JUST PRETEND I'M NOT HERE

by

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This thesis was written as an exploration of fatherhood, loss, trauma, migration, and memory. It explores these topics through interconnected short stories.
Dedication

To my mom and dad. To my dearest friends. To Emily and Lola.
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Brotherman

The shape of the envelope inside his mail slot surprised David. It was square, not the usual rectangle. A sign, he thought, that perhaps someone besides his brother Thomas had finally written him. Indeed, it was Sabine, his brother’s wife. David was in love with her.

Inside the Cameroonian embassy, David could barely contain his excitement. He held the envelope against his stomach and performed a little dance. His abdomen and hips moved but the rest of his body was still. The night watchman looked on.

“So, which one is it? Money or a woman,” the watchman asked.

“Both. Women like this one are expensive.”

They laughed at the same time, the way that men do to mask truths that are well beyond their experiences. Their laughter hid the fact that instead, they were the joke. Their choreography was impeccable.

David had never been with a woman like Sabine. They’d known each other since he was ten and she was seven. Even then, she was bold and beautiful, a loudmouth who had no interest in him or the other the boys in their village. David and his friends would banter over which one of them might someday be the lucky one. They played a game that had her name attached to it. In it, they sat in a circle, and pretended to be her father. One after the other, they tried to top each other, sharing fantasies of what her dowry might fetch them. Their answers escalated like the body count during the progressing
colonial war in Cameroon: a suit collection, a sports car, an army, the promise of eternal life. David teased that the cost might make his father have a heart attack and collapse, the way the trees fell not far from their home right when white men yelled “timber.”

“Monday?” the night watchman asked.

“Yup, see you then.”

David waved goodbye to the night watchman and headed for the exit. His toes barely touched the steps as he hurried down the marble staircase. He felt as though he was still dancing.

He retained the extra bounce in his step as he walked to the subway. He held the envelope in his gloved hand and every once in a while brought it close to his face to look at her name and his, written only a few inches apart, closer than they’d ever been.

On the platform at 68th street, David encountered the usual early evening mob. He’d been in America long enough to know that for many, Friday was payday, and that for a handful of others, rush hour was the perfect time to get paid. He’d already been pickpocketed twice and there’d be no confusing the envelope for cash. It was worth more to him than anything he owned. As the train came to a screeching halt in the station, David stuffed the thin envelope inside the inner breast pocket of his brand new winter coat. The coat was made of cowhide and lined with wool on the inside. He bought it on clearance at Macy’s. It was the most expensive purchase he’d ever made. Snow was in the
night’s forecast. He had never seen it before. He was excited about it, and the letter. The evening was promising.

David squeezed between two strangers on the crowded northbound train. Thoughts bounced around his head like the straphangers. He thought about what the note might say as he surveyed the tired faces in the crowd, their bodies shifting and leaning and grazing against his and others. He’d open the letter in front of Curtis as this was part of their Friday routine before work. David seemed more than certain that the letter would vindicate him. In it, David believed, Sabine expressed remorse for having shared in his brother’s views that he was a coward for leaving; she would tell of her resignation to a life that revolved around Thomas’ militant beliefs. Such thoughts satisfied David. He smiled with a confidence he had yet to wear on his face since he’d been in America. The look beamed the length of the subway car. It caught in its crossfire a woman with whom minutes ago he’d made eye contact. She reacted with a grin of her own that she wore after turning away and exiting at her stop, still blushing, into the arms of a waiting man with a thick afro.

David resurfaced aboveground in East Harlem just before five. Overhead, patches of baby blue sky held on amidst a collection of white snow-laden clouds. He noticed couples like an expectant father might notice strollers. They had always been there, but now they seemed everywhere. As dark hues took over the sky, David was convinced that Sabine had considered the offer he’d made
before he left home. Sabine was ready to leave Thomas and start anew with him in America. He couldn't wait to share the letter with Curtis.

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David began receiving Thomas’ letters soon after arriving in New York in April. His mail came to the embassy, a six-story mansion on the Upper East Side, where on weekdays, he worked as the primary chauffeur for the Cameroonian ambassador to the UN, a tall round man in his mid-fifties with frequent cravings for strawberry ice cream.

The first letter was twenty-one pages, and in his opening paragraph, Thomas made his intentions clear: he wanted to keep his little brother informed about the growing violence back home. Thomas suspected, as was the case in Paris, London, and Berlin, cities where he had close friends, that in America too, there was no media coverage of the terror, disappearances, and censorship. By the tenth letter, another twenty pager, David learned that Thomas was writing a book and that the two hundred pages of letters he had read were just the beginning. David wrote back the same day, wishing his brother luck. He considered finally telling Thomas how much he envied him for being crazy, brave, and for always having the courage to voice his opinion, sentiments that had endured since childhood, but pride made his pen heavy, and so he put it down, ending with a simple take care.
David was off to his second job at The Hamelet, a jazz club; since July, he’d worked in the coat check room with Curtis, the owner’s son, on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights. The job had belonged to his roommate, who’d quit for a more lucrative second job cleaning hotel rooms in Times Square. It was the roommate who had suggested to David that he stop by the The Hamelet on a Saturday.

“Because it’s the day after payday,” he’d said. “He’s always in a better mood. He’s usually there around seven. Just ask for Curtis.”

On his next available Saturday, David was scheduled to chauffeur the ambassador in the evening. He decided to walk past The Hamelet on his way to the embassy. He wanted to see for himself, to confirm what his roommate had raved about for months. It was located around the corner from their apartment, on St. John’s Place, not the prettiest street in Harlem; David couldn’t help but notice it, a red jewel amidst tired buildings with windows that sagged like droopy eyes. He was sipping coffee as he approached it. A group of girls dressed almost identically turned rope beneath the club’s bright cherry awning that protected them from the morning drizzle. The awning stretched the width of the sidewalk, hovering above a patch of sidewalk marked by a constellation of black blotches that made the pavement looked diseased, black circles that seemed to direct where the girls landed their feet. The awning came to an end within a foot of the curb and the cascading trail of rubbish that was Harlem’s year round confetti.
Twelve foot tall double carriage house doors stood out of place, not for their stain the color of palm oil, but because they reminded David of the giant doors that were the backdrop in a photo his older brother Thomas had sent home to Cameroon a few weeks after arriving in Paris for university. On the back he’d written “Presence Africaine aux pays des blancs.” The word play and significance of the Pan African publishing house in the Latin Quarter were lost on David, but he’d noticed the camera strapped around Thomas’ neck. The string of white smoke rising from near his fingers that revealed a little of what his brother had been up to. Thomas looked happy to be there, and David, as only he could saw mischief behind his brother’s smile. Thomas was up to something. He always was. And as the drizzle turned to rain, forcing David underneath the awning with the girls. He was certain that the start of the rainy season back home had brought the start of something new for Thomas. That’s how Thomas lived. He always thought David should do the same: live.

David watched the rope turn. He studied it and the girls. He paid attention to one of them. She looked about seven, Sabine’s age when they’d first met. She was up next. Her body rocked back and forth. Her hands swung at her sides like the receiver in a phonebooth across the street, dangling and swaying with the wind of the quieting rain. She timed her first step with the rope. David dared himself. He placed his coffee on a black spot on the ground. He’d seen enough to know how it worked. They met inside the turning rope, facing each other, twenty years apart, laughing with the same intensity.
the rope caught their ankles, the girls applauded without reserve. David felt alive. It was like a sign, there in front of The Hamelet, that it was going to be a good day, that the job would be his, and maybe one day, Sabine would too.

David bought a newspaper from the dispenser beneath the awning. It read WATERGATE in bold capital letters on the front page. He used it to shield himself from the rain as he continued his journey to work. He arrived half an hour early and waited outside. All around him, white women walked with confidence. Some held their dogs like babies, others talked to them. Others chatted, while watching their dogs urinate and drop feces to the ground, after which they called them by their names and walked away casually, as if the people around didn’t matter.

The night watchman let David inside. He retrieved an envelope from his mailbox. It was from Thomas. He thought about opening it when he heard the loud knock of shoes descending the mansion’s spiral staircase. His Excellency introduced his two guests, representatives from the Foreign Ministry. Why they were there, at the office, on a Saturday, David didn’t know. It wasn’t his job to know. David was a public servant of the lowest rank. He did what he was told. He kept his opinions to himself. He served His Excellency, his wife, and kids. This was how he served his country. His Excellency then took note of his earliness. In front of the dignitaries, he called David his son. He said he was rare. What man doesn’t like to be noticed by an older and much bigger man than
himself? His Excellency was in the mood for drinks and, as he put it, good black music.

“I know a place,” David said.

“Which one?”

“It’s called The Hamelet, Your Excellency.”

“Where is this Hamelet?”

“It’s in Harlem, Your Excellency.”

“Why not? Let’s go.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

David parked a handful of meters from The Hamelet’s entrance, in front of a red Monte Carlo with a sunroof. Hours in the city’s slow traffic had made him an expert at identifying cars. This one shone brand new. It looked fresh off the lot. A 1973 perhaps? He wondered what American star might be inside. He ran through a short list in his head, of those he’d love to meet, men but mostly women. One, a famous singer he could only remember was named for a season, had once told David that his accent was the prettiest voice she’d heard in a while.

“David, what are you waiting for?”

“Sorry, Your Excellency.” David exited to let the trio out and watched them disappear into the world behind The Hamelet’s double doors.

Above him, a street light came on, startling David. Only one street light was working on the entire block. Second-hand smoke billowed south from
beneath the club’s awning. The limo gleamed. He leaned against it, like it belonged to him, his arms crossed in front of his chest. The couple put out their cigarettes and entered The Hamelet just as a man came outside. Night had settled everywhere on St. John’s place except at The Hamelet. The man approached David. He pointed towards the limousine with a cigar. His other hand scoured inside his pant pocket.

“Hey brotherman, you got a light?”

There was a long pause. David pondered what to say. He could offer one of several apologies, like “sorry, no English,” or “I don’t understand.” Or he could use this intimate opportunity to ask once and for all “what does this word brotherman mean?” He chose silence and shrugged his shoulders.

The man took a step back to examine the limo. His eyes wandered and David followed them. He stopped searching his pockets. He was near the trunk of the limo now. David didn’t know what he was looking for.

“What country?”

“Hunh?”

“CMD.” He tapped the license plate with the toe of his boot.

“Oh, Cameroon.” David hoped the stranger was satisfied.

“We usually get European plates up here.” The man continued to circle the limo. “This your car?”

“No, that not my car.” David wanted to call him boss, out of respect, to placate the man, but the word escaped him.
The man was in front of the driver side door now. He cupped his hands to the window to look inside, then backpedaled to the passenger door and did the same. David began to worry. He realized that he was a chauffeur only when His Excellency was inside the vehicle. He was its guardian the rest of the time. It was his job to ensure the car’s safety. He heard the click of the door handle and watched the burly man enter. He sat down where His Excellency would sit. David watched him and The Hamelet’s red double doors. He prayed that His Excellency wouldn’t come out, that what was playing inside was indeed good black music. The man flipped open a secret compartment that was foreign to David until then. He plunged his big hands inside and removed from it a lighter that he pressed against the front of the cigar now between his lips. He blew his cheeks like a woman in the final stages of labor and before long the cigar tip turned orange and a cloud of smoke emptied from his mouth. He exited on David’s side.

“Trumpet lungs.”

David didn’t understand but he smiled anyway, relieved.

“You waiting for someone?” The man spoke in short sentences now, with familiar words and used grand gestures. It helped.

“Yes, boss.” The word had come back.


“Yes, boss.”
“Don’t worry, he’s happy,” The man smiled. Most of his teeth were white, some were gold, and others towards the back were missing.

“Good,” David said.

“You, coming inside?” He pointed towards the door. “My house. Free drinks.”

“No, thank you. I wait for boss.”

“Another night?”

“Busy. School.”

“What are you studying?”

“English classes.”

“You liking it?”

“It’s okay.”

“Look, here.” The man moved close to David. He looked to be in his late thirties, maybe ten years older than David. He put a hand on David’s shoulder. “Tomorrow night. English. Here. Eight o’clock. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“Free class. You understand that?”

“Yes.”

“And guess what?” The man appeared frozen momentarily, displaying a slight grin, wide eyes, and raised eyebrows that revealed the source of his forehead wrinkles. “You’re supposed to say what.”

“Einh.”
“Just say what.”

“What?”

The man laughed again. It was contagious. David laughed too.

“Now, listen to me,” he said pinching his left earlobe between his fingers. He drew David’s attention to the man’s ear where, he noticed an earring in a man’s ear for the first time. “I pay you too. You understand?”

David looked at the man with a blank stare. He was puzzled, and tried not to let the confusion come across. He wondered what could possibly be wrong with this man, what His Excellency and his colleagues had walked into behind the closed doors of The Hamelet that had nothing to do with music. Who offers free classes in exchange for paying their students? But David quickly remembered that this was America, where the unimaginable was possible.

“Yes,” David said.

“Good. You get here, you ask for Curtis. That’s my name. OK?”

“Hey. Are you Curtis? I’m…”

“Yeah, I know who you are. Not that many black men driving limousines with diplomatic plates from Cameroon in New York City.”

David just nodded.

“Tomorrow, seven o’clock, what you’ve got on is perfect. Coat check room, let’s try it out. If it works out, in no time, you’ll learn all the English in this place that you’ll ever need to know.”

“And I can teach you French, boss,” David told Curtis.
Curtis said he liked the sound of that, he knew some French from summers down South with his grandparents in Lafayette Parish. And he wanted to know more. Next year, he told David, he planned to leave the city for a less populated island.

“Why would you leave America?” David asked

“America doesn’t exist, man,” Curtis said, puffing on his cigar.

“Einh?” David was lost here.

“I mean...sorry.” Curtis saw the mix of confusion on David’s face. “Just forget what I just said.”

“OK.”

“See you tomorrow?”

“Yes, boss.”

“And please, call me Cee.”

“OK. See you tomorrow.”

David went home after he dropped His Excellency at the residence, his guests at their hotel, and returned the car to the parking garage. His tenement building apartment was bare. Three calendars from the same florist hung on the walls, two of them from previous years. Unframed family pictures were taped in the vicinity of the four mattresses spread across the apartment on the floor. David and his roommates almost always ate at home, save for those very rare occasions when they had a date. They would buy a rose, two if they’d been tipped well during the week, and take a girl out to dinner. Their flimsy dining
room table and four chair were a set that David had picked out of a spring cleaning trash pile across the street from the embassy; he’d brought them home on two separate subway trips. Around this table, David and his roommates from the continent enjoyed playing cards into the wee hours of the morning, inflating their American experiences while drinking cheap American beer. As fun as those nights were, David rarely enjoyed the company of his roommates. They were always working, holding down two or three jobs to his one—until The Hamelet—which meant that his late night distractions were limited to catching up on Nixon’s scandal on the radio or watching the activity of prostitutes across the street. This was not the America he thought he would find, but both diversions were equally entertaining.

Removing his jacket, David felt the letter from Thomas in its pocket. He had forgotten about it. He skimmed the formal customary introduction, absorbed the sparse drops of brotherly affection, and dove into the usual pages upon pages that chronicled his brother’s observations about the war and its aftermath, the repression and the disappearances, the silence and the violence. When he was done, he crumpled the letter in paper balls and disposed of them in the trash bag hanging over the doorknob of the hallway closet.

When David sprung from bed in the middle of the night, a thunderstorm reigned over the city. Water sprinkled through an open window above his face into the living room where he slept. Shutting the window, he watched one of the scantily clad women below carry on beneath an umbrella and another disappear
into the backseat of car. David listened to the rain like he was eavesdropping on a conversation. Universal in its cracking sound, it needed no translation. The drops hitting against the glass sounded tentative, like unreliable sources. They were unlike the rains back home that had smashed against the tin roofs he and Thomas had slept under as children. Those, David recalled, sounded credible, like someone he should listen to, someone he should trust.

The storm kept David awake. Three months into his American experience, he was homesick. He walked over to the trash bag and retrieved the paper balls that made up Thomas' long note. He started the letter over, desperately searching for any semblance of home. He was moved by the sad truth of his brother’s composition. The language comforted him, even in its ugliness. Thomas’ words offered the most beautiful portrayal of a man determined to save his home. The pages reminded David of his brother’s intellect, his defiance against the notion that one voice, on Earth or elsewhere, could speak for all, his belief that rather, the sum of many, was the way of the future. Thomas’ precociousness had earned him that competitive scholarship to pursue university studies in France, from which he’d returned a forever changed man, to support his countrymen. David was jealous of his brother, and afraid of his convictions, of being affiliated with a brilliant young mind from humble beginnings, destined, like others before him, to be punished by the order of the day. David pictured Thomas, back home at his writing desk with a cigarette between his lips, conjuring up new theories under the spell of the rainy season
monsoon over the tin roof of his house. He could see his brother’s face clearly and he wondered if Thomas was thinking about him, and could see David clearly too, and the tears that wet his face. The tears landed as they should against David’s mattress, quietly. He wiped them away and thought about why he’d left, articulated in his last words to Thomas, who’d refused to see David to the airport. He’d die for his country, David told his brother, but on his own terms and not this young.

Eventually, David fell asleep. He dreamt a big fish had come for Thomas, but only Sabine was home. She ended up in the hospital, where her examining physician, a small fish, told her she would never be able to have children. When David awoke the next morning, he didn’t remember the dream, but he noticed the uncrumpled pages on the floor, and realized he had tossed and turned until his blue fitted sheet had loosened, revealing his white mattress and its made in America label. He had no regrets about leaving.

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David eventually remembered the dream. It came to him one morning, as he was giving up his seat to a woman on the subway. She was pregnant and glowing. He’d asked and she told him she was having a boy. He was happy for her but the thought of more dreams of that nature frightened him.
David no longer brought Thomas’s letters back to his apartment. He snuck in readings during the lulls in activity at coat check, preferably the times when Curtis was in the main room and out of sight. When he’d finish reading, he made balls out of the pages, pretending he was a member of the New York Knicks who’d just won a championship, and launching them towards the trash at the rear of the coat check room. That’s where Curtis had found a letter from Thomas. He’d lost a lottery ticket that he was certain had been mixed up with the wad of napkins he’d thrown into the same trash can.

“What are you looking for?” David was hanging the black coats of a man and woman who had arrived together.

“Man, I lost my goddamn lottery ticket.”

“We’re together,” the patron interrupted. “You can put them on the same hanger.”

“What kind of ticket is that?” David asked, realizing the man and woman were more than just friends.

“Dee, you don’t know what a lotto ticket it is?”

“No, I don’t.”

“It’s my ticket out of America, that’s what it is.”

David slid the man their check and watched them lock hands as they disappeared behind the velvet curtain. He studied Curtis, frantic and surrounded by the trash items he recognized, those he gladly had accepted from customers, and the balls of papers that made up Thomas’ letter that week. He watched
Curtis carefully peel one page after the other back into its original two-dimensional form.

“You reading love letters at work?” Curtis chuckled.

“They are not love letters.”

“Then who’s writing you these long letters?”

“My brother”

“Your brother? What’s he need five pages to tell you about?”

“Ah, it’s nothing important.”

Curtis took the letter home that night. He was hooked at the first mention of war on the bottom of the first page. He was fascinated with Cuba and vowed to return to Vietnam when the time was right. With a dictionary, he pieced together the hints of a war and its consequences that in America, much to his surprise, no one, including David, ever talked about.

“David,” Curtis said Sunday, the next evening, holding the letter up to David’s face. “I like you. You’re a good worker, and the customers like you too. But I can’t just read stuff like this and then forget about it.”

“You understood the letter?” David asked with an intimation of doubt.

“Most of it.”

“Then I am a good teacher too!”

“You are. And from now on, these letters you get from back home, they’ll be part of our French lessons.”
David was stunned by Curtis’ request. He’d hoped to keep unpleasant memories of home to himself. He wasn’t prepared to share them with anyone.

“And for your trouble, I’ll pay you a dollar for every page we cover. Good enough for a few lottery tickets.”

David listened to Curtis explain how the lottery worked, the odds of winning, and what it would mean if David ever did.

“You’d be King of New York,” Curtis said. “You’d have your choice of queens to pick from.”

“No, my queen is back home.”

“Back home? What’s your queen doing back home? She should be here with you.”

“Maybe someday.”

“What’s her name?”

“Sabine.”

“Why’d you never say anything about her?”

“Because she’s married to my brother.”

Curtis put a hand on David’s shoulder and shook his head.

“You’d be surprised by what winning the lottery can do to a married woman’s commitment.” He handed David a five dollar bill for the previous night’s letter.

David played the lottery for the first time the following Monday morning before going to work at the embassy. He was taken by this game of luck. He
believed he had more luck than any New Yorker. He’d escaped a kidnapping during the war. And now he lived and worked in America. That was enough for him. He filled in combinations of his luckiest numbers, his birthday, his arrival date at JFK airport, and the embassy’s address. The money spent didn’t feel like his own. He felt as though he was playing at Thomas’ expense and that made him content. He lost Monday’s lottery drawing but as Curtis had explained to him, every day was a new round. He looked forward to getting more letters from Thomas, more often. The more pages, the more dollars, the more lottery tickets, the greater his chances of striking it rich. He didn’t just believe he would win. He was determined to win, and when he did, he would succeed in wooing Sabine away from his brother.

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David walked past the velvet curtain that separated the club’s vestibule from the main room. Curtis was waiting at the bar. He poured drinks for them, a double whiskey for both.

Fridays had developed into something of a private reading before work. David would read Curtis his letter or two of the week, almost always from Thomas, after which they would have a conversation about it in French.

“Look!”

Curtis had never seen David so excited. “What’s gotten into you tonight?”
“It’s her!”

“Who?”

“Sabine!” David removed the envelope from his pocket and stuck it within a few inches of Curtis’ face. “It’s from Sabine!”

“Your queen!” Curtis approached David for a celebratory high five, then David gently pushed Curtis into the bar stool.

“Sit down, I have been waiting too long.”

The envelope was light, a detail he’d forgotten. He pried it open carefully, removing the letter as a surgeon might remove a broken heart. The paper was soft and felt fragile, like tracing paper, almost transparent, and despite the absence of lines, the horizontal penmanship was remarkably flawless. The note was folded in two and written in red ink, all of it above the paper fold save for her name. Curtis could clearly see her backwards name on the unfolded sheet.

David stared at the short letter. “Let me read it to myself first,” he said.

“Fair enough,” Curtis said.

Within seconds, the letter began to shake and seemed to release itself from the quiver of David’s grip. It swayed downwards in slow motion, resisting the same air that seconds later David fell into, fast and straight. Curtis’ reaction was quicker. He caught David before the weight of his body hit the floor.

Thomas was in prison. Four men, real brutes Sabine wrote, had kicked down their door in the middle of the night, yanking Thomas out of bed by his feet. His head hit the floor hard. They were asking Thomas for the book he was
writing. Sabine didn’t know about it. David had seen excerpts in the letters. They beat Thomas while Sabine begged him to give them what they wanted. The men asked for it, again and again. Thomas just grinned at them, his teeth stained by his bleeding mouth. And so they beat him even more. They used their batons. Blood streaked down his shaved head. Blood was everywhere. The men were laughing. They had alcohol on their breath. They used rope to tie his limbs together and hauled him away like an animal, parading him in front of neighbors awakened by Sabine’s screams. In the letter, Sabine said Thomas had called David’s name as they whisked him away, and begged her to write to him and ask for his help.

David came to seconds later.

“What’s happening?” he asked. He noticed has was on the floor and that Curtis cradled him almost like a baby. He saw the club’s other workers standing over them.

“You fainted during our lesson. How do you feel?”

“Good.” David read the clock on the wall. “Should we continue?”

“Lesson’s over.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m pretty sure the letter’s the reason you passed out.”

“Where’s the letter?”

“It’s underneath you. You sure you want it?”

“Cee, I’m fine.”
David rose to his feet, grabbing the letter off the floor, and disappeared behind the velvet curtain. In the coat check room, he prepared for the evening as usual. He set out the tip jar, organized the hangers, ran the vacuum, and turned the radio on. He took his usual seat and proceeded to read the letter again. The weatherman warned that a blizzard was approaching New York City.

David was surprised. Thomas wasn’t the type to ask for help, from anyone, and certainly not from David. And then to beg, and for another man, in front of a woman? No wonder they were laughing, David thought. David couldn’t help but chuckle to himself. He wished he could help, for Sabine’s sake. But he couldn’t. He worked at the embassy, but he wasn’t a diplomat. He was just a chauffeur. He went where they needed him to go. He had no power, no say. For him, it was Yes, Your Excellency this, and Yes, of course Your Excellency that. When he had to say no at work, his stutter awakened. He used that word with great caution. And now he had to tell Sabine no, he couldn’t help, to remind himself through her that he was of no use. It was Thomas who wouldn’t even see David to the airport when he left home; he said David would be a sheep in New York. Really? Contact David now? Wherever Thomas was, David knew he was not waiting for his help. He pictured his brother again, amidst the disgusting conditions of their country’s prisons. Thomas found the time to smile like he was in that photo in Paris. Whatever Thomas did, David said to himself, let this teach him a lesson.
The Hamelet’s doors swung open around 8PM. From his stool, David observed the mob of familiar faces that descended upon the club like clockwork every Friday. The doors stayed open long enough so that a strong burst of cold air blew in snow that vanished inside the smoky warmth of the vestibule. Curtis was by his side. “There she is, my brother, as white as ever,” he told David. “Happy first winter.”

David conferred with Curtis, who gave him the green light.

“Go ahead, go check it out,” Curtis told David. “I’ll hold things down until you get back.”

David went outside. Underneath the awning, a sizable crowd of mostly men stood as if fighting for the limelight. They chatted amongst one another but paid little attention to the snow. Heads tilted back, they blew white clouds, a concoction of cigarette smoke and winter breath, towards the bright lights that illuminated in the awning the Hamelet’s name, written in bold white capital letters on the uptown and downtown facing sides, an equal invitation in an otherwise unequal part of the city.

Particles of what to David looked like ashes from a wood burning fire tumbled from the sky. The sidewalk was covered white save for the area directly underneath The Hamelet’s awning, where David could still notice a black dot or two. David stepped out from below the awning and let the snow fall on him. He
let flecks fall against his palms and watched them vanish without a hint of cool. He picked some up off the ground and felt the cold of snow he’d heard about. He held some for as long as he could, until he felt an unbearable coldness in his blood that terrified him.

In this state of mind, his thoughts returned to Sabine, in the house, after the brutes left her. He couldn’t shake the image. Sabine, scared, alone, confused. Dressed, but not showered and so still covered in Thomas’s sweat. She doesn’t smoke, but she lights one of Thomas’ cigarettes, and the heat burns her throat, but she continues to pull the smoke in, exhaling between tears, just to feel close to Thomas. David was afraid for Sabine. He hoped she was ok and that his dream was just that, a dream.

David stepped back underneath the awning. He wanted to feel close to Sabine, and asked for a cigarette from one of the men. The first time he’d smoked, he was with Thomas. They were kids and shared the unfinished butt of the French soldier who stood guard from a watchtower outside the concentration camp where they had spent a year of their childhood during the war. David felt the burn too. It wasn’t the feeling he wanted. He put out his cigarette and wondered how smokers tolerated the burn. Maybe, he thought, the cold weather evened it out.

David returned to the coat check room, where Curtis looked alarmed.

“Those men I told you about, they’re coming tonight,” Curtis told David. “And remember what I said. You don’t want anything to do with them.”
David stood from his stool when the duo walked in. He knew it was them, because Curtis had disappeared to the basement. David admired the two, the way they swaggered through the doors. They were dressed identically--black suit, shoes, and bow tie, and a white shirt--save for their fur coats. They hugged everyone in sight in the dark vestibule that was plastered in concert posters from years past. Then they crossed the vestibule, their bright smiles leading the way like flashlights through the red hue of the room. They didn’t even look at David, who couldn’t help but notice that they looked like him, that they had similar features, that they might be distant relatives of his washed ashore in America. One of them shut his eyes and ducked his head to reveal a bald spot the size of a coaster. He tapped his long fingernails like a pianist against the mahogany ledge of the coat check room that separated David from patrons. The other one bopped his head, swinging it back and forth, left to right. He drummed a pair of black chopsticks, whistling along to the muffled chords playing in the main room. David was afraid to make eye contact.

“What’s the matter boy? Ain’t you supposed to be asking me for my coat?”

They fit the description Curtis had given David, who followed his instructions to the letter.

“When they show up, just be cool,’ Curtain had said.

They called themselves the Jackson Five, and now it was only two of them. Another brother was serving life in prison. Two others, twins, had
disappeared, like David and Thomas’ cousins during the waning years of the war.

David handled their coats with care, placing them on the best hangers, and gave them their tickets. He wished them a good evening.

“When Curtis gets here, you come get me,” the shorter of the two said.

David hesitated, not knowing whether to call him boss or brother.
The interview resumed one Mother’s Day morning.

“How’d you and mommy meet?” Samuel asked David, his father.

They sat across from one another at the dining room table, in the nook of the short arm of the L-shaped room that doubled as the living room. With precise maneuvering of cramped furniture, the floor found triple use as a dance floor where the carpet had begun to fade and flatten.

Samuel’s bowl sat empty, the white porcelain licked clean of any trace of chocolate syrup.

“That’s it, no more sugar in this house,” his mother had yelled last week after sampling Samuel’s oatmeal. “Do you want to get sick too?”

His mother would be out of the shower any minute. She couldn’t know. No, not after the work he’d put into it. Not after how much better oatmeal tasted. He’d searched all over the apartment. He’d even searched inside the family’s Chevrolet. He’d exhausted every dark corner he considered worthy of a hiding spot. Hiding is a children’s game after all, isn’t it? Every dark corner, except for one.

The pantry was long and narrow, truncated by the slant in the roof above. It was home to barrels, bags, and bundles of foods with English translations but little value outside the Mboma family. It smelled of a home Samuel had imagined but never visited. It’s where Samuel heard the family of mice at night, as he waited in the hallway of the staff quarter for the bathroom, for the one toilet, one
shower, and one sink they shared with the chauffeur and his girlfriend across the hall, and the groundskeeper’s family of three who lived downstairs, adjacent to the shared kitchen. It’s where Samuel, reluctantly, entered every now and then when his mother sent him for replenishments. He didn’t mind shrinking his height to fit, except when he’d been in there for too long and couldn’t find what he’d been sent for. Discomfort would begin as an ache in his neck, tightness in his bent knees, and a strong feeling that at any moment a tiny creature would race across the floor and send him scurrying out of there faster than any wind sprint he’d ever run.

“What is it?” his father once asked.

“A mouse, I saw a mouse.” Samuel was eight, but age was no excuse.

“What are you scared of? Go get what your mother asked for.”

It was the word scared. Samuel didn’t want to be scared. Of anything. Of mice, or men, or death. His father was scared, or worse, a coward in Samuel’s eyes. And Samuel kept that sentiment to himself. His father allowed others, his bosses, white people, authority figures, to speak to him as if he were still a child. Samuel observed his father complying, begging, and agreeing. His father rarely challenged anything, and when he did, he objected weakly. The mice made that pantry darker and scarier but Samuel wanted no part of the label “coward,” or in that kind of existence. He didn’t want to be like his father.

He found the stash of sweeteners and imported Belgian chocolate powder in a sealed plastic bin on a shelf above an unopened case of cognac, in the
corner of the pantry where his mother had identified the mice’s entry hole. His mother’s stash spot, he presumed, and chuckled when he discovered it. No one understands a child better than his mother. Above the bin was a box of random items that he’d ignored then, but thought about now as he faced his father, contemplative and staring off in the distance, who he could only stare at in bursts sprinkled with curiosity and pity. Among the objects in the box, a camera. Who, why, from whom, and by whom was it being kept out of sight.

“Tomorrow,” David answered, let’s continue tomorrow. I’m going to go sit down.”

Sit down was code for nap but his father had barely touched his oatmeal, now abandoned and cold. Under normal circumstances, Samuel swallowed anything left on anyone’s plate. However, his father’s attitude towards food, the look of disgust and disinterest on his face, made it seem like it was the food that was diseased, not his liver. Regardless, his father’s oatmeal was plain and unsweetened.

“No dessert for the army of free radicals,” his mother had warned, setting down David’s bowl an hour ago.

Samuel wouldn’t have liked it anyway. But that’s not why his father had barely eaten. Treatment left a metallic taste in his mouth. Multiple topping pizza tasted like an edible motherboard, his father had said.
“Eat a little bit more,” Samuel encouraged his father. “You’re almost halfway done.” That’s as optimistic as Samuel got. He was trying, but his father was finished.

“I’m full,” he said.

Samuel had inherited his father’s pessimism. No amount of positive thought that he’d soaked in over the last few months, from doctors, to nurses, and priests who visited the house to pray, had rubbed off on him. By most rational estimates, David’s bowl was closer to full than empty. Six tiny spoonfuls. That’s all his father, a shrunken version of his former self, could take in. Samuel had counted each one. Like his father, he tracked everything, every penny, every I-owe-you, and every you-owe-me. And his father owed him. He’d rounded it out, four hundred and ten dollars, almost a third of what he’d made over the last year between his paper route and winter shoveling, but now wasn’t the time to be asking to his sick father to repay him. Not with medical bills that threatened the savings account.

Counting was a tendency for Samuel, and a pre-occupation that bordered on mental illness for his father. And his father was still counting.

“Ninety eight days,” he’d blurted out earlier in the interview when Samuel had asked: “What games did you play as a child.”

The answer caught Samuel off-guard. He thought he’d been the only one counting.
“I’m going to reach one hundred,” his father had continued in a slow drawl, saliva trickling out and down the side of his mouth.

“And then what?” Samuel threw back while catching the clear trickle before it landed in his father’s bowl. He wasn’t expecting an answer. His father didn’t reply.

One hundred, that number his father professed so much.

“You should get them all the time,” his father would say. Almost all the time was not the same as all the time, and David made that clear. Samuel’s friends got money, bikes, video games, pizza parties, even vacations for their accumulation of almost always one hundreds. For Samuel, there was only hope, hope that one day these one hundreds would blossom into something magical. Samuel excelled at math and latin, by instinct and design. Medical school was an order, not an option. And then last night, with his mother’s help, after he’d changed his father’s bedpan and sorted and delivered a colorful assortment of pills, his palm landed on his father’s forehead:

“If you still want to go to med school,” his father said, “you’ll make an excellent doctor.”

Oh one hundred, that mark of perfection, that natural number, numerical symbol of the Roman C. Such were the connections that floated inside Samuel’s head.

His mother appeared with red a towel wrapped across her chest. Another formed a mound atop her head. She filled the ruthless silence that dominated
the house these days with songs of Christ. This time it was something about leaving things in His hands. Everything for her was about this invisible man, whose miracle she awaited. Nobody dared confront the obvious, that the one calling the shots behind the scenes, beneath David’s skin, was cancer. Samuel wanted no part in his mother’s theatrics. And so on cue, he exited yet again.

Samuel thought a lot about this year’s harvest during the interview. It would be the first one of his own doing. He was eager to head over to the garden, but his father needed him first. While his mother disappeared to dress for work, Samuel wrapped his father’s arm around his neck and ducked his own head just below David’s armpit. He wrapped one arm around his father’s waist and hoisted him up, walking alongside him until they reached the reclining section of the couch. He covered his father from neck to toe in a wool blanket. With both hands, he patted the blanket’s edges until they wedged between the heavy garments that masked muscle loss, and the plastic slip cover that had prolonged the life of the couch. Samuel was gentle though still visibly upset. They’d gotten through only four interview question since they started. He wanted to shake the shit out of his father, the way a parent is warned not to shake a child. And his father, at this stage, had lots in common with an infant. Samuel didn’t follow through of course. The whole scenario was terrifying, with its cacophony of head snapping, finger crackling, and shoulder popping. In one quick swoop, Samuel lifted his father’s skinny legs and tucked in what was left of the blanket.
“And that’s why you have children,” David used to say when Samuel complained about helping.

That was then, back when David still did most of the work, and Samuel still acted like a child. Nothing prepared Samuel for the day when this phrase took on meaning, the day roles officially became reversed, in their situation, much earlier than David had expected. Samuel admired his father, the speed at which he could fall into deep sleep, like a newborn at his mother’s breast.

David fell asleep. For the last time? Maybe. But it was May and so on the bright side, anything from here on out was considered a victory for the Mboma family. Still, Samuel hoped death would lurk around the corner and away from the upcoming party where his father would be honored for three decades of public service. Afterwards, Samuel concluded, and his father would likely agree, death could come, and get the after-party over.

For Samuel, the so-called real world seemed like a spell that grew colder and more vicious with age. At sixteen, the brutality of life bore through the plush cushion of his ignorance. In Samuel’s world, death had always belonged to other people. It was prescribed. It’s pattern was clear. There was some logic to it, some predictability. On the six o’clock news, death was a son on replay for the young, black, and male, for those with AIDS, and those who perished on the scene of car accidents. And so it should come as to no surprise that Samuel rode his bike whenever and wherever he could, was still a virgin, and tried as hard as he could to figure out how it might be possible to not be be black when
clearly, on the outside, he would always be that color. The possibility of death was the jack in the box that a few months ago had caught him by surprise. How long? That’s all he wanted to know. That’s all he remembered from the doctor’s visit.

Three months. That’s how long since he’d taken over gardening duties on the family’s rather large garden at the edge of the diplomatic estate. That’s how long they’d given his father to live. What had once been a place of chores was now his sanctuary, somewhere to escape the smell of decay that overpowered the tiny two room apartment. The family ate and prayed on one side, and slept and prayed on the other. It was where David would one day stop seeing and breathing and feeling. It was as close to dying in your home country as any foreign national could get.

The garden was home base. Samuel had run there after storming out of church two Sundays ago, the same day the family had learned that the cancer had spread. He’d fled a special healing prayer for David. Samuel was an appointed crucifer that day, tasked to carry the church’s ten pound processional cross and lead the congregation out of church at the end of service. Instead, there was the loud clang of the brass cross Samuel had been carrying, followed by high pitched calls of his name that bounced around the walls of the cathedral.

“Don’t worry Sabine,” a Mexican colleague and fellow worshipped had reassured his mother once outside. “Jesus is right with him.”
Samuel ran out of the church, still clad in his white robe, down the long stretch of hill past the high school. He rounded the corner near the park, a busy intersection where cars honked and passengers gawked and joked:

“Look, there goes black Jesus!”

“Jesus should try out for the 2012 Olympics!”

Samuel entered the property through the wrought iron gates at the back entrance of the property. He hid beneath the canopy of bitter leaf greens, the main ingredient of ndole, Cameroon’s national dish, until there was nothing left to do but roll around in dirt and sob. When he rose to his feet, soil covered most of the once pristine white hooded robe. He joked to himself, that if Jesus were real and black, even he would have to run from cops. And something about those images, dirty ol’ him and runaway black Jesus, made him feel alive again.

Samuel slammed the door behind him and left his mother and father together. They prayed. On his walk along the gravel path to the garden, Samuel wondered at what point sex, the so-called best feeling in the world, ceased to be the go-to to relieve men from pain. Inside the garden shed, Samuel put on the white robe, now his de facto gardening outfit. He threw the fluorescent orange strap of an old courier bag over his shoulder and began to harvest bitter leaves for his mother to soak. At the ambassador’s request, and because David had been honorably relieved of his duties as head chef, she was making ndole for tomorrow’s 50th anniversary of Cameroon’s National Independence Day.
Samuel appreciated the garden more than he used to, now that it was his responsibility alone and not simply a chore. Since the beginning of spring, he’d awakened at sunrise to water the garden before school. On his way out, he’d find his father, on his recliner, up already, alive still, but deteriorating. Samuel found refuge in the garden, in its predictability. More than anything, he believed in what he could see, soil, rain, the sun, the science behind it all. The outcome was indispensable, tasted good, and outside of the occasional seed, was much cheaper than going to church.

There promised to be lots of heat by noon, record temperatures for the third day in a row. The pools, the ambassador promised, would be ready in time for tomorrow’s festivities. The solution had come to Samuel yesterday, while trapped inside the world of fantasy. There, now more than ever, his mind often drifted for long unexplainable lapses while in the garden. He was contemplating the heat and hypnotized by the steady cone of mist that rained down onto the plants from the hose. Oh, what to do with all this excess heat?

Under nature’s spell, ideas appeared more possible and dreams more clear. And for that, this garden was his Eden, mesmerizing and magical, the birthplace of hope. In this latest daydream, Samuel had figured out how to bottle sunlight in highly concentrated amounts. And overnight, with only a minor dose, the rows of green bitter leaf shot up and doubled in output. Tomatoes turned lipstick red, exciting with passion. The yellow squash shone with bright optimism. At home, he injected his patented invention into the port hooked to his father’s
abdomen. The strange coldness his father felt regardless of the weather, was no longer. The heat warmed his blood. It restored the fat and reinforced the muscle beneath rejuvenated skin. It returned his smile, reversed his memory loss, and replenished his bankrupt heart with heavy deposits of the humanly insured currency of love. His father was his old self, not always a pleasure, but a better version of his current bitter state. He wore his chef’s hat again and regained his sanctuary, the open kitchen inside the ambassador’s residence which mirrored the size of the family’s apartment. He glowed again, whistling and swaggering pain-free and effortlessly as always from fridge to counter, counter to stove, and stove to elongated wood table of Versailles inspired dining room inside the ambassador’s palatial home. He moved again. And tomorrow night, white coat unbuttoned, chest hairs drenched and leveled by uncontrollable sweat, he’d join the crowd of happy feet who rejoiced well into the morning. Applauds followed. Gifts too. Bikes, video games, pizza parties. The stuff of adults too, island vacations, and more money than he’d ever considered. He was in high demand among food scientists and medical experts. Investors lined up to cash in. From feeding the poor to healing the sick, there was money to be made. And this is where it all came crashing, the mistake, the end to an innocent pleasantry.

Samuel celebrated, as he assumed his father might. He drank too much, which his father had, to feed his pride and heal his guilt. He injected more of the serum into his father and the invention backfired. The mistake. The formula burned the
way years of abuse had damaged the cells inside David’s body, creating around vital organs a fertile breeding ground for homegrown radicals to capitalize.

When Samuel came to, he noticed a woman in the distance. She wore a brightly colored boubou and a black scarf covering the top of crimson tresses that reached the middle of her back. She looked no more than twice his age. She was hunched over by the end of the garden atop the slope, near the collard greens that, without fail, year in and year out, produced the strongest harvest of any crop in the garden. She noticed him too and waved, and after locking the valley between her thumb and index finger to her hairline to shield her eyes from the sun, she smiled as if she knew him and approached. Up close, she looked in her fifties, somewhere in the vicinity of his father’s age. As she approached, her eyes widened and her jaws stretched the gap between her glossed lips. Her excitement had Samuel bracing for some good news for change.

“You looked just like David from up there,” she said. “You must be Samuel.”

Samuel had never seen this woman before, this woman who knew his name and his father's name. If only she knew how much David's face had changed.

“Yeah. Who are you?”

“I'm sorry, pardon my rudeness. I'm Nina. I'm a guest of His Excellency. I was told I might find you here, and that you might be able to help me carry my buckets back to the house. They're quite heavy.”
Samuel didn’t know what to make of her proper attitude, not to mention her accent, Southern by all estimates, which betrayed the African cloth that she wore as comfortably as his mother. He’d seen them in Harlem but not around these affluent white suburbs, those black Americans who claimed themselves in the African cultures battered and severed from them long ago.

“I’m sure we can manage. So, what’s with the robe?”

Speaking of garments. Just as Nina said this, Samuel was also contemplating his choice of gardening attire, which didn’t quite fit in the moment. Something about white hooded robes, fields, and the South. He removed it and remained in nothing but basketball shorts.

“It’s a long story.”

“Fair enough! Have you had collard greens before, young man?”

“Yeah, my mom makes them sometimes, Christmas and Thanksgiving especially.”

“Where’s she from?”

Samuel paused long enough to think: Where else would she be from?

“Cameroon,” he said. “What about you?”

“Alabama, where we’ve got more collards than you’ll ever see here up North. And where’d your mother learn to cook collard greens in Cameroon? There are no collard greens in Cameroon.”

“From my father...wait, have you been?”
“Oh, yes I have. Beautiful country, beautiful men,” she said with a playful wink. “Have you been there.”

“Nope. I really want to go though.”

“You should.”

“What were you doing there?”

“I was in the Peace Corps.”

Samuel had heard of the Peace Corps. Years ago, a former ambassador had hosted a small group of New York based alums. He was certain Nina wasn’t among them. That group was all white, and all female. Samuel and the children of other staff members had sat in on the movie portion of their presentation about AIDS and education. Afterwards, he had wondered if a domestic equivalent to the Peace Corps existed.

“What did you do with the Peace Corps?”

“I worked on an agricultural project with some cocoa farmers.”

“Are you a farmer?”

“No, but I wish. I work in D.C., the State Department, but I love this more.”

She pointed towards the garden. “Who do you think introduced your father to collards? Your father and I, we go way back. I met you father a long time ago, in Harlem, where he used to live before their government bought this property and he moved down here. There used to be nothing here. We built this garden together, started with my great grandmother’s collard seeds and this dying bitter
leaf plant he brought over from home that barely made it. We called this place Vernonia & Brassica."

Samuel stared back with confusion.

"Let me show you."

They walked up to the patch of garden atop of the hill where Nina had left her harvest. There were four bags and two distinct leaves.

"Collards, they’re called cruciferous vegetables. They belong to the Brassica family of plants. And these, I picked these bitter leaves earlier this morning, they’re part of the Vernonia family."

They swooped down, almost simultaneously, and each grabbing a pair of bags.

"Here, why don’t you take these," Samuel said watching her struggle, "I think they’re lighter."

Their hands brushed against each other during the exchange, an observation that seemed a big deal only to Samuel. He wondered if his father’s old strong hands had brushed against her fingers too, and elicited the same reaction.

They reached the house and placed the bags on the counter near the sink. Nina offered Samuel a glass of water which he drank at the island. A piece of paper dated June 12, 1974 sat in the middle. It was a detailed recipe for ndole. The handwriting was unmistakable. It belonged to his father.
Homecomings

I pause near row twenty to catch my strength. I’m cradling Clementine in one arm and dragging the car seat with my free hand. We’re on our way to David’s funeral in Douala. Samuel is already there.

“Chérie, no one uses car seats in Africa,” Samuel had warned me.

Clementine and I are the first to board. A perk of motherhood. The plane feels empty and larger than usual. I’d forgotten about the endless rows that fill the main cabin, as I haven’t flown coach in a long time. Since Clementine was born, Samuel and I have preferred road trips for vacation, so we can explore the vast European countryside punctuated by quaint towns.

I am used to first class, one of the many benefits I receive from my luxury fashion clients. There, I enjoy free champagne and the company of wealthy men. I like to sit next to the older ones whose protruding bellies render their jacket buttons useless. Their persistent flirting makes me forget how poorly I’ve aged. I find them charming. During stretches of turbulence, the gentle movements of their potbellies, which rise and fall with every heavy breath, remind me to focus on my own breathing to calm my perpetual anxiety. Sometimes I take out my sketchbook while they sleep and draw them from sock to neck. I draw what I imagine they look like naked, beneath the layers of their inelegantly fitting clothes. Later, I’ll finish each drawing by taping on the face of a young model torn from one of the fashion magazines I am always studying.
Sometimes, I think about how long their folds of flesh have gone untouched by their wives and wonder if this is how Samuel will look one day.

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I first traveled to Cameroon in 2010, the first stop on a five-country assignment for *Le Monde* about expatriate life in Africa. It was my first major editorial gig, my big break, I thought. I’d never landed a photo assignment outside of Europe or North America. I was pleased—and stunned—on arrival at baggage claim to recognize a familiar face among a sea of unknowns clamoring for my attention. It was Samuel. His contact information, scribbled on a piece of paper minutes before I darted for the airport revealed a different first name, one I couldn’t pronounce until years later.

“La blanche, la blanche, la blanche!” Chants of “white woman” came from every corner of the dilapidated airport. I thought to call my father and have him listen in. It would have tickled him. My mother’s Asian features has always dominated my appearance to the untrained eye.

I’d first noticed Samuel from afar, almost a year before that assignment. I’d attended his keynote speech at a photo conference in Arles about ethical reporting in foreign news coverage. I wanted to expand my portfolio beyond the fashion world and the conference was a good place to network. Impressed by his speech, I joined the many others who lined up to chat with him after he
stepped down from the podium. Waiting wasn't my thing. I headed for the cocktail reception instead.

“La blanche, la blanche, la blanche!”

The chants originated from the faintly lit mezzanine of the airport, where onlookers had gathered like soccer fans to size up the spectacle below: cab drivers, porters, and guides zeroing in on foreigners before their families and friends could get to them. I glared at the harassing crowd, but that didn't stop some from following me as I headed towards Samuel. And their catcalls only grew louder. I was not flattered.

I recognized Samuel by his thick black glasses, shiny shaved head, and the long full facial hair that hugged his face. His posture, more than anything, was unmistakable. He looked relaxed, unfazed by the urgency of the crowd around him, just as he had at the cocktail reception. His most noticeable characteristic was his height. He was a head taller than anyone had in the baggage area. I waved frantically in his direction. I don't think he saw me.

“La blanche, la blanche, la blanche!”

A couple of young boys had managed to sidle up next to me. Now, they hissed too. I pretended not to hear them. I fanned myself and felt the patches of sweat on my shirt that grew by the minute in the staggering heat of the overcrowded room. I focused on the shiny blue suitcase that was soon within my reach on the carousel.

“Madame, s'il vous plait…” one of the men said.
“Non merci.” I grabbed my suitcase and made my way towards Samuel, who was now talking on the phone, laughing and looking important. He walked in a straight line towards me, like he might run into me if he didn’t see me. I waved again. He still didn’t notice me.

Up close but still a dozen bodies away, Samuel’s youthful features came into focus under one of the few working lights in the room. His skin tone, sans makeup, was a photographer’s dream. His demeanor sucked you in like a vacuum. When he volunteered at the cocktail reception that he had done print work in the past, I asked if he’d be interested in modeling for a friend who was launching a clothing line.

“It’s unpaid,” I’d said reluctantly.

“Fair enough, I’m out of shape.”

“La blanche, la blanche, la blanche!” Now a trio of young boys trailed me.

Sweat trickled down my spine. Unfamiliar faces stared. Bodies bumped into mine. I was anxious, a familiar feeling in a foreign country. I gave up walking. Within seconds, I figured, the right body would bump into mine. I watched Samuel. His approach was smooth and the unbearable humidity caused my mind to wander. I replayed that photo shoot in my mind. I imagined Samuel partially naked. That little girl behind the camera, he had jokingly called me that afternoon, straddled him now. My nose barely touched his. The tautness of his skin and the ridges on his forehead, details only noticeable in post-production, made him all the more appealing.
“La blanche, la blanche, la blanche!” the boys continued. They too had stopped. They waited. My fantasy went on.

On command, I lifted his wife-beater mid-torso to reveal the beauty of his torso. Studio lights accentuated remnants of a chiseled abdomen where I sensuously positioned curled fingers just as I had ordered the female model during the shoot. A voice chimed in, one that sounded like mine, a body double perhaps. She said something and we buried our smiles into each other’s ears. I listened to the breath of his chuckle, inviting like the sound of ocean wave, and suddenly we were alone on an island, fine white sand beneath. I smelled possibility in the perfume of his neck. He whispered something nice about my hair, bleached blond with blue highlights. Then the voice reappeared. We turned towards the camera, away from each other. She asked us not to move. She said perfect. Then something clicked.

“Samuel!” I yelled, reaching past one of the young boys to grab as much as my hand would allow of his bicep. His warmth had a cooling effect on my anxiety.

“Sophie?”

“Yes!”

“My bad, I know I said I’d call in my email, but i figured…”

“I know.” I ran a hand over the buzz that had regrown from my scalp.

“I like it.”

“Thanks!”
I let him wheel my suitcase much to the chagrin of my followers. They looked at us wide-eyed.

“America, yo?” one asked in his best English. He was staring at me.

“Nah, New York,” Samuel answered for both of us.

We made our way towards the exit and the young boys who had been following me retreated. The air of the Douala night was heavy and smelled of roasted cacao beans. We walked along the airport sidewalk towards a sea of white headlights waiting in the distance behind barricades. He didn’t ask about my hair. Instead, he asked if I was hungry.

A vehicle came through the barricades and stopped where Samuel indicated. A high-pitched voice muttered in the distance behind us. I remembered the boy. He’d been standing near a group of my much older admirers from the mezzanine. He hadn’t said a word, but smiled and I’d waved at him. We both stood out in that room. His skin was a shade of white, his hair blond like mine used to be, and his features closer to Samuel’s. He reached to help with the hard shelled suitcase, the one with all my gear, and Samuel barked at him, twice, revealing a side of him that my imagination had not conceived. I hopped into the back of the waiting vehicle, reached my hand into my purse and gave the little boy some money. Within seconds, two of the young men, who earlier had crowded around me, returned. They approached the boy, who turned back towards me with desperate eyes.
“Donne ma part,” the much older ones said to the boy, demanding their share.

“You see what you started,” Samuel teased. He had turned to face me just as a policeman placed his forearm on the sill of his passenger door. Samuel was folding what looked like a bill. When he turned back around, he shook the policeman’s handout. There was a sharp synchronized snap of the fingers. And just like that the money was gone from Samuel’ hands.

**********

Clementine and I are soon joined on the plane by three boys, no older than ten. They play tag up the aisles and across the rows of the plane, yelling as they get close to one another. I slide into a row to let them run by. Their beleaguered parents saunter behind them.

The boys had been roughhousing before boarding the plane. Their squeals at the gate worsened the migraine that had kept me up all night. The boys’ mother sat across from me in the waiting area, trying to breastfeed discreetly. Their father read *Un Enfant du Pays*, a French translation of Samuel’s favorite novel. Samuel had read it aloud to me, in bed under warm blankets in our Paris apartment during the winter months when I was pregnant with Clementine. Every now and then, the boys’ father shook his head. Judging by
the thickness of pages on one side of the spine, I assumed he had just read about Bigger smothering Mary with a pillow.

I didn’t bother to ask the parents to discipline their kids. However, when the boys came close to me a fourth time, I stretched my leg out. The oldest tumbled, his head crashing into his youngest sibling’s torso. No one noticed the collision but me. I wouldn’t have cared if anyone else had, including the boys’ father, who sat right next to me, lost in his book.

The boys are wearing pastel orange shorts, bright blue t-shirts, and shoes that reveal the shapes of their toes. I miss Samuel as I start to play the homecoming game in my head, which he had introduced to me on our first of many trips to Africa. Clementine had yet to come into our lives, and the game was simple: determine those passengers who were going home versus those who are simply visiting. These boys didn’t fit the vacationer profile. Their excitement conveyed more relief than joy, like they were going home.

“These white kids who grow up in Africa love it here,” Samuel had once told me. “Their parents take them to Europe to visit family, but that is not vacation. It’s performance.”

“What do you mean?”

“In Europe, they are like animals in a zoo, removed from their natural environment, except everyone looks like them.”

I laughed. I was intrigued by him. “Go on,” I said, knowing he wasn’t finished.
“Here, they’re free from the societal pressures of the West. Africa is all they know. It’s in their DNA, their soul. It’s their wilderness, the canvas of their untamed imaginations. They are happier here. All of my students used to tell me so.”

**********

Of all of ways that Samuel could tell stories, my favorite was when he spoke them. My favorites were any related to the year after graduating from college that he spent teaching English in Cameroon, at a private elementary school for expats and wealthy locals of Douala. His students admired him because, in their own words, he was black, from New York, and spoke French like their parents. They often compared his coolness to that of their previous English teacher, a mild-mannered tattooed white woman from Nebraska who had worked at the school for many years. Samuel and his students understood each other. In Douala, they belonged and felt estranged at the same time. They were upset when Samuel left abruptly, and excited to reconnect with him in France many years later when, well into his twenties, Samuel finally landed a position that would include his name in the masthead.

Samuel had planned to stay in Cameroon for three years. He’d studied journalism and his advisor had suggested that he work overseas and scrape together Africa-related clips to position himself for a foreign bureau gig. He was sitting under a mango tree in the schoolyard, savoring every bite of his grilled fish
with fried plantains when Natasha, his girlfriend of two years, unexpectedly phoned him. Planes had just flown into the towers, the Twin Towers, she said.

According to Samuel, Natasha’s view of the buildings was unobstructed from the balcony of her Tribeca penthouse apartment. Together, they used to make up stories—Tales from the Towers, they called them—that bordered on the erotic, stories about what happened beyond the buildings’ lit windows late at night. When I suggested that I’d love to do this too, because we also have nice views from our apartment, Samuel was not interested. He said he had insisted to Natasha that they stop telling these stories and that he never explained to her why. In a class on immigration, he’d learned that low-wage office cleaners occupied the buildings after midnight. He didn’t tell Natasha that his mother also cleaned for rich people.

Natasha had cried uncontrollably on the other end. For almost an hour, Samuel said, he simply listened as she interchanged words with tears. I tend to cry uncontrollably too. I like to think that the uncontrollable crier is Samuel’s type. They hung up soon after Natasha saw the South Tower collapse. He urged her to go to her mother’s house in Connecticut. By the end of the week, Samuel had resigned, packed his bags, and gone home too.

**********

“Bonjour madame.”
I turn around. The flight attendant comments on Clementine’s beauty, but I am at a loss for words about hers.

“Bonjour.” I want to say more but I am embarrassed by my accent, which has not improved much in the three years I have lived in France.

The flight attendant is tall and slender. Her makeup is gentle, save for a dark red lipstick; the kind I had applied to my lips in a drunken stupor on my second date with Samuel, and later smeared all over his neck in a sidewalk photo booth. Her hair is not hers. I can tell the difference between real hair and a wig. I had experimented with wigs. I trashed all the self-portraits that I took of myself in them. They made me look weaker than I already felt. The stewardess wore a nametag. I grinned when I noticed what it said. It read Patience.

I reach around my back with my left hand and grab the camera dangling beneath my right shoulder. My heart still pounds in these moments, when the lighting is ideal and the subject unassuming, when all I want to do is take a picture.

“Can I take a picture of you?” I gave up on speaking French. “Just your face. You’re beautiful.”

“Merci,” Patience replies, flashing an apprehensive smile that reveals bubble-gum pink gums and teeth glossier than the white finish in my studio. “Sure, go ahead,” she adds.
I snap away, unabashedly. Patience isn’t bothered. She seems to like the attention. I make sure to get her contact information. I promise to send her a print. It’s my way of thanking random subjects.

“Now,” Patience says, “let me help you with that car seat. What is your seat number, please?”

“Trente A et trente B,” I say, showing her my boarding pass, making one last attempt at French.

“You mean quarante, madame.” We laugh together. “Follow me.”

**********

Clementine shifts in her car seat. Thunder cracks in the distance.

“I want papa,” she mumbles, awoken by the storm, her eyelids still droopy.

She asked for Samuel many times in the last four days. There was the time when she saw a brown man leaning against the metro doors on Thursday. Or, when she noticed one running sprints in the Parc de la Villette on Friday. Or, yesterday, when she observed another launch his daughter toward the sky while she giggled uncontrollably. She asked for him last night too, when she saw me in the kitchen cooking dinner for us in Samuel’s red apron, the one that used to belong to David, his father. In the bakery this morning, those words tumbled from her mouth as I did my best to play substitute dad.
“One for me, one for mama, and one for papa,” Clementine said over tears, as she handed, separately, three Euros to the woman behind the counter, a routine she performed religiously every Sunday morning, when she and Samuel bought pastries for breakfast while I slept.

“Do you want to wait until we see Papa and eat these together, like we always do?”

Clementine lowered her nose and peered into the bag.

“No, thank you, mama.” She took a huge bite of her almond croissant and then licked the sugar that dusted her upper lip. For a very brief moment, she’d forgotten about Samuel.

Clementine began seeming anxious about Samuel' absence when I picked her up from daycare on Wednesday. It was the day after Samuel flew to Douala to begin finalizing funeral arrangements for his dad. Clementine had never been away from Samuel for longer than an evening; he worked from home and picked her up every afternoon. She was especially ecstatic when he showed up in his orange and blue bike helmet. Bike rides home began with a tour through our Belleville neighborhood, ending in a cruise down the cobblestoned paths of the Père Lachaise.

“Papa, papa, regarde! La maison de Mr. Wright,” I once heard Clementine say. I had met up with them on my bike on the bumpy path of the cemetery after an unsuccessful pitch, preceded by hours of editing. Clementine pointed
towards the columbarium that housed Richard Wright’s ashes. She has asked if he was home, and if he read stories to his daughter the same way Samuel did.

After lunch and a nap together at home, Samuel and Clementine would set off to watch a marionette show, throw coins into a fountain, taste cheese or chocolate from a local shop, roller skate at the Trocadéro, or admire skeletons at the museum. Clementine’s favorite day was Friday, when they shared baked macaroni-and-cheese at a restaurant. The item wasn’t even on the menu, but the chef and owner was an old friend of Samuel’. Samuel often took her to the Champs de Mars in the evenings, where they ate overpriced Nutella crepes and watched the Tower’s flickering lights. Such was their weekly routine of which I’d get nightly live or recorded reports from Clementine before bed.

I was used to being away from home, and from Clementine. But recently, after a series of voice messages Clementine had rehearsed with Samuel, I started to reconsider traveling so much for work and being away from my family. I knew how lucky I was. I was one of few women in my profession to have dodged the curse of motherhood. After Clementine’s birth, I’d quickly resumed my creative life and continued my burgeoning career. I had Samuel. Those other women didn’t have someone like him.

“We’re gonna see papa really soon, honey,” I repeat. Really soon is not good enough. She kicks the air in front of her up and down. She stops when she realizes that no one, including me, notices.
Heavy rain continues to fall. The flight captain announces that takeoff will be delayed for thirty minutes. Patience returns with a glass of whiskey I have ordered, or apple juice, as Clementine, who is asleep, likes to call it. It isn’t the top-shelf kind I am used to, but just what I need to wash down a sleeping pill. The concoction soon kicks in. Finally, I, too, drift towards sleep.

**********

I am awakened an hour later to noisy breathing and heavy coughing to my left. A balding old man whose frame barely fills his dark blue suit seems sick. He reminds me of David, after his weight dropped and his hair had fallen out, after the despair of disease had robbed him of his smile. At our wedding, David was weak but looked regal in the latest suit I had gifted him. He’d joked with me as he escorted me down the aisle, me in my uncomfortable heels and he with his walker, and said “I’ll race you.” I never told Samuel why I’d stopped crying as he placed the ring on my finger: I’d glanced over at David. I recognized his smile as the same one Samuel had flashed as David and I approached the altar. It was the same reassuring smile I had fallen for five years earlier during the month I spent with Samuel on assignment in Africa.

I look past the old man in the dark blue suit and through the oval window of the plane.
“The flight was delayed an additional forty-five minutes,” says a female voice to my left. “That’s all you missed. It should be a lovely flight once we get moving.”

The voice is calming, and the accent American, Southern, I think. She wears a brown robe with a white collar, and a white scarf atop her hair that falls to the back of her neck. Her hands, soft and delicate, rest atop a thick burgundy book on her lap.

“What’s her name,” the woman whispers, nodding at Clementine, who is still asleep.

“Clementine.”

“She’s adorable. And your name?”

“Sophie.”

“Nice to meet you Sophie, I’m Mary.”

I reach above my head to signal for a flight attendant.

Patience reappears.

“Another one please,” I command as I empty my previous glass.

“Of course.”

“And, would it be possible for us to move back there?” I point to an unoccupied row of three seats in the last row on the plane.

“I’m sorry, but passengers will not be permitted in those seats on this flight.” Patience’s expression is unpleasant. She barely makes eye contact with me, like she is withholding information.
“What are you drinking?” Mary asks.

An empty cup and the bottle of pills remain on my tray. “Apple juice,” I answer.

*******

The old man’s snore wakes Clementine.

“Mommy,” she cries, “I want papa.”

Her sobs then awaken the old man. He tries to appease Clementine. He tickles her feet and plays peek-a-boo with her, but this only makes the situation worse. His frail face, I’m convinced, frightens her. I lift her onto my lap.

“She looks a lot like you,” the old man says.

“Thank you.”

“She reminds me a lot of my granddaughter.” He pulls out his phone and shows me a picture. “Her name is Anaiis.”

“You’re one lucky grandfather. She looks a lot like you, too.”

“Thank you. I’m on my way to see her. She lives there now.”

“Mommy, I want papa,” Clementine chimes in, nudging my neck with her head.

“Is that who you are going to see, your husband?” the old man asks.

“Yes. We’re going for a funeral, her grandfather.”
I hand the phone back to the old man. The screen goes dark so he presses a button to bring Anaiis’s face back. He stares at the screen. His hands are trembling. “Did he get a chance to meet her?”

I nod just as a horrifying shriek erupts in the back of the plane.

“Mommy, what sound that noise?” Clementine wants my full attention again.

“I don’t know, honey. It sounds like a monkey.”

“A monkey?! Mommy, I wanna see it.”

“A monkey?” the old man volunteers, “no, that’s not a monkey,”

“That sounds like a person to me,” the woman in the brown robe interjects.

I think about what I have said. I quickly recognized how absurd it is. A monkey on a flight to, of all places, Africa?

The screeching continues uninterrupted.

“What’s going on?” I say aloud, though no one hears me, not even the wise-looking old man in the dark blue suit who I expect has something to say about everything.

Passengers stand up all around me. My row remains seated. Mary, the nun, twirls rosary beads between her fingers. The old man covers his ears to drown out the screams. I wonder if this is how they all start, a diversion at the rear of the plane. I pull Clementine in tight and close to my chest. I can feel my heart pound fast against her.

“Mommy, what sound that noise?”
I poke my head above the back of my seat, but a crowd blocks my view. I can’t tell what the confusion is all about. I search for Patience. I can’t find her. And then I remember that Patience said we couldn’t sit in the last row. I wonder if Patience is that person on the inside.

“Mommy, I’m scared?”

A chorus of authorial voices speaks up and begin to bark orders. They are loud, firm, but polite. Police officers for certain.

“Sir, I’m going to ask you one more time, sit down, please!”

“Be quiet!”

“Sir, it doesn’t have to go down this way!”

Their efforts seem to only intensify the agitation. New voices speak up. Their accents differ from the first group.

“Look at what they’re doing to him!”

“My brother, just do as they say.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“He’s a human being, for Christ’s sake!”

The officers--I suppose they are officers--retort. “Sit down! Sit down! Sir, you need to move away from us, right now!”

“See, this is why I moved to Germany. You see how they treat us here.”

“Gentlemen, this is the last time I’m going to ask you to put away your cameras.”
Enough people return to their seats for me to see what the pandemonium is about. A scruffy man in wrinkled clothes, about Samuel’s age, hand handcuffed in front, is flanked by two clean-shaven men. Several passengers record the incident on their camera. They threaten to broadcast their images on the Internet.

“They’re allowed to film. Since when is that against the law?” I shout out, startling Clementine.

“Young lady, you’re wasting your energy,” says the old man in the dark blue suit. “Why are they even filming? They don’t even know this man. Who knows what he did, to be going home like a screaming monkey.”

“You sound like my husband.” I had wanted to ask Samuel at the conference whether he thought pictures alone could tell a story.

“Of course, if your objective is to let your viewer’s imagination tell the story,” he answered over beers in Senegal, where we wound up our assignment for Le Monde. “But if it’s not, then I suggest you get to know your subjects’ stories and make sure they leave little room for imagination.”

Tensions escalate when two broad men with fluorescent orange armbands rush the cabin from the rear of the plane. They yell and point fingers at passengers still on their feet, and remove from the plane anyone they suspect of having recorded the incident. A middle-aged woman faints and has to be wheeled off the plane. Her teenage son trails behind her. He stops squarely in front of the older and more restrained officer, and looks him in the eye.
“My aunt is in the hospital right now. She’s dying. And now, because of you, my mother won’t be able to say goodbye to her little sister.” He speaks within earshot of me.

The officer responds by insisting he keep moving.

By my account, thirteen people who appear to be headed home disembark from the plane. When the plane is finally airborne, I am glad that I am more tempted by beauty than conflict, that I didn’t pull out my camera and shoot. The officers, unfazed by Clementine’s pleas to see her papa, would not have hesitated to throw us off the plane.

**********

Sandra, Samuel’ second cousin, greets Clementine and I upon arrival at the airport. By now, it’s a familiar place, and staying at Sandra’s is part of the routine.

“Mama, where is papa?” Clementine expects Samuel to be there, as he promised her he would.

I had expected him, too. I’d promised Clementine that he would be. I am seething.

“Samuel is at cargo,” Sandra explains. “There were some issues with the shipment. The body just arrived,”

“Wait, you mean….?”
“Yes, David’s body was on your flight.”

Suddenly, Samuel’s prolonged absence doesn’t matter, nor does the plane drama I so desperately want to tell him about. I don’t care that Samuel has lied to me several times on the phone, told me everything was going according to plan.

“One day, I will take you to Cameroon,” David had told me last Christmas. “I am going to show you my village.”

I remembered that Christmas well. It was a month before the diagnosis, David’s favorite holiday of the year, because he was able to feed a large number of friends and family. He had gotten up early, before anyone else, to begin prepping for the evening’s feast. He was particularly happy. He wore the latest designer suit I had gotten him from one of my recent shoots. He wore it to morning mass and exchanged it for a red apron above a hooded sweatshirt that he cooked in. By dinner, the suit was back on.

I remembered the food that had filled David’s plate. Each dish had a story that I knew intimately because David repeated them every Christmas. I didn’t mind. With each rendition, David added details that he had previously left out.

There was the koki he’d learned from his mother as a child because he knew she was sick and that he would miss it when—as the local priest explained—she went to rejoin the Lord. Then there was the hachis Parmentier, a favorite of Charlotte, the only child of the French family for whom David cooked in Douala in his early twenties. Of them all, I remembered the ham hock infused
greens most fondly. Not only was it her favorite, but the dish told the story of
David’s lifelong friendship with Connie, the woman across the hall from South
Carolina. For the last forty years, they’d shared a small garden plot in which she
grew collards and he grew bitter leaves.

David described his village. I visualized the photos I would take of lush
emerald grassfields and vivid red clay roads. I told him I really wanted to go.
And, that’s when he told her:

“One day,” he said, “one day, I will take you to Cameroon. I am going to
show you my village.”

I had refilled my plate before David had even finished half of his. I
attributed his slow pace to my incessant questions. I cherished the stories of his
childhood in Cameroon and early years in Harlem in the 70s.

Then David mentioned to the first of many jolting pains in his abdomen.
“You know, I don’t know why, but ever since yesterday, it seems like the more I
eat, the more my stomach hurts.”

Later, I would watch him wince during chemo sessions, his hair thinned
out. “You know,” he whispered “that trip to Cameroon…” His limp hand, still
sandwiched between mine, suddenly felt heavy.

Now, I picture David inside his coffin. He’d been somewhere beneath my
seat in the main cabin, in the cargo hold, dressed in the last suit he would wear,
surrounded by suitcases filled with clothes that would be worn another day. I
recalled the promise he’d made. It was not how either of us had imagined our joint visit to Cameroon.

“The paperwork is going to take a while.” Sandra hung up the phone.

“Come, Samuel will meet us at home.”

“OK.”

“Amadou, let’s go,” Sandra ordered her chauffeur. “You’ll come back to get Samuel when he’s done.”

“Wait, one second.” I notice that the old man in the dark blue suit is being wheeled out of the airport. His granddaughter sits on his lap, her arms around his neck. His arms encircle her waist.

I hop out of the vehicle and jog towards them. “I never got your name.”

“My name? Why do you need my name?”

“I don’t know.” I don’t anticipated this response. “In case we run into each other again, maybe somewhere in Paris.”

“Run into each other?” The old man chuckles. “Where I lived in the city, people didn’t even run into people they knew.”

He motions Anaiis to follow her mother to the car, then turns to me.

“Let me tell you. I came home to be surrounded by my family, because everyone I love—and who loves me—is here. I came here because of Anaiis, because there is so much she needs to hear from me that no one else will ever be able to tell her. I want to eat my wife’s cooking while I can still chew and swallow on my own, before they shove a tube down my throat.”
Knots build in my stomach.

"I came here because... You know in your country... All those beeping machines, the sanitized white rooms, the art on the wall... My doctors told me there was nothing else they could do for me. I came home to die. And I feel better already."

I think about my country, my parents, the many places I've called home, Los Angeles, New York, Vietnam, Paris. I think about Samuel and Clementine, and how no matter where in the world we are, together, the three of us spell home.

**********

We leave the airport in Sandra's seemingly brand new grey SUV. At one intersection, a crowd gathers around a burning vehicle that has flipped over. A woman on the ground is wincing in pain. Blood stains the blue dye of her blouse.

"My baby, my baby," she cries, pointing to the carnage.

A toddler lays sprawled on the other side of the vehicle. He is surrounded by frantic strangers trying to resuscitate him.

That evening, I pace around Sandra's marble-tiled kitchen, restless and anxious for Samuel to come home. I think about the old man in the dark blue suit and the child involved in the car accident. I want to know their names. I want to feel close to them.
“Eat, Sophie,” Sandra says, before adding that her cook has prepared bitter leaf stew to my liking.

I’m hungry but I can barely eat. Chewing feels like a chore.

“I have a meeting at the Ministry early tomorrow morning. I am going to bed now. Make yourself at home.”

“Merci, Sandra.”

“Samuel should be here within the hour. Amadou just left.”

“Remind me, where do you keep the wine again?” I remember Sandra has an exceptional wine collection.

After I put Clementine down, I take two glass and a bottle to the balcony outside our bedroom overlooking the front gate. It’s a little past two in the morning. The night air is warm. The streets are thirsty for life, save for the uniformed men with their batons posted in front of the walled in homes of this affluent section of the city. Somewhere, a chain rattles the concrete like it’s being dragged. A large vehicle passes by, lifting the dust of the dry ground that now dances in its headlights. Now, in that same somewhere, a dog barks ferociously. A car pulls into Sandra’s driveway. Samuel exits before the engine cuts off. I wave and whisper something inaudible into the quiet of the night. He blows a kiss in return. I wait for him by the bedroom door and fall into his arms as soon as he touches me.

“I’m here,” he says.
We sit on the edge of the low bed. I’m the one telling stories. I tell him about the shrieking man being deported, and about the old man in the dark blue suit who reminds me of his father. I tell him about Mary, that there was something about her, and that I wasn’t quite sure what it was. I tell him that I’m upset that he lied to me, that I wished I’d known that David was with us on that flight, in his casket. I tell him how much Clementine has missed him, and that she had brought him his favorite pastry.

“We drove by an accident on the way home,” he says. I didn’t want to bring it up. “There was a body on the road. They said it was a little girl.” Samuel climbs into bed next to Clementine. I watch him inch his face towards hers and rub his nose against her cheek. “I saw the car seat in Sandra’s car,” he says to me. “I’m glad you didn’t listen to me.”

Clementine picks up on her father’s voice. With her eyes shut, she turns towards him and burrows into his chest like a snail that has found her lost shell.

We are home.
Just Pretend I’m Not Here

On a rainy Saturday morning in April, Clementine’s options had been narrowed down to two. She’d broken curfew the night before, and so staying home alone while family went away for the weekend was no longer possible. She could travel with her parents to her brother’s soccer tournament. Or, she could stay at Nana Sabine’s and help with the annual spring cleaning which, her father warned, could linger into Sunday evening, long after her tournament bound family had returned from their trip up north.

“Do I have to go to church too?” she asked her father.

“It would make Nana Sabine happy.”

“Come stay with me,” Nana Sabine said on the phone. “We’ll go through my old clothes, maybe have us a little fashion show. I’m sure you’ll find something you like.”

At seventeen, Clementine had a taste for vintage clothes. She loved the way they complimented her shape, hugging modestly around her hips and revealing the right amount of leg. The softness of cashmere, cotton, silk, and satin, her favorite fabrics, caressed her skin, creating a mystifying love of self and sexiness that confused and aroused her classmates at school. Her confidence made dating an uncommon occurrence, and for that reason her parents were willing to bankroll her expensive wardrobe.
Her father had cited Parmenides in kid-friendly language during the bratty “me-me” spats of Clementine’s preschool years reminding her that her existence was but an extension of something more important than herself. The message finally clicked for Clementine the summer after her noticeable growth spurt in middle school. She donated her clothes of the last two years to an all girls orphanage in South Africa; other girls would forge their own accomplishments inside clothes that knew Clementine’s history. That’s how she felt these days in her vintage clothes. Wherever she went, she carried another woman’s story. It was inspiring. The stories housed in the fabrics that touched her fueled her imagination.

Clementine inspected a pile of black heavy duty trash bags that Nana Sabine had labeled socks, undergarments, and shoes.

“Don’t touch those,” Nana Sabine said. “They’re for church.”

“Where should I start?”

“My closet.”

“It’s empty.”

“Almost. I pushed some clothes to the side for you to try on.”

Clementine reached toward a handful of hangers and turned toward the bathroom.

“Where are you going?”

“To the bathroom.”

“I’ve seen your naked butt before.”
Clementine’s dress dropped into a loose circle around her ankles. Nana Sabine held out her hand as if inviting her to dance. Clementine stepped out of the navy blue fabric as Nana Sabine swung the closet door shut to reveal a full length mirror. Clementine winced as Nana Sabine gripped her hair, styling her thick curls into a bun atop her head.

“Stay there, don’t move,” Nana Sabine said. She returned to slide a white porcelain bracelet onto Clementine’s arm, and fastened the black leather straps of a silver watch with around her wrist. Next, she removed Clementine’s onyx studs and replaced them with gold hoop earrings.

“What do you think, Clementine?”

“I love them, Nana, thanks.”

“Who said I was giving you these?” They laughed. The reveal of their curved lips was almost identical.

“What about that?” Clementine nodded toward a black dress draped over Nana Sabine’s forearm. “Is that for me?”

“Maybe.”

Clementine slowly removed the dress from the dry cleaning plastic. It had white, pink, and purple polka-dots.

“It’s from Dior, Nana.”

“And, from my childhood.”

Clementine wiggled into the silk dress that v-necked down her chest, and stood tall in front of the mirror.
“It looks nice on you.” Nana Sabine pulled the zipper up her back.

“I love it.”

“This one you can keep.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I certainly can’t wear it anymore.”

“Thank you.”

“I’d been keeping it for a girl, but then I had two boys. I haven’t managed to squeeze into it since your father was born.”

Clementine looked at her Nana.

“You’ll understand when you have children,” Nana Sabine smiled

“If I have children.”

For fifty years, the dress had hung on Nana Sabine’s side of the closet, abandoned in the dark corner like a distant memory. It was a reminder of her first husband, compressed by garments she’d received from David, her husband who’d just passed away. It wasn’t until David died that she could let herself drown again in her feelings for Thomas. It brought her great pleasure and also tremendous pain to think of him, and she didn’t want to live any other way. She’d tried to suppress his memory, but how could she? She’d married David while carrying Thomas’s son, who turned out to be Clementine’s father. Nana Sabine unbuttoned her jeans and lifted her shirt. Not a day went by when she didn’t notice the scars, the curvy stretch marks that squiggled down her midsection like rain streaking down a window.
“With the right man,” she told Clementine “a changed body is worth any child.”

Clementine gazed at the reflection of her Nana Sabine’s abdomen and clutched her own stomach. “How did you know Grandpa Thomas was the right man?”

Nana Sabine smoothed her abdomen. “You just feel it in your gut.”

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Clementine sprang from the living room couch, awakened by her vibrating phone rattling across the glass coffee table. She caught it inches above the floor. The missed call, stamped 11:10AM, was from Nana. Clementine had overslept and Nana Sabine had gone to church without her. They’d cleaned until one in the morning and Clementine had stayed up an additional hour texting Devon, the boy for whom she’d broken curfew. Clementine scrolled through a series of unopened text messages, biblical scriptures that were Nana Sabine’s way of telling Clementine she should be in the pew beside her.

To make up for it, Clementine decided to start Sunday’s cleaning without Nana Sabine. She had slept in the worn and holed clothes Nana Sabine dedicated to household chores. She picked up where they had left off the previous night, dusting and polishing the wooden furniture in the dining and living rooms.
The polka-dotted dress hung where Clementine had left it. She texted a photo of it to Devon.

Hey, do u like this dress?

It's nice. Where’d u get it?

My gramma’s.

Can I come over now?

At my gramma’s!

Can I come over there?

No!!!

Last night was fun!!

So what do you think?

Nice enough for prom?

As long as you’re in it, yeah!!

She tried on a handful of other dresses from Nana Sabine’s closet. None appealed to her in the same way as the Dior dress. Maybe, she thought, it was because she still looked tired, her hair pulled back into a ponytail, and she lacked
the appropriate accessories. She searched Nana Sabine’s dresser for last night’s jewelry but Nana Sabine had worn it to church. Instead, a white box labeled Georges R Studios, caught her attention, tucked between the dresser and the wall.

Clementine opened the box. It was filled with images, mostly of young people she didn’t know posing for the camera. Many were images of teenage Nana Sabine and Thomas. The collection of black and white images bridged a gap to a time and place Clementine didn’t know. They grounded her exaggerated fantasies about her grandparents’ past histories. Their pervasive silence about their past had haunted her in childhood and still occupied her curiosity as a teenager. Now, finally, these images lessened the void of their unspoken life.

The emotional connection was instantaneous. Clementine had never experienced Cameroon in this manner, inside square stills that offered new glimpses of everyday emotions of people who could pass as her relatives in Cameroon. The overwhelming evidence of such real lives shifted something profound inside her. Image making, she realized now more than ever, was capable of altering the mind and, by extension, one’s belief in who one was capable of being.

One photograph was harder to put down than others. In it, Nana Sabine wore black platform shoes, her hair styled in a cone-like bun atop her head, her arms pressing gently on Thomas’ shoulders. His hands lay flat above the
unnoticeable baby bump of her slender waist, against the silk fabric of the polka dotted dress Clementine had tried yesterday. Nana Sabine had crossed her hands behind his neck, fingers dangling comfortably. Their noses almost touched and their smiles were delicate. He stared at her, eyes wide open, while her eyes were shut. She looked relaxed, like there was no reason to let go. Next to them in the background, on Thomas’ left, is a table on top of which sat an ashtray and a tiny record player. Clementine texted a picture of the photograph to Devon.

"My gramma in that dress with grampa!!"

"Damn! You have her face!!"

"I know, right. Genetics!!!"

"Where was this taken?"

"Not sure. Somewhere in Cameroon though!"

"Where’s that?"

“Clementine?” Nana Sabine yelled. She was home from church.

"Google it:-)"

"Doing in right now."

“In your room, Nana,” Clementine yelled back.

"TTYL. Gramma’s home."
Nana Sabine took a seat next to Clementine on the bed. She took a moment to take in the photograph.

“We were very young here.”

“How old were you?”

“I was nineteen, and I think Thomas was twenty-six.”

“And you’re wearing the dress!”

“Thomas and I loved to dress up and go to discotheques. The government had instituted an 8PM curfew, so we went where we knew we could dance peacefully.”

“Georges R Studio.”

“He is name is Georges Raimbaud. He was a photographer, a nice man. Thomas was his assistant for years. His studio was the only place with a record player and music that we liked. Most of the time it was just the two of us and George. At first he paid us no mind, but he always ended up taking out his camera and telling us to just pretend he wasn’t there.”

“That explains why you’re not looking at the camera.”

“We were slow-dancing, Clementine. There wasn’t much else we wanted to be looking at but each other.” Nana Sabine chuckled.

“What did you dance to?”
“Oh, you wouldn’t know.”

“Try me.”

“Natural Woman.”

Clementine shook her head. “Nope.”

“Stand By Me.”

“ Heard of it.”

“When A Man Loves A Woman.”

“Of course!”

“Those were some of our favorites. Thomas loved songs about women. He had so much respect for mothers. He was against taking up arms during the war because it would mean killing a woman’s child.”

“Nana, so what happened to Grandpa Thomas?”

“We don’t know, sweetie” Nana Sabine took a long pause. Clementine put an arm around her. “We’ll never know. It’s too bad he never got to see you and your father. It would have tickled him to see that both of you have the same birthmark as he did, and on the same part of your thigh.”

That night, in her bedroom, Clementine stuck her butt in front of the mirror, craning her head to look at the birthmark. It was the size of a kiwi, shaped like Australia, and a shade darker than the rest of her body. It had been easy to keep it hidden. Now, before her eyes, she marveled at how it transformed from a stain on her skin to a badge of a natural woman, a portal into the unfinished story of a disappeared man.
Clementine slid under her covers when Devon sent her a text.

Africa.

Hunh??

That’s where Cameroon is.

You looked it up!

Said I would :-) Also said you’d get me home on time.

I’ll make it up to you.

No need.

OK. You ever been there?

No, but seriously thinking about it.

For when?

After college.

I’ll go with you.

You’re sweet.

You too

G’nite.

Gn.
Prom arrived two months later. As planned, Clementine wore Nana Sabine’s dress and had her hair done in French braids that wrapped around her head like a crown. Devon wore a classic black tuxedo. They’d been dating for four months. Clementine’s longest relationship before then lasted six weeks. After she’d joined the chess club and made varsity soccer, the other boy had created a schedule that showed in red when their available times were compatible. That was too much! Devon didn’t seem as obsessed with her. In fact, she’d initiated things with him. He was the only player in the club she couldn’t beat, and she wanted to play the best as often as possible. He was decent looking too, and at prom proved to be light and nimble on the dance floor. Clementine sat out from the fast tracks, which was most of the night. Devon and his friends broke a sweat while she watched on with two of her equally uncoordinated friends.

The moment Clementine had been waiting for arrived when the lights grew dim. Devon was smiling as he approached her. She rested her arms on his shoulders, crossed her hands behind his neck, and let her fingers dangle. Her face close to his, it was Devon’s move. She felt possessed by the magic of Nana Sabine’s dress. Like Grandpa Thomas in the photograph, Devin pressed his hands flat above the sides of Clementine’s waist, against the silk fabric of the polka dotted dress. He smiled wide, and brought his nose within inches of hers. She smiled back and they waltzed in this pose for what seemed like minutes. In this moment of relaxation, Clementine felt like they could continue past the
music. She took one last look at him, closed her eyes, felt his forehead against hers, the wet of his lips, his hand slide below her waist, over the birthmark, just as the warm light of a flash alerted her attention. Opening her eyes, she saw herself and Devon on the screen of his phone which he held in his outstretched arm in front them and above their heads. She freed herself in one hurried motion causing the phone to drop the floor.

She stormed through a rather large radius of stares and out of the auditorium. By the time she got outside, the picture Devon had captured had been posted and seen by hundreds of people who chimed in with their own version of the story.

Their relationship was over without words ever spoken. Clementine continued attending chess club all through the summer, and Devon was happy to play against her whenever possible. He beat her every time. Then one muggy mid-August day, Clementine showed up to chess club in her Nana Sabine's black polka dotted dress. It made her feel like there was something bigger in the world waiting for her. She played Devon four times and won each game.

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At 86, George Raimbaud had become the buzz of the art world with a solo exhibition of never before seen portraits taken from 1950 to 1975 in his Cameroonian studio. On the cold December night of the show’s opening,
photography was enjoying its hard earned moment of belonging in the art buyer's world, and Clementine's Nana, Raimbaud's muse, was up for sale in almost every corner of the Chelsea gallery.

Clementine's enlarged grandparents slow danced in front of a constant crowd of onlookers. Displayed prominently on the middle wall that partitioned the space, the couple's intimate moment was illuminated by lights so bright that people across the street could see them clearly through the gallery's floor to ceiling windows. Nana Sabine and Thomas's gaze was contagious. Everyone within a few feet felt compelled to smile, at a lover or stranger, and wonder why their own love had failed to be so pure and simple.

An older couple, two men in their fifties, commented on the shape of Thomas' torso, the rigidity of his jaw. They held hands and between sips of champagne, analyzed the length of Nana Sabine's dress, pondering what season it was designed for, ignorant to the fact that in Cameroon there were only two seasons, a dry one and a rainy one, and that both are equally scorching.

The air thickened as the gallery neared capacity, but fire codes didn't apply. Tens of thousands would soon be exchanged between private investors and the gallery's accounts. The title card of Clementine's grandparents' conspicuously lacked a red sticker, indicating it had yet to be sold.

Further north in Harlem, just an hour before the show opened, Clementine had sat in an African hair salon getting her hair done to match Nana Sabine's in
the image. She took a picture of the image and brought it with her to be sure the hairstylist got it right.

“This woman, you look a lot like her,” the hairstylist had said when she finished Clementine’s hair. “And her dress, who sells it?”

Clementine didn’t answer, but paid and let her generous tip do the talking. She stopped by her Morningside Heights dormitory to change into the dress and made her way downtown. She was an art history major at Barnard and had known of Georges Raimbaud’s show for some time.

A burly black man dressed all in black held the door open for her when she arrived. Her grandparents contagious smiles greeted her, and she smiled back. She made her way towards the photograph while taking in the crowd, the staring and pointing, the decadence of some outfits and the understatement of others. She recognized many of the pictures on the wall from the box she’d rummaged through at Nana Sabine’s three years ago. None but the one she stared at had both of her father’s parents. It still remained unsold, but three couples dressed in black from head to toe save for the mens’ white shirts, stood in front of it. They alternated between talking amongst each other and looking at the photograph with calculated stares. The Chelsea neighborhood was an area she frequented often, mostly for the free food and alcohol, but also for the art. The gallery was a world she understood; and as far as photography was concerned, it was always the same looking crowd of buyers and onlookers.
Clementine’s body had warmed. She took off her coat and remained in front of the photograph. She expected someone would have noticed already, the hair at least, but they didn’t. She looked away from the photograph and found Georges surrounded by a thick crowd. She approached, stomping her heels against the floor with force. She made eye contact with Georges, who was describing retirement on a vineyard in Alsace. She interrupted him and said she’d read somewhere that the man in his iconic imagine had once worked as his assistant. Without hesitation, he responded that yes, that was true, and that the boy just disappeared on him one day.

Clementine removed herself and walked around the gallery, waiting for someone to notice the dress, her hair, or her unmistakable resemblance to her grandmother. She expected them to ask who she was, so she could tell them who her grandparents were, because they belonged to a much larger conversation than was occurring in the gallery. Maybe it was the fact that the image was black and white and hers was the real deal, with purple and pink dots. Or maybe for some it was just not possible to link her light complexion with her dark skinned Nana. Or maybe, her grandparents, flattened to two dimensions behind black framed glass now, belonged as much to someone else as they did her. That in order to claim her place, her family, and ownership over the perceptions of other people, she would have to present a threat to the art economy.
Clementine buttoned her coat and made for the back of the gallery. Near the bathroom, she looked up towards the ceiling, gathering all the information she needed. No camera. The back exit was for emergencies only, and this was one of them. She walked towards it, pulling the fire alarm as she passed into the cold air of the back alley.