to this office was her graduation from a prestigious institution.

Strolling in confidently at 9:45am, Terry, Belind’s officemate, gave a quick hello as she hung her $900 Canada Goose jacket on the rack.

“It’s so cold out there. And ugh, the subway, so late. So delayed.”

Terry did not take the subway. One day, Belind caught Terry jumping out of a cab two blocks from work. Terry blamed it on a delayed train, but the narrative made no sense, especially when Terry referenced a train that didn’t even stop on the Upper East Side. But Terry didn’t need to be fiscally responsible. As the daughter of one of the top ten developers in New York City, Terry’s primary motivation for being in the job was to
contextualize her art history degree and eventually use her experience and trust fund to open her own gallery.

Belind nodded and passed Terry the tea kettle she kept in the office.

“What is that? Jasmine?”

“Yup, Jasmine oolong. Thought I’d get my fancy on.”

“Sometimes you just need to spoil yourself.”

The girls tapped their mugs and sipped on the refreshing tea. Belind believed that all living was a rut, so the primary goal for every human was finding the least annoying rut. Her current rut was quite burdensome and annoying and Belind was in the process of searching for a more stimulating rut. Something that she could be proud of doing over and over again.

It was almost lunch time when a loud thud shook Belind’s desk and interrupted her writing. Grant swung a chair around and straddled his legs around the chair back.

“I’m not talking to you sitting like that.”

“Belind, I -“

Belind pounded on her keyboard as if typing a manifesto until Grant pouted his thin freckled lips and sat in the chair as it was designed to be sat in.

Grant was the catalyst of Belind’s adventures at Caneberry’s. Having lived in the same hall since freshman year of college, Grant took Belind’s curt tone and insolent attitude as an expression of tough love. Grant was one of those Catholic school boys that
actually believed and followed the Catholic religious tenants. After finding Belind sitting in the school chapel pews eating eucharist crackers at six in the morning, Grant concluded that Belind was just the religious partner he needed to get through the temptations of college living. He strung her into the religious life council and Belind felt a belonging she had yet to find anywhere else since. Grant treated Belind like a sibling and Belind treated him how she treated her siblings: with scorn and resentment. And like her siblings, Grant still found a way to insert himself into her life. Including sharing a job opening at his “awesome” job on the Upper East Side.

“Look Belind, I need a favor.”

“Favor a la Belind is not cheap.”

“Yeah I know,” Grant said shoving a box towards her. Inside the box were a bunch of notebooks and pens, the kind Belind was searching for in the supply closet. If only he knew what she was doing all that writing for.

“So you’re the one who locked the supply closet?”

“No. I mean yes. But Simon told me I had to, since he wants to have more control over the Impressionist budget.”

Simon Law was the head of the Impressionist and Modern Department, the second most important department behind Contemporary. Simon Law had a thick posh British accent that he used to both frighten and assuage. Grant had become obsessed with Simon ever since he became his assistant, and Belind lamented Grant’s waning visits ever since he became Simon’s assistant.
“Anyway, Belind there’s a valuation on 73rd and Simon said he’d like to take me along. But he forgot that today I have to pick up that restored Sidaner from the MET --”

“Okay, why didn’t you just tell the MET you were going to pick it up tomorrow?”

“Because the Sidaner is being used for the London Day Sale and needs to be shipped out tomorrow and Simon only told me about the valuation this morning. Anyway, I really want to go. Apparently the consigner has a rare Léger and a couple Chagalls.”

“Grant, four small notebooks and ten pens that you didn’t pay for is kind of low balling it for me to go all the way to the MET and pick up a high-valued art piece, don’t you think?”

Grant pursed his lips and Belind tapped on the box of goods. Grant let out a grunt of frustration.

“I ---,” Grant looked at his hands and shook his head, debating whether he really wanted to offer Belind what she was silently asking. Belind open a notebook and began writing in it as he deliberated.

“I’ll type up a volume of Warhol’s catalogue raisonné,” Grant spit out quickly.

“Volume 2a?”

“No, Volume 1.”

“Volume 2a?”

“Okay, how about Volume 2b?”
“Volume 2a.”

Grant swallowed.

“Fine, Volume 2a.”

Satisfied, Belind drew a big heart on a notebook page, ripped it out, and handed it to Grant.

“For encouragement,” she said. Grant stood up to leave then turned around.

“Also, tomorrow there’s an alumni event at the Princeton Club --,”

“Text me the MET archive number,” Belind tapped Grant’s shoulder as she pushed past him to the hallway.

In the Upper East Side, you were either being served and serving others. The neighborhood drew strong class lines that gave Belind the eerie sense that she was in a SIMs simulation and the ones being served had found the cheat code that gave them an exorbitant amount of money while everyone else was trying to get enough money to keep playing the game. Dog walkers walked packs of six to ten dogs, each with their own idea of where they wanted to go. Nanny’s pushed strollers with children that were not their own, showing a kindness that they may not the energy to show their own children. Doormen braced the cold to ensure the rich did not have to be humiliated by the task of opening a door for themselves.

The walk to the MET wasn’t bad, but the harsh winter wind made the distance seem like eternity. Belind was tempted to hail a cab after walking several blocks, but didn’t want to wait three weeks for the company to reimburse her for the trip.
Large crowds of students, tourists, and volunteers huddled inside the front lobby of the large museum. It was easy to spot those who were experiencing the building for the first time, their eyes bulging at the grandiosity of the architecture and the seemingly never ending stairs to the second floor. Belind took a sharp right and led herself to the researcher corridor of the museum. It was easy to get lost in the monstrosity of the building and slightly daunting to ask for help from the stoic volunteers, but Belind was confident she was headed in the right direction.

At the front desk at the Watson Library, Belind tapped the bell for the attention of an available researcher. A woman with a mass of curls on her hair and an oversized argyle sweater appeared. The woman snatched the bell and tucked it under the desk.

“How may I help you?”

“I’m a representative from Caneberry’s…”

The woman’s shoulders went stiff. Non-profit institutions had a strange relationship with their profit making cousins.

“Yes, that Caneberry’s, and I was wondering where I could find the restoration department?”

“You mean the conservation department?”

“No, I was told the restoration department. Whichever department is supposed to make the paintings look prettier.”
“There’s actually quite a significance in the etymology of those words. I’m sure in your line of business there is a dearth of understanding why paintings need to be conserved and not simply restored.”

“Listen, they don’t pay me enough to argue for anything they do. I’m just here to pick up a painting.”

“Which one?”

“Well are you the person that could get that to me? I think I’m just supposed to find the conservation department, which I’m hoping you’ll direct me to.”

A brief, yet heavy pause.

“Why yes. It’s a little bit of a trek to the conservation center, but I’ll lead you there.”

Belind followed the researcher to an unassuming entrance towards the back of the facility. The doors opened to expose a large two story art studio with researchers working on huge canvases. The air smelled of caustic acrylic and oil paint.

“I think if you talk to Helen over there, she can help you locate your item.”

Belind followed the researcher’s finger to the conservator working on what looked like Dufy.

“Hi, I’m Belind, a representative from Caneberry’s- “
“Oh my God, finally! Do you know how long we’ve had your Sidaner? I got a call with someone saying somebody else was going to pick it up and I thought you were just ghosting us again.”

Belind had heard another narrative from Caneberry’s regarding the communication with the MET. Apparently it was the MET who had shoddy communication and limited resources to truly track all the works they had in their inventory.

“Okay, great, I have the archive number, so if you could just let me know -”

“We put that thing in storage over a year ago. Let me see if we can find anyone who can help you find it.”

“I can help her!”

Belind just noticed that the researcher was still there.

“Um, sure, you know how to navigate the archives, right?”

“Yes, I’m a Mellon Fellow.”

“Okay. Don’t know what that is but I love the enthusiasm. Make sure she goes through all the deaccessing procedures before she leaves. Many thanks love.”

The conservator returned to what looked like a varnish removal process. Half the painting looked worn while the color on the other half had a restored vibrancy.

The Mellon Fellow led Belind to the large open storage center where ladder shelves reached the ceiling. Each row had a two letter identity and each column was
assigned a year. Belind had already given the Mellon fellow the archive number and the fellow was doing a bad job of pretending she knew what she was doing.

“So I’m pretty sure it should be here.”

The fellow opened the drawer to reveal a smiling bronze monkey sculpture.

“I don’t think we’re even in the right section,” Belind said although amused by the monkey.

“Yeah, it’s been a while. How about you stay here and I’ll go find the storage manager.”

The fellow ran away, although Belind wasn’t even sure if there was anyone around to help. After waiting a while, Belind decided to see if she could find another bronze monkey-like treasure in the vast storage space.

In these columns, Belind remembered that ultimately all these high valued items were just….. things. Stuffed away in tight spaces to maximize space efficiency, the art returns to its nothing beginning as simply an idea of the artist. In a way, the storage felt like hoarding in hyperdrive. The museum never knowing when to say no to a donation from a grieving heir who didn’t know where else to put their loved ones beloved objects.

But much of this art was not a voluntary gift of the previous owners or artists. Belind came across the storage compartments for the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and Americas. There were statues, dolls, totem poles, and other trinkets. Belind opened almost every box, feeling that she was getting access to the same extensive knowledge Europeans descendants had to their ancestors. She remembered when she got jealous of
the West African cultural dominance of black student life on campus and how she would extensively research each African country to see if she could create some roadmap back to Africa. Sometimes Belind felt she should be grateful that her family’s heritage was distinct from that of the colonizer, but she also felt entitled to know where she was really really from. The ancestors who survived the involuntary migration to the West and then demanded and won their freedom.

The South America section featured coins from the Aztec period and masks that reminded Belind of the descriptions grand-mère had of the Lougaru. The society of the Aztecs seemed so clearly reflected in the objects they had. Belind had recently learned on one of her lunch break library excursions that the term Tainos wasn’t even the appropriate term for the natives of West Indian islands. The Spanish and French never bother to learned what the natives called themselves before exterminating them.

In a box labeled AH1921.223, Belind found a crown. Black diamonds and emeralds laced the base of the crown. Long golden arms created a dome that formed a fat crucifix at the top. Every jewel glistened with the boldness of a million stars. Belind assumed she had reached the European section, but instead found an engraved gold plate that said: “For safe keeping and the release of forced laborers of the Dondon region”.

Dondon? Wasn’t that Papi’s hometown in Nord d’Haiti? Belind looked at the crown and her legs remembered the pain of climbing up the mountain to see the Citadel. The view of where the island met the sea tempered any complaints about the steep hour long hike. Belind, Delen, and Gloria turned into young children again, exploring every
crevice, pretending they were Christophe’s prisoners, and testing to see who could reload an authentic 17th century cannon fastest.

Papi stood overlooking the view.

“Usually when you revisit something as an adult everything seemed smaller than you imagined. But this feels bigger.”

“Why?”

“Because I have a better understanding of what it took to make this. That this was not easy or even expected.”

Belind hated when he got philosophical. She and Delen decided to scare the white tourists a little before Papi yelled at them to see a throne he found. He sat on it with a pride that felt undeserved. Incomplete. A role many leaders of Haiti tried to replicate, but only further tarnished with their reckless pursuit of wealth and power.

“I found the Sidaner!”

Belind whipped around, almost dropping the box with the crown. The Mellon fellow proudly presented an eight by eleven in frame that enclosed an even smaller five by five inch painting.

“You really gotta squint to notice it’s a bouquet, don’t you?” Belind said taking the painting and examining its contents.

“Yeah, it’s a good beginner painting for anyone starting a collection. What are doing with that box?”
Belind looked at the crown that jutted out of its container.

“Uhh, I thought I might try to find the Sidaner myself, but I was even more clueless than you.”

“I wasn’t clueless, just rusty. And of course you’d be clueless, you’ve never done this,” the Mellon fellow said closing the bin and placing the crown in its proper location, “Alright, let’s go fill out the paperwork and get you on your way.”

The Fellow walked ahead, as Belind put the Sidaner under her arm and took a photo of the crown’s tag. She skipped ahead to catch up to the fellow who led her through the rigorous process of museum deaccession.

Belind decided to take a taxi back, which she venmo charged Grant for. Belind felt a shot of giddiness at her discovery. It was so rare to find a hint of her people’s existence in the Eurocentric art world and she couldn’t wait to ask million of questions to her father.

At Caneberry’s, Belind swiftly arrived at Grant’s desk, presenting the Sidaner to the beat of Darth Vader’s theme song.

“Oh, great, thanks for getting this,” Grant looked withdrawn and kept his eyes locked on his monitor. A pile of paper was scattered near his elbow.

“So how’d the valuation go?”

“I mean, I went, but only to help Simon carry his bag and then he made me wait in the lobby.”
“Shit, wow, that’s --”

“Paying my dues. We gotta pay our dues in the art world and in twenty years time, I’ll be in his position.”

Belind winched. She always hated how people allowed tradition and precedent to determine their life. Grant was better than this. Only problem is he didn’t know he was and more importantly wasn’t brave enough to reject the disrespect. She’d already had this conversation with Grant so many times before and knew it wasn’t worth deconstructing the phrase ‘pay your dues’.

“Yeah, sure. Listen, you said something about an alumni event?”

“It’s fine Belind, I’m not gonna force you to go.”

Belind pursed her lips and thought about saying the things most kind women said at this point. Something about how she didn’t mind going and that she just remembered she needed to meet someone in the area anyway. But Belind was not most kind women.

“Okay, cool. And I sent you a venmo charge. Hit that pay button when you get the chance.”

Belind took a detour through the Latin American library before getting to her desk. Sometimes Caneberry’s sold Hyppolites or Obins and Belind knew they had to have some books on Haitian art for cataloguing. But the only book she found was Franciscus’ Haiti: Voodoo Kingdom to Modern Riviera. Inside the front cover, the author wrote a note addressed to Caneberry specialists.
My years of research and contemplation have led to this. My time with the kind hearted Haitians has taught me so much and I hope to replicate their simple lives as best as I can in America. Maybe this book will be of use when researching Haitian and Haitian-adjacent art. -John

What the fuck was Haitian adjacent art? Belind ripped out the page and put it in her coat pocket. When she got to her desk, she stuck the book in her bag and told Terry goodnight.

“Oh wow, I feel like I haven’t seen you all day.”

Belind felt no pain at Terry’s ignorance of her absence and took her airiness in stride. Belind turned in the revolving door twice, thinking about changing the rut she was currently in, before the door ejected her into the New York City sidewalk, where no one knew that Haitians once had crowns.
“Consider a pair of twins. Suppose that one twin goes to live on the top of a mountain while the other stays at sea level. The first twin would age faster than the second. Thus, if they met again, one would be older than the other. In this case, the difference in ages would be very small, but it would be much larger if one of the twins went for a long trip in a spaceship at nearly the speed of light. When he returned, he would be much younger than the one who stayed on earth. This is known as twin paradox……”

Stephen Hawking in *A Brief History of Time*

**Twin Paradox**

The cats screamed during their brawl, disrupting any semblance of calm Delmas managed to contain in the early morning before dawn. Fifi rose from her mattress and went to the window, which was covered by a set of metal bars. She put her hands on the bars and tried to see if she’d find the cats that were making the noise. She didn’t find the cats, but Fifi let out a deep hiss. The cat brawl ceased for a bit. Then resumed. A street lamp reflected light on the clock above the fifth bed in the living room. 5:30. The crucifix of Jesus glared at Fifi with pain deftly etched in splintering wood covered with beige paint. *Bonjour*, Fifi said to Jesus.

He said nothing back.

Fifi knew she might as well get ready for her day.

A light film of sweat made Fifi’s t-shirt stick to her body. Fifi quietly stepped over her pregnant older sister and her husband, her mother and her cat, her brother and his motorcycle keys, and her younger sister and her doll. Everyone had a partner at night. Only Fifi slept alone.

Outside the wind blew up grey dust from the loose cement and rubble that were fixtures of Port-au-Prince’s landscape. Fifi leapt down the steep and slippery alleyway that led to the neighborhood well. On her way, she passed the closed convenience store her
neighbor, Miriam, ran from her first floor. Miriam had been on Fifi’s back about the credit her family was running up at the store. Fifi made a mental note to give Miriam at least 500 gourdes that evening so her family could go through the alleyway in peace.

At the bottom of the alleyway, Fifi encountered the small 1 foot by 1.5 foot metal lid that covered the neighborhood well. Fifi took a small bucket from the edge of the well and tied rope around handle. She put the bucket in and lifted water out, then took another bucket. And another. She took enough so that everyone in her family could shower and water could be boiled for oatmeal. Fifi firmly held the handles of the buckets as she made her way back to the apartment, however it was not her arms that would fail her. Fifi tripped on a loose rock. All the water she collected spilled around her. A curse word almost escaped her mouth, but she paused. Fifi forgot to pray before leaving her house. Fifi believed everything had a purpose. God was punishing her for not praying that morning. While still on the ground, she put her hands together and prayed for the safety of her family and her community. Then she went back down to the well and got more water. She hoped no one in the neighborhood would notice the extra water missing. If they did, they no doubt would blame it on her family.

Fifi’s mother waited at the entrance of their flat, sitting in front of the gas stove, waiting for water. Sleep still burdened her eyes, as she glanced up toward Fifi, who usually woke up after her. Fifi gave her mother a bucket and a kiss on the cheek. Fifi got to the middle of the living room, where she took a cloth and began washing her little sister’s face. Wideline groaned.
“Wideline, you gotta wake up.” Fifi said trying to lift Wideline’s body off the mattress.

“It’s too early.” Wideline said making her body limp in Fifi’s arms. Fifi got close to Wideline’s ear and whispered,

“If you wake up right now, I’ll get you a pattie from Point Chaud.” Wideline’s body suddenly came to life as she took the cloth from Fifi to finish washing her face.

Fifi went to the bathroom to take her shower. She had mastered the art of getting lathered soap on the cloth and washing her body in under three minutes. She timed herself to refute her older sister’s complaint that she wasted too much water and time. Fifi’s body was skinny, but lined with thin muscles that came from her daily walking commute and heavy-duty chores around the house. Her wide-set eyes framed her oblong face and protruding cheek bones. Her lips looked like full parallel lines that guarded her large teeth, set in an overbite row. Fifi would slick her permanently straightened hair in a low bun. After showering, Fifi promptly put on her school uniform. The creases her mother ironed on her uniform stuck out like cards in a Rolodex. Her mother had always been so eager for Fifi’s education since her older sister had dropped out in her ninth year and her mother herself never went past fifth year. Fifi’s path toward her PHILO offered the chance that her family could rise out of throngs of that “barely” middle class existence.

However, Fifi’s mother was ignorant about Fifi’s chances of finishing high school. Fifi used to rely on her uncle in America to help pay for school, but ever since his heart attack, his Western Union transfers had been coming in less frequently. She had
been prioritizing paying her sister’s fees since she just started her fourth year. Wideline needed more education to ensure she could read and write into adulthood. Fifi was about to take her PHILO and finish her secondary schooling. But nobody in her family had ever graduated high school, so in a way her determination to stay in school was foolish and simply unproductive as far as opportunity costs were concerned.

At this point, it was only the napping habits of Mother Olivia that kept Fifi in school. Fifi’s was bad at making plans and decisions, instead leaving the hard things in the hands of God. Fifi took things in stride. Plans only reminded Fifi of how impossible achieving stability was, each step ridden with the impossible task of having more money than which was available.

Fifi shared a bowl of oatmeal with Wideline. Their older sister, Joline, and her husband, Cadet, packed sandals they would try to sell downtown. Sometimes their mother would join, but her knees were weak, so she was more of a burden than an effective salesperson. Before the earthquake, downtown Port-au-Prince was bustling with the Haitian bourgeois coming out of Cinema Parisiana and tourists touring the capitol building.

Now only the frames of the largest buildings remained, with most vendors deciding to move up the hill to Petionville. But Fifi’s mother always thought that her spot outside of Cinema Parisiana was blessed with good fortune. However, potential customers were turned off by the appearance of sandal vendors selling outside of one of the saddest reminders of the earthquake, piles of rubble outlining the umbrella that shaded the shoes.
After finishing her oatmeal, Fifi gave everyone a kiss goodbye, grabbed Widenline’s hand and headed outside. Immediately, the sisters were assaulted by the sharp chirping of Creole conversation, relentless heat that enveloped the body, and sunlight that made you afraid to look toward the sky. This was Delmas and this was her home.

After visiting the quiet and unassuming countryside, Fifi always wondered how people responded to Port-au-Prince upon their first visit. Fifi only thought one thing: sensory overload. There were a million things to observe at once. Tap-tap buses, which were decorated pickup trucks that stayed close to the ground, filled the roads with their decomposing exteriors. The outside of the tap-taps were colored in faded vibrant colors, filled to the brim with people getting to their destination. At times you could find people running on and off the tap-tap while the truck was still moving, defying Newton’s laws of motion.

The most popular car brand in Haiti was Toyota. Haitians have a special relationship with Toyota that could not be threatened by the appeal of shining BMWs or Mercedes. Reasonable price and reliable build were more important. All the car shops were well equipped with spare Toyota parts, providing Toyota frames with near immortality. The streets, filled with pothole and the occasional pile of debris, had no traffic lights or signs. All laws were invented haphazardly by the drivers and pedestrians that shared the streets. The anarchy on the streets was a microcosm of the general chaos that governed the country.
The sidewalks ran parallel or on top of shoddy sewer systems that were decorated with trash and still-standing water. Vendors occupied every space available on the sidewalks, trying to sell food, drug store trinkets, water, and even furniture, to the passerby who had even less disposable income than the seller. Vendor fair was thrust into the Fifi and Wideline’s faces. Fifi and Widenline would pretend not to see the fair, simply walking with aloof arrogance. Rudeness was a necessary mechanism of survival in the city.

Most buildings in Delmas were unfinished and unpainted, giving the air a certain cement grey glow. There were stairways that led to nowhere, but flat cement floors meant for second story rooms, spiral metal bars indicating the potential corners. Half way into their commute, Fifi would find an old lady sitting with a nightgown on an opened second floor. A clothing rack hung behind her, the sun creating a halo around her plump frame. The old lady looked straight ahead, looking at nothing in particular. Fifi thought of her as the guardian of the city. She most likely saw things that were not visible on the ground. Things that only the particular shape of plastic chairs could illuminate.

Fifi stopped by Rue Frere to get a pattie for Wideline from Point Chaud. She went to the back where the cook would sell her old patties from the previous day at a discounted price. She wrapped the pattie in paper and told Wideline to save the patti for later. Fifi saved two patties for herself. If she didn’t sneak past the school master she would have to go to Delmas to help her older sister sell sandals. Standing on the street made Fifi hungrier than sitting in class. The streets took her energy in the same way the classroom contained it. But the real reason Fifi hated helping her family sell sandals, was facing the reality of depleting income head on. It made conceptualizing a better future
seem even more inconceivable. Her brother-in-law could only put in so many requests for employment. Soon her sister would have to resort to being a maid for the bourgeoisie, which could sometimes be a nightmare depending on your employer. Her brother already involving himself in petty theft and protection rings.

Fifi arrived at Widenline’s school and gave her a kiss goodbye. Fifi then walked the fifteen extra minutes to her school. A large metal gate and barbed-wired walls surrounded the four-story square building that hosted Institution Saint Louise de Gonzague. Boys and girls huddled in the courtyard, wearing green and white uniforms, preparing for morning prayer and invocation. Teachers stood at the entrance of the gates examining each student that entered. If uniforms were not clean and properly ironed, the children would be punished and sometimes even kicked out of school. The school believed that this rigidity was the source of their success. Nearly 80% of students passed their PHILO and went to university. Fifi gave a quick nod of acknowledgement to the teachers as she searched for her friends in the crowd.

Madeline, Esther, and Cassandra, stood in a circle closer to the far east side of the courtyard. Madeline always wore make-up to school which occasionally got her in trouble if she went on the more dramatic side of things. Her face was small and contained, giving the impression that she was scrutinizing everything in her sight. She made it clear that her main goal in life was to use her long legs to entice the attention of rich men who would take care of her financially. She didn’t care too much about emotional maintenance. Esther was light skinned and plump, the daughter of a French non-profit director and a Haitian businessman.
Despite having all the privileges one could have in Haitian society, Esther lived in a shell. Her emotions were guarded by a veil of indifference that remained plastered on her face. Most interpreted her attitude as elitism, but she had once confessed that she didn’t want to go to France for university, even though she was a citizen and her mother highly encouraged it. She had a deep love for Haiti, which Fifi speculated was rooted in her love for a boy in her class named Stanley. And Cassandra. Much like Fifi, Cassandra was the child of street vendors. However, Cassandra’s family had much more luck, and her American family members provided a steadier source of income than Fifi’s. Her brother recently enrolled in university in Florida. Cassandra was the only one who could truly understand the plight of Fifi’s situation and would often be the one to warn against an approaching Mother Olivia.

“Bonjour Madame Fabiene.” Madeline often used Fifi’s formal name and overemphasized a posh French accent. Madeline argued that Fifi was a name belonging to the lower class and generally used her full name.

“Bonjour Madeline, Esther, Cassie.” Fifi gave each friend a kiss on the cheek.

“Are you prepared for your presentation?” Esther asked softly. Everyday a student was required to do a presentation in either foreign language, math, or science. It was rapid fire. Haitian education relied on rote memorization, which was reinforced through presentation where students had to recite things that they had learned since elementary school.

“As prepared as I can be. Hopefully we don’t do math.” Fifi replied. Math was notoriously brutal. You are given a problem to solve in a short amount of time, which is
only exacerbated by the stares of other students anxious about their own performance and teachers who are quick to kick you out of the classroom for any faltering steps.

Fifi turned her back from the group as they discussed the notorious case of Joseph, who vomited while presenting and was never seen at school again. Fifi’s eyes searched for Mother Olivia who was bound to be examining students to double check the lazy scrutiny of the teachers at the gates. Satisfied with her scan, Fifi returned to the conversation.

“I found out that Junior’s father is being considered for Secretary of Commerce. It’s only for the provisional government, but Moise may use the cabinet for his presidency if they prove loyal.” Madeline said.

“Madeline, who said Moise will win the election? Plus, why would you want to associate with a member of Moise’s cabinet? All those men are thieves in suits. Neg volé” Cassie responded.

“They may be thieves, but they have more money than anyone else in the country, so they must be doing something right. God doesn’t dole out blessing randomly Cassie.” Madeline rebutted, stealing glances at Esther to encourage her to enter the conversation, since her father had connections with Moise’s party, Têt Kale. Esther remained quiet.

“I don’t know what God you pray to. But rest assured, God sees the sin in these men too.” Cassie had always been adamant that final judgment and punishment was ultimately presented in the afterlife. Cassie kept a mental list of all her sins in order to make sure she was always leaning towards eternity in heaven rather than hell. Fifi believed it was a coping mechanism for the sheer injustice of the world they lived in.
“Yes, Cassie, we will see. But for now, on this earth? God is providing those men with an overflowing of blessings, which I intend to have full participation in.” Madeline turned on her heel toward her position for opening prayers. The girls followed suit to their respective assigned slots for morning prayer.

Fifi stood behind the familiar broad shoulders of Samuel. Samuel never talked to Fifi, he was too popular for Fifi’s company. But Fifi was familiar with his shoulders and felt that they were close in a metaphysical way. Blood vessels popped out his neck and his adam’s apple was visible even from behind. Fifi had always wondered about her own sexuality, but she felt that sex in Haiti was a means to one of two necessities: children or spouse for future income. She went over the prayer in her mind as she waited for the designated student to lead the morning ritual.

“Madame Fabienne Salnave.”

The hairs on Fifi’s arm stood up. The voice was distinctive for its husky yet feminine tone. Mother Olivia’s thin hands touched Fifi’s shoulders.

“Come with me.” Mother Olivia whispered.

Fifi gulped. Everyone was in their positions so they would be sure to notice a student being led away. It was simply embarrassing for other people to know that she may be in disciplinary or financial trouble. It wasn’t rare to see someone being led away by Mother Olivia, but it did require an embellished story upon return. If the student ever returned.
Fifi picked up her books and followed Mother Olivia to her office on the first floor of the school. The office inexplicably had the best ventilation in the building and had a self-containing wind. The strength of Mother Olivia’s perfume made it nearly visible. The walls were covered with pictures of Mother Olivia’s adventures around the world including Senegal, Canada, France, Guyana, Argentina, and India. Mother Olivia gently settled in her large wooden chair and then stared at Fifi.

“Ms. Fabienne, did I not tell you to tell me about the progress in collecting your school fees?” Madame Olivia accompanied her stare with a light tap on her desk.

“Yes, Madame Olivia.”

“You have not been in my office in over a week. Each time we speak, it is because I call you here.”

“Yes, Madame Olivia.”

“Well, it hurts me to tell a student to leave, but it seems that you do not even want to fight to be here.” Mother Olivia’s words cut the core of Fifi’s pride. Fifi looked directly in Madame Olivia’s eyes.

“No, that’s not the case Madame. I simply did not know how to update you. I could not find further funds and things were seeming hopeless. School is all I have. So I put all my energy into my school work. I tried to ignore the fact that I may no longer be able attend this wonderful institution.” Fifi hoped that she provided the right balance of begging and self-assurance.

Mother Olivia licked her lips.
“You have not paid tuition in over a year. I believe I have given you as much room as I possibly can. If you can provide me a year tuition by the end of the week, I can keep you at the school until the next semester, where I will expect payment for this semester and the next. If not, then it is best that you prepare an application for our scholarship programs, which many of the students here have completed with success.”

The scholarship programs were corrupt and almost impossible to attain without some connection to a non-profit. Many times, the parents of richer students would try to win the lottery for the children of their help to fulfill a sense of faux populism. As if these people did not have the money to pay for another child’s school fees. They simply wanted to hoard the money for themselves. And Fifi knew that eight months out of school might lead her down a rabbit hole of attaining income that would soon become indispensable to her family, making the decision to return to school even more difficult. Fifi looked at her palms letting her thoughts run.

“As you know, a year’s fee is 24,000 gourdes. I know it’s a lot, but I have basically given you a free year of school already. I wish I could speak to your mother about it.”

Mother Olivia knew that some parents were simply in accessible. On top of the difficulty of movement, Fifi’s mother, as well as many others, were restricted by embarrassment in their appearance. Fifi always thought self-consciousness was the bane of her mother’s existence. Fifi’s best option would be to get the 24,000 gourdes by the end of the week. Fifi looked at the cement floor.
“I will get the 24,000 gourdes by the end of the week.” Fifi didn’t believe herself. Clearly, neither did Mother Olivia.

“Madame Fabienne. However this turns out, remember you are an intelligent girl. Never let any one mistake you for stupid. Use whatever education the institution has imparted you to the best of your ability.” Mother Olivia gave Fifi a kiss on both cheeks and a squeeze on the shoulder.

“Thank you, Mother.” Fifi said, her voice as numb as her emotions.

“I will tell the guard to open the gate for you.”

“Will you let me wait until everyone is in class?” Fifi blurted, wondering if Mother Olivia knew the implications of leaving while there were still students in the courtyard.

“Yes, of course.”

Through the window of Mother Olivia’s office, Fifi waited until every student had left the courtyard. Once she confirmed that everyone was in class, Fifi gave Mother Olivia a final goodbye and hurried to the gate.

Once Fifi was out the gate she felt like a corset suddenly wrapped around her waist and squeezed. Tight. Fifi felt lightheaded, but she still walked. To where, she didn’t know. She didn’t have the strength to go to help sell sandals downtown. She let her feet lead her wherever they desired.

Fifi knew this was bound to happen. The Haitian middle class was a constantly shifting and crumbling class that was supported by the income of the diaspora. Fifi’s
brother in law said that one day, when the diaspora forgets about those left behind, the country will only survive by burning the bodies of the poor for energy. Fifi always believed Haitians had an inclination for believing in worse futures, but with the illness of her uncle and increasingly depleting funds, Fifi realized that it was all possibly true.

Fifi once heard that for most Americans, 24,000 gourdes was nothing. 24,000 gourdes translates to about $350 dollars. She remembered when her cousin came to visit from America with copies of art from a painter named Basquiat. Fifi laughed and said the artist drew like a child. Then her cousin revealed a primitive looking picture of a man holding a leash for a cow. The Field Next to the Other Road. Her cousins asked her: How much do you think someone paid for this? Fifi dismissively said 10 gourdes. Her cousin’s eyes got big and then she hissed: Thirty-seven million dollars.

Fifi stopped in front of a vendor selling paintings from a local artist. Full colors filled in the shapes that represented people, animals, and objects. The paintings never seemed still despite the stock poses of the subjects. The paintings went beyond the canvas, because they generally represented the everyday scenes of the countryside or the city. You could easily find the face in the painting in a passerby. Nothing sold by this vendor would be more than 3,000 gourdes. Why couldn’t these paintings be worth thirty-seven million? Fifi considered that people didn’t want to see things in their environment. They want to enshrine it, hang a painting at a safe distance from its reality.

Walking down Delmas, Fifi spotted a Western Union. Despite the limited possibility, Fifi entered to see if her uncle had transferred anything recently. She gave the clerk her mother’s name and he informed her nothing was available. Fifi’s mother had
initially suspected that her brother had just resented sending money so he sent less frequently. But Fifi was empathetic to the plight of her American family members. The same joy that defined Fifi’s trips to Western Union, were most likely matched with resentment from her family abroad.

Fifi considered all the ways she could make 24,000 gourdes by the end of the week. She could possibly start a traveling branch of the sandal gig, going throughout the city to see if she could catch mission tourists around the city. Or she could get close to one of the young missionaries that often based their operations in the country side. She would become their little project, speaking that Creole that sounded like long yawns, and the American congregation would be asked to sponsor her school fees. Or she would marry wealth as Madeline would suggest.

For the moment, Fifi let her environment engulf her. Cars beeped at each other as they tried to force the reality of a highway onto the two-lane roads. Fifi removed a pattie from her bag and consumed it, allowing the spices to hit the roof of her mouth and the flakes to tickle her gums. She observed a tree grow out of a sewer. Women balancing heavy baskets on their heads, while swiftly maneuvering through the streets. She was happy for the sensory overload, the distraction.

As Fifi walked, she encountered familiar logos. Baby Loto, La Rouseau Center, Lion Center, Rejuvination, Agne de Dieu, La Confiance, Loto Plus, Titi Loto, 3+2 and most importantly, Lesly Center. The iconic blue and yellow color scheme that decorated the exterior of Lesly Center’s across Port-au-Prince could easily be misinterpreted for a more legitimate business. Maybe a small lending franchise, maybe a non-profit tutoring
institution, maybe servicing something as minimalist as dry cleaning and tailoring. But what Lesly Center distributed was something more valuable than any business could hold. It held hope in the form of a borlet. Haitian lotteries were so popular that it was impossible to go to even the most remote village without seeing several lottery stands. The lottery’s popularity came from the fact that in the midst of national misfortune, luck would bless one fortunate soul with sudden wealth. Wealth that only God could ordain. That only prayers could bring to life.

From behind a man bumped into Fifi, causing her to drop her pattie. Papers flew in the air, floating across the streets and down in sewers. A scrawny, yet astute man crawled on the floor, trying to capture as many of the papers as he could. He turned to Fifi.

“Aw, woman, you were not paying attention!” Fifi didn’t understand how she could have prevented something coming from behind her, but she got on her knees and helped him capture the papers. She noticed that the papers were scribbled with numbers and names in precise rows and columns.

“Are you a professor?” Fifi asked.

“I should be. No, I’m a neg sajak. A gwo neg sajak.” the man responded. A bookie. He stood up, arranging his glasses on his face. His skin was marked with large pores and stretched tightly around his face. He was cleanly shaven and wore a clean short haircut.

“The papers.” He said looking at the stack that was balanced on Fifi’s arms. The man looked so austere, that it seemed inappropriate for him to be a bookie. Most bookies
sat in their booths with loose polo shirts and cargo pants. Not in tan suits and designer glasses.

“You’ve won the lotto yourself I’m guessing,” Fifi said as she handed over the papers.

“Well the money has to come from somewhere.” the man said. It did. Curious, Fifi continued asking her questions as he walked to his destination.

“So you are the one who has all the money,” Fifi said following him. The man laughed.

“You think a man who has all the money would be walking in the street? No, I help coordinate the distribution of the prize money, but it’s not my personal money.”

“Whose money is it, then?” The man stopped at an intersection and looked at Fifi. Then he handed her half of the pile realizing she was just a curious student.

“It’s the money of people buying the borlets that we’re giving away. Some people are buying tickets everyday, so revenue makes up most of the winnings. We also charge each branch for using our name and some of the tax from the lottery…..it comes back to us.” The man smirked. Then he looked at Fifi. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

A pang reverberated in Fifi’s chest.

“Um, not today.” Fifi replied. The man started walking faster as if he was trying to lose Fifi. But Fifi still had his papers. She followed him, but then she realized someone was following them.
“Monsieur Darrien, Monsieur!”

The man was clearly the one named Darrien, but he walked as if he didn’t hear the woman behind them. Fifi struggled to catch up, but the women caught them just as they were about to cross another street.

“Darrien, I’ve been meaning to catch you.” Darrien popped his tongue then turned to greet the lady. The woman was in her thirties. She wore a tight red body-con dress that seemed inappropriate for her age and the time of day. Her ankles wobbled trying to support her body in heels.

“How good to see you on this side of Delmas.” The lady remarked.

“Yes, well I had some business to do.” Darrien slid his glasses up his nose.

“I just wanted to ask you if you have any lucky numbers for me today.”

“Oh Eugete. Now is not the time. You see I brought my niece to work today. I want to show her how I work in a respectable profession.” Darrien looked at Fifi to make sure she played along.

Madeline told Fifi about these relationships. Women would sleep with men in exchange for lottery tickets. Or at least to have proximity to them. It didn’t seem like Darrien was involved with the lady in that way. Only that the woman wanted to be involved with him.

“Toton, is this one of your customers? The loyal one that buys a ticket everyday?” Fifi put on a child’s voice and stared intensely at the lady as if she were a painting in a museum. The lady was a bit stunned.
“No tifi, me and your uncle are friends.” The lady responded.

“Oh really? Why have I never seen you at his house before?” Fifi batted her eyes. The lady was appalled. She looked to Darrien for rescue, but Darrien continued with his own agenda.

“Meh, let me take my niece to the office. Au revoir.” Darrien put his hand on Fifi’s back and led her across the street. Darrien had a mischievous smirk on his face. He squeezed Fifi’s shoulder once they reached the other side.

“Ah, the school girl has a cunning side.” He teased, while giving Fifi more of his papers. “You know, being cunning is a great sign of intelligence. Not everyone can think on their feet like that.”

Fifi struggled to balance the extra load of papers, but she was pleased to find that Darrien appreciated her efforts.

“She was interrupting my questions.” Fifi replied trying to win Darrien with a little charm as well.

“Yes, ask me any question you want. We should be in the office soon.” Darrien gave Fifi the rest of his papers. Darrien walked lightly and talked to Fifi as if she was a longtime companion. With boldness Fifi asked:

“If you needed to make 24,000 gourdes in a week how would you go about it?” Darrien’s face became more solemn as he contemplated her question. He looked at her uniform as if he suddenly had a revelation.
“Because I can tell you are a smart girl I will tell you what I truly think. School is a scam. Half of your classmates will end up as public servants who live off loans to create the façade of middle income existence. I did not finish school and look at me. I have a maid in my home, a car, and a driver. I sometimes walk my errands to remind myself that I was one decision away from being a street vendor. You see, your cunning will take you a lot farther. School suppresses your instinct to rebel and question the very institutions that suppress you. Instead students are taught how to obey rules and be the lackeys of richer men. The rules work like this: if you are poor you must obey. If you are rich, you make your own rules.

Darrien covertly stuck his hand into a vendor’s basket and removed several bags of nuts and beans. The vendor didn’t notice and continued walking down the street.

“To be successful, Madame, you must walk around like you can do anything, even when you have nothing at all. That is the attitude of the successful. Think bigger than 24,000 gourdes. Think one million.”

Darrien turned a corner Fifi had never been aware of on her many trips down Delmas. They reached a tall, yet unassuming cement circle building, that had yet to be painted. The guards at the door recognized Darrien and allowed him to enter with Fifi. Inside, the décor screamed at you to notice its detail. Marble floors reflected the light shining off a large crystal chandelier that hung with no precaution of falling. Everything here looked permanent and secure. Fifi realized she had never walked into a building that did not indicate infrastructural flaw.

A woman ran up to Fifi and grabbed the papers from her arms.
“Monsieur Darrien, you have been a while. I told you I could find the address. I hope your trip wasn’t too much of a hassle.” The lady wore a grey pantsuit and looked like one of those women in American sitcoms. She was very light skinned, wearing natural bouncy curls that fell across her shoulders. Fifi noticed the woman was speaking strictly French without a Creole word leaving her mouth.

“Ah, Marie. I don’t mind interacting with the people. Plus, I found this little gem.” Darrien walked to the elevators and tilted his head so Fifi would follow him. “File the papers and update the winner as soon as possible. Let me know when the boss intends to make his way to the embassy for the party.”

The elevator doors opened and Darrien and Fifi entered. Darrien clicked the seventh-floor button then turned to Fifi. The elevators opened to a hallway with gold and blue carpet and paintings hung on crème colored walls.

“Don’t I make it seem like I’m a big man?” Darrien goaded as he walked down the hallway. Something felt off about how proud he felt in being seen as a big man. Fifi knew she had no choice but to answer positively.

“Yes, you present yourself well.”

The paintings on the wall had no coordination. The styles jumped from Baroque, Renaissance, Impressionist, Cubist, to Pop Art. Darrien noticed Fifi’s confused face.

“I know, very ugly paintings. My boss loves going to museums in America and Europe. He believes that staring at these ugly things make him cultured. But these aren’t even the real paintings, just replicas.”
Darrien opened a door and led Fifi in. His office was smaller than what she’d imagined. Square shaped with a small wood desk covered with pictures of what she assumed was his family.

“Now that I have invited you into my office, what is your name?” Darrien said, settling himself in a chair behind his desk.

“Fifi. Fifi Salnave.” Fifi found no harm in using her nickname. If she could not be called by the name she wanted to be recognized as, there was no reason in her being there in the first place.

“Fifi. Yes, a name of the people,” Darrien said condescendingly. The air was thicker here.

“I see that you are in a bind. A bind that I, and many other people, are familiar with. But I implore you to take the unconventional path.” Darrien opened a drawer and placed cash on the desk. Then he took the beans and nuts he stole from the vendor and put it on the desk.

“Fifi, you could be a great asset to me. You see, I am seven people away from being in charge of this whole operation, which would get me even closer to my goal of running for president.” Fifi was a bit shocked by his revelation. Or rather the fact that he was being so blunt about it.

“I need someone to help me run errands around the city that get me closer to proving that I am a worthy candidate should a position open above me. This is a hard industry and those at the top are always likely to crumble. As you can see, I am becoming
less and less unassuming. I draw attention in the streets, but I cannot let just anyone run
these errands for me, so I usually do it on my own. Despite our brief encounter, I feel as
though I can trust you Fifi.”

Darrien pushed the cash and the stolen goods toward Fifi.

“I leave you with these gifts, not to bribe you into joining me, but to give you
with choice. You will leave here with exactly 24,000 gourdes. Tomorrow, you can go to
school and pay your tuition. Or you can come back here with the 24,000 gourdes. I will
keep the money until the end of the week. You work for me and I’ll pay you 24,000
gourdes every week. You make sure I get the next highest position, and you will be paid
30,000 gourdes per week. Another position, you will be paid 40,000 gourdes per week.
Do you understand what I am saying?”

Fifi straightened her back. She put her clammy hands together, wrapping the
fingers around each other, and nodded her head.

“Good. This building is on Delmas 77. I work on the seventh floor. Your
assignment is to help me rise seven positions. It’s simple Fifi.” He nodded toward the
cash and the food. Fifi picked them up.

“Thank you very much Monsieur Darrien. I greatly appreciate it.” Fifi held the
cash in her right hand and the food in her left.

“Remember Fifi, successful men do not obey. They make their own rules. Bonne
chance.”
Fifi left the office and walked quickly to the elevator. As she waited for the elevator’s arrival, she noticed a painting in lines depicting two voodoo men looking at each other. Despite the grandeur of the European paintings, this painting seemed more realistic for the setting.

Fifi quickly left the building and realized she had to pick up her sister from school. On her way, Fifi dropped off the food Darrien gave her into a random vendor’s basket and put the cash at the bottom of her backpack. When Fifi arrived at Widenline’s school, Widenline noticed a layer of dust on the bottom of Fifi’s skirt. Fifi said they had a field day at school. Then Widenline said:

“The principal told me that you have to pay the school fee for the upcoming month soon. He just wanted to remind me to make sure that it wasn’t as late as last time.” Fifi pursed her lips.

“Yes, Widenline, I will give you the money as soon as I get it.”

When Fifi reentered her house, she saw that the electricity was off. Reliable electricity in Haiti was as common as an honest politician. Fifi had heard that the rich had generators and invertors to ensure that the lights never went out, even during city-wide blackouts. Whenever there was a blackout, Fifi would look up in to the hills where the rich Haitians lived to see lights flickering with the arrogance of consistent power. Fifi felt the presence of the cash in her bag burning as she considered consistent electricity with envy.

Tonight, Fifi did not sleep alone. She hugged the cash to her chest, hoping that if someone were to harm her in attempt to take the money, even in their victory, her blood
would stain the bills for eternity. There were no cats that night, but every whistle of the wind reminded her of the choice she would make the moment she rose from her mattress.

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Widenline did not protest waking up that morning. Fifi completed her routine with no contemplation. Her nonchalance towards planning had suddenly become an asset. She went to family savings jar, which had no more than 10,000 gourdes. The money was used to buy food, candle sticks, gas, and ice blocks for the refrigerator. Fifi removed 5,000.

She gave her neighbor Miriam 1,000 gourdes. She gave Widenline 4,000 for her school fees. Fifi’s older sister was gaunt from pregnancy sickness. Her brother in law had to sell the sandals by himself that day. Her brother did not come the night before. Fifi’s mother made the family boiled eggs to eat for breakfast and lunch.

This morning Fifi noticed a whole new set of images. Some of the street potholes seemed to be outlines of animals or celebrities. Green was always the worst faded color, its florescence almost vomit inducing. Fifi thought how important a belief in God was in a country like Haiti, where the rules of intelligence and meritocracy were constantly undermined the greed of the privileged. Goats lingered in alleyways always finding their way back home to an owner eager to slaughter. The dancing traffic officer who choreographed traffic like a messy soul train. A dog humping a light post.

Fifi dropped off Widenline then turned onto Delmas toward her school. To get to school, Fifi would turn on Delmas 33. Outside of the school she noticed a police officer
collecting a bribe from a man he pulled over. She decided to follow the cop car as it went
down the street, past Delmas 34, 35, 36, 37…
A CONVERSION

Gloria hardly realized she was burned until after she had placed the brisket on the plate and handed it to the customer.

“Have a blessed-ed day,” she said with a smile, doing her best to hide what her family characterized as a gummy mouth.

Gloria was embarrassed by her eagerly added “-ed”. Gloria looked down and realized that a burn blister had formed on her arm, a fault of the too short gloves that did not reach her elbows, even though she often had to reach behind the hot skewers to get cooked meat. She just wanted to make sure the customer and her boss, Bob, saw that she was serious about spreading barbecue ministry. So she smiled brightly through the shock of the pain until the customer was at the next station.

A managerial spot had just opened and Gloria knew she was more than qualified for the job. It paid $5 more per hour and the only noticeable difference in responsibilities was making sure fellow employees worked efficiently. Gloria had worked at the job for over a year and had never been late for a shift or seriously messed up an order. However, her direct superior, Christina, said that she didn’t seem bright enough, and even though she was a strong candidate, her gloominess would be a hindering factor.

“I just feel like, like I know you are happy, don’t get me wrong, I just want to like see it on your face? You’ve totally got an interview for the position, but I want to just give you a heads up that like Bob is going to see if you are able to like smile more and spread ministry.” Christina had said in their one on one.
Gloria peeked at Bob from the corner of her eye as he made his rounds between tables smiling at customers and making sure they were having a good experience. Bob didn’t seem to even be able to notice Gloria’s “gloominess” at all. Why did it matter if she smiled, when a random moment where her face went blank would define his perception of her engagement or happiness?

The pain in her hand became unbearable and she asked her co-worker to cover her station while she went to the restroom. With the gloves off, the blister looked even worse. The blister looked like an encapsulated lake with reddish-brown beaches that clashed into her dark brown skin. It was intensely disgusting and she knew she had to send a picture to her brother and sister. She drew a smiley face on the blister bubble.

*picture attached*

Look at my new friend.

Where’d you get this?

Work at 5 Clovers

How????

Glove was too short and I burned myself on the skewer.

And you’re sending us a picture? You should be laying on the floor spazzing right now! Get your coins!
Belinda had this idea that one of the siblings would be embroiled in a lawsuit so severe that they’d be able to live off the settlement for the rest of their lives. But Five Clovers is a different kind of business. With its glass windows decorated with stickered Bible verses, stations named after books of the Bible (appetizers are Genesis, Meat is Leviticus, Dessert is Revelations[for the end of times of your waistline]) and firehouse brick decor, the business being sued would yield a Hobby Lobby level of outrage. It was a ministry barbecue, which gave them an advantage in any litigation: religious discrimination.

You can’t sue Jesus.

And all God’s people say *clap* Amen.

Gloria chucked her phone back in her bag and headed to the floor. Bob looked tersely in her direction, probably scowling at the insolence of an employee’s bladder interrupting the workflow of his assembly line.

Gloria nodded an apologize and began cutting brisket.

The lull of the day continued with most customers providing a customary smile or nod of acknowledgement before moving onto the next station. The blister steadily grew and Gloria hoped it wouldn’t pop while she was on her shift. Gloria sang songs in her head and as much as she tried, the Christian rock that played on the speakers remained stuck in her head.
I know You're able and I know You can

Save through the fire with Your mighty hand

But even if You don't

My hope is You alone

“Group’s here!” the cashier yelled from the front register.

Through the windows, Gloria saw a large black charter bus come into the parking lot. Her coworkers scrambled to make sure they had extra food items on hand and that their most popular plates were pre-prepared. Gloria took it as a cue to cut more brisket, being careful to not let her blister get close to the meat or the hot skewer.

A crowd of young and old black women got out of the bus. Many immediately started taking pictures of the outside of the establishment with their phones. They smiled and made faces with each other as if commemorating a great discovery. The women came inside the restaurant, where their harmonic voices overpowered the music on the speakers and the sizzling of meat on the grill.

“Winter is here,” Gloria’s coworker at the other station joked.

The women split themselves into pairs and triplets, each group conferring with each other about their dinner decisions. There were the Dieters, who only got salads at the appetizer station and asked for grilled chicken strips at the grill. There were the
Indulgers, seeming to point at almost every item at each station, their arms struggling to hold up their trays. There were the Sharers, who got things as groups, asking for two or three plates so they could organize their shared meal once they arrived at their table. The women were young, old, and middle aged, the smaller groups representing a mix of generations able to connect on faith and not age.

An older woman with a jheri curl wig approached Gloria’s station. Gloria was cutting brisket unconsciously and placing the meat on plates mindlessly. However, this woman’s response to ‘What would you like?’ brought embarrassment.

“That blister’s about to blow, hunny,” the woman said.

Looking at her arm, Gloria noticed the blister had nearly doubled in size. Before, most of the blister could be hidden by her gloves and her sleeves. Now it shamelessly showed its balloon frame for all to see.

Gloria tried to pull her sleeve down to cover the blister. It made no difference. She looked at the lady sheepishly and said,

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, baby. Work is hard. I get it. I got some castor oil and apple cider vinegar though if you want the swelling to go down.”

“Mhm,” Gloria responded, attracted by the offer but not knowing how the logistics would work while she was at her station.
“Hunny, I said I’ll take some of that brisket please. Sans blister juice."

“Oh right,” Gloria said. She retrieved her knife and continued cutting the brisket.

Gloria resolved to tape paper around her blister so at least it was not visible to the customers. She droned back into the rhythm of work when her coworker nudged her ribs.

“Hey, I think that lady is trying to get you to go over,” he said.

Gloria noticed the jheri curl wig lady waving her over. Gloria also found Bob standing a ways behind the woman, actively encouraging Gloria to go to her.

Gloria took off her apron and walked to the lady.

“How can I help you ma’am?” Gloria said with a forced smile.

“You can stop all that fake smiling now. I’m the one helping you,” the lady handed over a packet rubber-banded together. The packet contained two small bottles, one with a dark liquid of thick viscosity and the other with a yellow liquid of a thin viscosity, a card with a raised image, and a wad of one dollar bills.

“Oh, that’s really kind of you, but I don’t need -”

“Listen honey, you win nothing in life by denying God’s blessings. Take the money and if you feel like it, visit our organization. We’d love to have you.”

“Thank you,” Gloria said.

“Be sure to wipe the blister with the vinegar first, then coat it with the oil.”

“Mhm,” Gloria said, nearly bowing to emphasize her gratitude.
Gloria went straight to the restroom, where she unwrapped the taped paper to reveal a pulsating blister. The vinegar provided a cooling electric sensation that almost immediately seemed to decrease the swelling. The oil made the blister look less red.

Gloria unbanded the dollar bills to find that the women had hidden a $50 bill within three one-dollar bills.

“Shit,” Gloria said, wondering what she would do with the money. It felt like theft, although the woman had intentionally given the money to her. Gloria took a closer look at the card. The title of the card said “A Seat at the Table” with black hands crowning a raised golden sankofa. Belind once told her about a Ghanian friend who had created an African fashion show called “Sankofa” to encourage people to buy the clothes modeled. Belind thought naming it Sankofa was clever since it meant “go back and get it”, which was a subversive yet effective call to action. On the back of the card was a depiction of Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper with Jesus and his disciples as black women. The address, number, and email address of the organization was stamped on the upper right hand corner, giving the impression that the words were shadows of the sun. Gloria buried the packet deep into her pant pocket and returned to the floor.

The woman’s group was gathered outside in the parking lot re-boarding their bus. Gloria tried to see if she could spot a jerry curl wig in the crowd, but could not make the woman out in the flurry.

Bob came up to Gloria, his hot breath running down Gloria’s neck.

“I just told the rest of the team, but great job dealing with the group. I was nervous that they would be wacky and unreasonable, but they were actually quite kind
and normal,” Bob said patting Gloria’s shoulder twice and leaving to attend to other business.

Gloria wondered why Bob would think the group would be wacky and unreasonable. Considering that Bob anticipated their arrival, they probably called ahead, which is more than what many of the high school sports team and choir groups did for equally sized groups. Gloria couldn’t shake the feeling that most people found something inherently wacky about a large group of black women.

Gloria finished her shift and took the bus to her dorm room. The spanish moss had grown thick during the fall, weighing down the branches of large trees that swung in the wind. Winter in Tallahassee usually required nothing more than a thick cotton jacket, but the north, jealous of their mild winters, had transferred some of the biting cold to Florida.

Gloria was glad to find her roommate, Tessa, was not in the room. Tessa often brought over her best friend Lynn and sang along to Disney Classics soundtracks. Although they were technically teenagers, Gloria found the singing obnoxiously immature and inconsiderate. She remembered growing up how Belind had a tendency to belt songs at the top of her lungs. When they were younger and afraid of Belind, Delen and Gloria never protested but simply moved to another room. Then they realized their strength in numbers and would bully Gloria into shutting up. It was the period in their childhood where everything seemed backwards. Adults became children. And little sisters became big sisters.

On her laptop, Gloria began searching for A Seat at the Table organization. A sloppily put together wordpress website displayed a carousel rotating pictures of black
women having fun at the beach, at an amusement park and at a bowling alley. The header banner image was a high angle image of the women with their hands up in praise in a small circular arena. A stage was in the center of the arena, the women forming a human circle around it. The arena was surrounded in murals that depicted the prophecy, arrival, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Again this Jesus was a black woman. The center mural was clear glass except for a brown cross hung in the center.

Gloria clicked on the ‘About’ page and was finally reconnected with the lady with the jerry curl wig. Her name was Dr. Edna Ealy. She founded the organization in 2003 (it never once described itself as a church) after serving as a chaplain at Howard University for five years. After seeing what she described as “a palpable sense of black women feeling existential guilt and shame”, she decided to start an organization that centered black women in a world where black women were ‘hardly seen at all’. The about page quoted Malcolm X: “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.”

Gloria always thought America’s identity politics was a bit overblown. She was confused by these raised fists, black love, and black liberation people. At one end they seemed determined to change the perception and treatment of black people and at the other end, they also kept forcing the narrative of oppression and disadvantage down everyone’s throats.

It wasn’t so much that Gloria didn’t want to engage with blackness, but that every conversation about race lacked any nuance to provide a viable solutions. And since
nothing looked like it was going to change anytime soon, Gloria would rather put her energy into personal issues which she had actually had agency over. Like getting a promotion at Five Clovers.

Gloria continued her routine of going to class, going to shifts at Five Clovers, then going to class again. In her evening media class, Gloria noticed a girl with grey box braids carrying a backpack with ‘A Seat at the Table’ pin. Gloria reveled in her ability to remain anti-social in the cliquish class environment, but she suddenly felt the need to speak up and pretend she wanted to start a conversation. Quickly, before lecture started, Gloria ran down to sit next to the girl.

“He’s such a boring lecturer, right?” Gloria tried her first attempt at conversation. The girl turned and sized her up.

“Not really, I think he’s trying his best. I mean, it’s not like he takes attendance or anything.”

Gloria sighed sinking into her seat. She didn’t know what else to say so she began taking notes.

“Hey, do you work at Five Clovers?” the girl hissed in the middle of class.

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

The girl pointed at the Five Clovers folder Gloria used for storing papers. She blushed.

“Yeah. You know, FAFSA don’t really got all our backs like that,” The girl smiled.
“I don’t think anyone has ever sung praises of FAFSA,” the girl smirked. “I’m Kendra.”

“Gloria. Nice shoes by the way,” Kendra’s purple Nike hightops had Basquiat crowns on the side.

“Yeah, these shoes were mad expensive. But you never deny God’s blessings.”

What did God have to do with Nike hightops?

After class finished, Kendra and Gloria continued talking, exchanging intel on the best black hair salons in the area and which black sororities at FAMU accepted FSU students. Before she knew it, Gloria was late for work.

“Hey, I gotta run real quick, but I’ll see you next week right?”

“I could give you a ride, if you’re stressed about that janky 47 bus. Was thinking about eating Clovers today too.”

Gloria contemplated. Getting in a stranger’s car was definitely an invitation for you to be featured in an I Survived episode, but also Gloria really did hate the bus. And if Kendra was already headed over….

“Oh okay cool. I’ll pay you back I swear.”

“Don’t worry about it, sis.” Gloria grimaced, knowing she hated being referred to as ‘sis’, since it always seemed to confirm an unspoken contract between two black women.
Gloria continued to grovel at Five Clovers hoping to convince Bob and Christina that she was worthy of the promotion. She mastered her commercial smile and muted, but sincere well wishes of blessings. But in the meantime, Kendra became a good companion. Kendra would drop Gloria off after their Thursday lectures. Gloria learned Kendra was Panamanian and hoped to attain a fashion degree. Sometimes they broached the topic of extracurricular activities, but Gloria never seemed close to discovering how Kendra was related to ‘A Seat at the Table’. And after a while, it didn’t even matter.

In order to prepare for an official interview with Five Clovers, Gloria decided to take the bus one day to Governor’s Square Mall. Kendra was back in South Florida visiting her parents, so Gloria couldn’t bum a ride. Getting to the mall without a ride required Gloria to walk thirty minutes to get to a bus that took 40 minutes to get to the mall five miles away.

Gloria hated that she smelled of burnt meat whenever she left Five Clovers and always doused herself with Vanilla Warm Sugar Mist to mask the scent. The bus took a roundabout way to get to the mall, taking detours into residential areas that encapsulated high schools and business parks.

Gloria lay her greasy forehead on the bus window and looked out the window. As much as she tried, Gloria couldn’t escape the weight of the $53 Dr. Edna Ealy had given her. She knew she owed Dr. Ealy nothing, but the generosity made Gloria feel obligated to visit A Seat at the Table.

If Gloria got off at the next stop she could transfer to a bus that would get her a quarter of a mile away from A Seat at the Table. She had google mapped the directions
every time she dipped into the $53 to buy something. First, she wanted some gum, but the bodega didn’t accept credit card, so she used her $3 to get the pack of gum. Then she saw that a boy, the son of a kid from her high school (yes, you can have child the moment you start ejaculating), was selling chocolate bars for his Boys Scouts badge. She ran to the local bank, asked them to break her $50 bill into ones and tens, and bought three chocolate bar from the cute kid. Gloria had always been a sucker for buying things from and for small children. And now she was going to use the rest of the $50 to buy a nice outfit for her promotional interview.

The bus came to a halt in front of a single bench covered by a glass awning. The advertisement space held the face of a bigger white man with brown hair that said “Happy Birthday to Dylan Foreman, the Best Boss Ever!”

Jesus, Gloria thought, talk about desperate. Her ruminations on the over-zealous sign almost made her forget about the fact that this was the transfer stop. The beep of bus doors closing jolted her into action and once she found herself outside the bus, she immediately regretted her decision.

She decided she would wait for the same bus line to come and take it the rest of the way to the mall. She laid on the bench, closing her eyes and accepting the warm hug of the sun. She heard a bus approaching and assumed it would be the bus to the mall, but the marquee said “Dogwood”.

The driver opened the door and looked at Gloria with annoyance.
“Are you coming in or not?” the bus driver asked. Gloria felt a drop of water hit her back. She assumed it was from the trees holding onto dew from the morning, but the clouds presented a different explanation.

“Yeah, one sec,” Gloria gathered herself and entered the empty bus.

The rain started pouring and Gloria just hoped that it would stop within the hour so that she wouldn’t have to wait in the rain for the next bus. But that wasn’t how Florida weather worked. When rain fell, it poured consistently and it could be up to twenty-four hours before the sky was clear again.

Gloria knew that she was genuinely curious to see how this organization functioned, but she didn’t want to admit that to herself. Although raised religiously, she thought those who believed the allure of organizations, religious or secular, were ignorant and bound to be defrauded.

A healthy level of skepticism always kept someone well protected from less than pure people. Gloria’s mother was sure to instill her children with the habit of always considering someone’s motives.

“The biggest risk in this world is never ensuring that the motives of those in your inner circle are aligned with your own.”
It made sense then that Gloria’s mother constantly wanted her kids to do everything a specific way. She wasn’t instilling habits for a better future, but habits that could more directly align with hers. And when her children rebelled in ways that were simply incompatible to her motives, she felt like she had no other option but to leave.

Gloria let her greased twists rest on the bus window. Giant drops of rain made rivers and tributaries on the pane. She thought of how the rain traveled from the mountain tops of Port-au-Prince down to the ocean. And how that same ocean condensed ocean water from the African Gold Coast and brought hurricanes to destroy the very source that brought it life.

The bus jolted to a stop.

“Í’m guessing this is where you want to go,” the bus driver said, looking straight ahead. To the right was a gate with an outline of a woman arched back blowing a conch shell. Her afro formed a large halo around her head. Gloria recognized that this was a depiction of Neg Mawon as a woman. The famous Haitian symbol of the freedom from slavery. The image converted by Duvalier into a symbol of fear and submission.

“Yeah, this is my stop,” Gloria said, slightly annoyed by the assumption the bus driver made.

Gloria put her backpack on her head and got off the bus. There was no bell or intercom system for Gloria to announce her arrival. She waited for a minute looking into the gate and wondering what were her options for getting in. The bus driver was still at the stop, writing notes on a clipboard. She was about to ask him to let her in again when she heard,
“I was just telling the girls how I saw someone with a blister that reminded me of leprosy,” Edna said.

Edna had a giant black umbrella that made it seem like she existed in her own climate where she controlled the weather. She wore dark purple lipstick and today, her hair was out of her wig and formed into a Angela Davis-esk afro. Instead of first ensuring that Gloria got under the umbrella, Edna grabbed Gloria’s arm and examined the blister scar. She clicked her tongue.

“Shea butter,” she said and without a word indicated at Gloria to follow her. Gloria ran under the umbrella and allowed Edna to lead her to the door.

The unassuming beech wood doors led into a corridor lined with framed pictures of painted artwork and portraits. The corridor opened into a bright hall, illuminated by vintage edison bulbs that filled with ceiling.

Here, the walls were blank, but there were tables and chairs throughout. Gloria recognized this as the arena from the website. White curtains covered the murals and created a sense that room was a self-reflecting fishbowl.

“Your name’s Gloria, right?” Edna asked.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Don’t worry none, I just remember your name-tag from the restaurant,” sensing Gloria’s hesitation.

“Right, right.”
Edna greeted the sprinkling of women congregated at the tables then led Gloria through a door. Behind this door was the most modern and pristine kitchen Gloria had ever seen. A high ceiling allowed the smoke from a large smoker that was both inside and outside the building to billow in a corner. Chrome appliances accented the Jerusalem stone that made up the walls of the building.

“Whoa,” Gloria couldn’t contain her awe.

“Yeah. When you spend half a million on renovations you hope to get that reaction,” Edna replied. Cooks ran throughout the kitchen with thermostats, spatulas, forks, and carving knives. Corn was being roasted, pepper and onion chopped, bread and muffins baked, and potatoes peeled. Gloria felt acute sensory overload that was accentuated by the fact that a jar of shea butter was thrust in her face.

“Now, as you can see, we take care of our people here. Give them gloves long enough to protect their offspring,” Edna slathered a dime of shea butter onto Gloria’s arm.

In the corner of her eye, Gloria spotted a to-go bag from Five Clovers. She picked it up and saw food wrangled apart inside.

“You didn’t like our food?”

“Of course we didn’t like it. We were doing competition research.”

Competition? Suddenly it clicked in Gloria’s head. The women were seeming to discuss their choices because of how they thought they could possibly improve the process. They were testing which food eating style was most likely to attract customers.
“Is that legal?”

“Are you asking me if it’s legal to buy food from a restaurant, because of course it is.”

“So this is a restaurant?”

“No, this a black women’s empowerment non-profit organization. I think it’s your business that has mixed up interests.”

“I just work for Five Clovers. I’m not the one of the people who make the decision.”

“Well you were the one who started using the collective “our”. So since you’re apart of *them*, do you know if Five Clovers does any homeless or women’s center outreach?”

“Oh, like I said, I just cut the brisket.”

“Would you like to do more than cut brisket?” Edna’s eyes glistened when she looked at Gloria.

“Actually, to be honest, I just came by to say thank you for the money. It really helped. So yeah, not really job searching or anything.”

“If you wanted to just say thank you, you could have called or emailed me. But you’re here, so clearly you’re interested in more,” Edna positioned herself at a station and started cutting okra.

“Um, Edna --”
“Dr. Ealy. I didn’t spend seven years in grad school for young bloods to throw around my first name.”

“Yes, Dr. Ealy, this sounds interesting and all, but I don’t even know what this place is or does. You just brought me to the kitchen and started talking about a job.”

“A job you already researched. You know my name, which means you visited our website. When you visited our website, I’m sure you read everything that was going on. Now, I have given many people money throughout my travels, but you’re one of the few that actually came to visit my organization. What’s happening right now is an interest meeting.”

Gloria knew she should have stayed on the bus. Now she felt like she was being gas-lit by a self-important black woman. She had her mother for those duties.

“Do you know when the next bus comes?” Gloria asked.

“The next bus comes when the next bus comes. I’m not trying to be rude hunny, I just never have taken the bus here.”

So it was going to be like this. Gloria pulled a stool next to Dr. Edna and said.

“Well, I’m in school, which means that I can’t work full time.”

“Mhm.”

“And after I graduate I would leave.”

“Yup.”
“And that’s fine to you?”

“Understand, I am not in the business of making money, spreading ministry, or whatever else you have been told is the motivation of people doing things like this. I develop people. I don’t care if you don’t like it and leave. That just means I wasn’t the right person to develop you. But you’ll never know if you never try.”

Dr. Ealy’s hands carefully cut the okra with precise and fast movements that made her hands blur in a flurry. It reminded Gloria of the way her father cut vegetables. He would make food by basically jazzing up microwaveable or reheatable dishes. He put fresh spinach, red pepper, and curry into ramen. He would put eggplant on top of reheated lasagna. He would add El Sabor to rotisserie chicken and fry the skin so that it served as a side. She recognized her father had a special skill that many people lacked. Making the bland unique and enticing. Making himself seem more innocent than he was.

“How much do you pay for me to be developed?” Gloria asked.

“Depends on how much you put into your development.”

Gloria pursed her lips. This lady was crazy. The rain stopped pouring.

“I think I’m going to wait for the bus outside.”

“Alright.”

When Gloria got outside, the rain was a light drizzle. A rainbow crowned the sky and when Gloria squinted closely, all she saw was black.
It had been two weeks since Gloria’s interview with Christina and Bob for the promotion. She thought it’d be too much to ask for an update within in the first week of the interview, but by the second week, she was asking everyday. They would smile at her briefly and say that they were still deliberating, that they had had a hectic past couple of days.

And today a new person started. He had military cut, broad soldiers, thin lips, and a strong handshake.

“Hello, Gloria, gonna be working as a night shift manager. I’ve relocated from the Orlando branch, but I hope to learn a thing or two about how y’all do it here in Tallahassee.”

Gloria knew she didn’t get the promotion. And at that point, she didn’t feel like fighting or crying about it, though the tears welled at the edge of her eyes. Gloria felt undervalued, unseen, and inconsequential. The ascetic life was never for her. She deserved better than being ignored for her efforts and dedication.

Gloria walked over to Bob, removing her apron.

“Hello Bob, I’m feeling sick. I think I gotta take the day off.”

“You look fine to me,” Bob said dismissively.

“Well, I’m leaving,” Gloria said to a disdainful Bob who then seemed affirmed, as if this moment exemplified why he never seriously considered promoting her in the first place.
Gloria got on the bus and transferred to the Dogwood bus. The driver dropped her off in front of the same female Neg Mawon gate.

“The gate’s open,” a voice said from an unseen speaker.

Gloria opened the gate and walked herself to the kitchen where Dr. Ealy was tasting a bouillon. She silently held out the ladle to Gloria. Gloria took a sip. It immediately reminded her of the bouillon Mummy made with cow’s tongue, farin, yucca, and plantain.

“It’s okay,” Gloria said.

“Okay,” Dr. Ealy said.

Dr. Edna walked toward a room in the back of the kitchen. There was large office that smelled of cedar. A small white desk stood in the center.

“There is a sign-on bonus,” Dr. Ealy said taking a seat behind the desk. There was no seat in front of the desk for Gloria to sit at. Gloria waited for a contract paper to sign.

“I haven’t signed anything.”

“Okay, then call it a ‘you came here again bonus,” from a drawer in the desk, Dr. Ealy removed a generic white enveloped. She gave it to Gloria.

Inside the envelope, a wad of fifty dollar bills stacked together. It had to be at least five hundred dollars.

“I haven’t done anything yet,” Gloria said still looking at the money.
“But I trust that you will,” Edna said leaning back into her chair.

“Okay, so how does this work?’

“You come when you can.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“You don’t have a W9 for me to fill out or anything? How will I get my W2 for tax season?”

“There’s no W2. We pay in cash only.”

Gloria looked at Dr. Ealy as if she were not already entangled in whatever scheme she was up to. Belind said always trust a black woman, especially a black woman who hustles. Gloria thought Belind gave too much weight to those who shared her skin-tone. But money always had a way of healing wounds faster than ethical considerations.

“Then, I’ll be here tomorrow,” Gloria said.

“You’ll be here tomorrow.”