The Book Of Adultery

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The Book of Adultery

A Collection of Short Stories
By
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts of The City College of New York of The City University of New York
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Denise’s youth had faded. I quickly studied her in that surprised moment at the service desk, probing her freckles and the weight that filled her face out. I hadn’t seen her in over twenty years. My childhood friend, John, told me where she worked. So when I got in town, I popped into the library to see her. She was real surprised — we both were. I was looking at a woman now — a good-looking woman regardless of experience’s handiwork. Through my lens as a fifteen year old she had been a good-looking girl. Over two decades ago that’s how I saw her in a Sunday school class, Denise and I met at Fellowship Baptist Church of the Illuminated. My parents forced me to go to service because they were interested in me learning about God. I happened to be interested in God, too. But not the intangible one that plays in our imagination. Back then I was only interested in the God that made things like Denise. Her hair, as I remembered, used to bloom into an untamed black forest. Spiral curls would droop down her slim brown face. She was skinny then — with glasses. I guess that’s who I imagined I’d see when I came to her job. But as soon as I walked into the branch, I saw someone else. That dark hair was now neatly slicked back into a bun with a thin gray stripe. Denise looked mature and sophisticated. Quite honestly even, she looked stereotypically bookish. She could’ve fit the bill of a prude, standing at the service desk checking in returned books. I walked up to her with the ease of September and simply said, “Hi, Denise.”

It was her idea to go to lunch and play catch-up. I took her number down and told her I’d call her later. Without being foolishly truthful like I can be and saying silly things, Denise asking me to lunch fulfilled a small fantasy I had had. I couldn’t let her know I’d always had the curious inclination to want to know what happened to her after I left Ohio. What happened to us when
we were fifteen? Why we broke up? How did her life turn out after I last spoke to her on a payphone in a Kentucky airport?

I called Denise that evening. We talked briefly and agreed to have lunch at a good Chinese restaurant she knew of. The next day she picked me up from my parent’s house, I didn’t have to give her the address. She remembered. She didn’t come in but beeped twice and I came out from around back. I thought she looked great, her sunglasses crowned her head. She wore a white cardigan and a turquoise v-neck cut top with dark slacks. The red lipstick she had on foiled her conservative appearance, and in terms of sex appeal, she knew what she was doing. She stood outside her car in the driveway and I gave her a hug. Denise was a woman, a real woman.

We got in her car and cruised up 75 North. I sat reserved and quiet and had wanted to just stare at her. But instead, I looked out the window. I had forgotten about the serenity of Ohio, trees and open space. Denise broke the silence when she asked,

“So how’s New York?”

“It’s good,” I said. I volleyed a question back to her, “How’s Cincinnati been treating you?”

“It’s okay, I guess.

“You seem to be doing well,” I said enthused. “A librarian! That’s big!”

“Thanks,” she said parting a faint smile. “I enjoy my work.” She sharply cut her head back, checked her blind spot and flicked the turn signal to exit the expressway. As an afterthought she said, “It’s boring here, Kersey.”
At the restaurant, we were tucked into a booth in front of a large window. Denise and I placed our orders and continued to ask the typical questions people do when they haven’t seen each other in years.

“How’s your family?”

“Who? My sisters?” she said.

“Yeah. Ca’ren and —“

“Jessica,” she said.

“Yeah, how are they?”

“Do you want the long story or the short one?”

“I’ve got time,” I said playfully.

“We don’t talk much,” she said. “I’ve learned that sometimes even your family don’t want to see you succeed.”

“That’s a bitch,” I said. “What happened?”

“What didn’t? I got married. Bought a big house. Bought a BMW — had a kid. Got divorced and kept all my things, including my son.”

“And that was it?”

“Isn’t that enough for two sisters who failed at everything?”
“Probably so,” I said.

Our food came. She dug into the Kung Pao shrimp she had ordered. I had the vegetable lo-mein. She looked at it curiously.

“You can try some of the shrimp if you like. You do eat shrimp?”

“Yeah, I eat’em,” I said.

“I think I want to try some of your noodles,” she said.

“Be my guest.”

I pinched up shrimp with my chopsticks, and she stabbed at the slippery lo-mein with a fork, trying to get a good helping from plate to plate. She was careful as a rescue worker needling each noodle. On the outside of us, I’m sure we looked like a couple framed in that big window. She didn’t smile much, at least not as much as I did. I was simply happy to be sitting with my first love. When I walked into the library yesterday and saw her, old feelings stirred up in me. She gave me a full toothy smile then, her dark-rimmed glasses climbed her nose, and her arms had immediately opened to me, as if they’d secretly wanted me for a long time, and we got stuck. At the service desk, in a tight embrace that felt very familiar, right there, we were glued together. It felt really good to see her, to touch her. Denise’s weight, which she didn’t hold back acknowledging, felt just right.

“Do you remember Mr. Mixon?” she said, still fidgeting with the lo-mein.

“Wow! I hadn’t thought about him in years,” I said.
“He couldn’t handle us. You remember that?”

“I remember you always having a philosophical question for him,” I said.

Denise stuffed a lump of noodles in her mouth and turned away. She looked out the window like she was looking for someone else was to join us. “He didn’t know shit,” she said. I laughed and it made her laugh, too. She was right. Mr. Mixon was a little man with an unkempt Afro and polyester wardrobe, who seemed to still be living in a decade prior to the eighties. Poor man had tried with all his intellectual power (the little saint), to teach a bunch of fifteen year olds of a much more progressive world about God — or “the word” is how they said it in the church. Southern Black Baptist churches said things like that. “What was that question you asked him once — about Muhammad? And having multiple wives?” I asked. Denise chuckled innocently and dropped her fork in her plate. Right before my eyes she turned fifteen again, full of virginity, before the husband — house, kid, and car — before us even.

“I think Mr. Mixon thought you wanted to be a part of a harem,” I said.

“He didn’t know what to think. Remember he just paused while we sat there waiting for him to say something?”

“How could I forget, that’s when you knew you had him. You constantly harassed him after that,” I said.

“I couldn’t help it, I prey on the vulnerable.”

“What are you some kind of animal?” I said jokingly.
“I’ve been that,” she said, twirling lo-mein around her fork.

The lunch crowd was building up. Businessmen, families with small children, and some who were alone but obviously waiting on others, took seats around us. The crescendo of chatter had finally encroached. But it never quite penetrated the intimacy developing in our booth, the air was getting smaller between Denise and I, and I was beginning to think foolishly. She asked, “Do you want to know why me and my ex-husband broke up?” “I do,” I said. “Well, first of all…” she said, poking a shrimp. “He was a liar! I learned that the hard way. But after being married a few years, he stopped wanting to have sex …”

I had a hot-flash rush through me. She said “sex” making me think back twenty-two years ago when we were kids. The monumental event of our relationship was our first and only sexual encounter, it was a big deal to me. I had been a virgin, and Denise, as much of a homely looking girl she was back then, with her a-line skirts and button-downs, penny-loafers, thick-lenses — a real square, who was real aggressive but appeared to be coy, had a questionable reputation. Before she and I began getting close, it was said by my friend Goon, that she had given it up to one of the boys in the church choir. I didn’t believe it, nor did I care. She was everything I imagined about a woman of my liking. But of course, she was the only girl I’d dated. Denise was intelligent. She read all kinds of books and talked about them like she had memorized everything in them. She inspired my imagination with profound questions, the little observations she’d made about life and challenged with rhetorical inquiry. I had lived across the street from the church, and in one of the many notes we’d pass back and forth during Sunday school, one day she wrote: “Do you think when this is over we can go to your house?” I was puzzled at first because there wasn’t too much to do at my house but watch T.V. A dirty idea had popped into my head, and if
she was thinking what I’d started to think, then I was game. Something I learned about myself that day, among a few other discoveries is: if I wanted something to happen, I’d go the distance to make it happen. More specifically: if I wanted sex, I did whatever it took. But this was a burgeoning habit I was learning about myself, the one I’d never quite kick, and I was none-the-wiser at the time Denise struck.

I remember Sunday school letting out around ten-thirty, and the main service didn’t begin ‘til eleven. My parents usually made it over to the church around eleven-fifteen, which meant Denise and I had about forty-five minutes to kill. My mind raced while Mr. Mixon babbled on, yet I began to take notice of the curious glances Denise shot me. Instead of passing the note back I had mouthed, “Yes.” She winked, which made me feel like it wasn’t necessary for me to even answer her. Everything had already been plotted underneath her black-spiraled mane.

“… I told him that I’m a woman, and I have needs. And if he didn’t resume our sex-life, I would cheat on him… Kersey, you listening?” I snapped back from daydreaming and gave Denise a peculiar look, the kind where your eyebrows are scrunched in confusion and it’s evident you’ve spaced out. “You’re listening to me, right?”

“Yeah, I heard you,” I said. “That’s deep!”

“He thought I was kidding, see.”

“It’s unusual,” I said.

“What’s unusual?”
“For a woman to be in that position.”

“Well, what’s unusual about it?”

“It’s you guys who normally turn the water off on us.”

“Turn the water off,” Denise said curiously, “Is that some New York saying?”

I laughed at her. I thought it was cute how concerned she looked, leaning into the table and pensively resting her hand under her chin. It was her life story she was telling me, the chapter that took away her idealism about relationships and marriage, and I couldn’t help but to trivialize it. I couldn’t help daydreaming either. I wanted her to see the humor in her divorce because I saw the humor in mine; however, I wasn’t as straightforward as Denise in my marriage. I administered my affairs from cheap motel rooms and backseats of rental cars. Places where most clandestine people peddle their dishonor. I didn’t tell my ex-wife I was going to cheat on her, I cheated secretly. Like everybody else. But looking at Denise I realized this was serious to her, the breakup of her family — that was serious. I looked through her dark frames, and her gaze cut me into a block of ice.

“I’m sorry, Denise,” I said. “Turn off the water is something I made up when women decide not to have sex.”

“Right,” she said un-amused.

“So go ahead, tell me the rest, “ I said.

“You sure you want to hear this?”
“Yeah, I’m sure,” I said. “Go ahead.”

“So he never admitted to it, but I found out through some friends — the sneaky son-of-a-bitch! He was cheating!”

“And so then you went out and had an affair?”

“I did,” she said. “But before I found out he was cheating, I told him I’d do it!”

“So, he kept the water off then?”

She looked at me playfully and sucked in a mess of noodles. There she was, just as new as anything I’d gotten on Christmas morning. I couldn’t help but think back to Sunday school again. Mr. Mixon had said the prayer that ended class, and both Denise and I got up quickly. She tucked her bible neatly underneath her arm, and I tossed my suit jacket on wildly. I stuffed the note deep into my front pocket, and we slipped out the side door of the church cafeteria, across the park, and into the woods. That was the plan I devised. We’d do surveillance on the house from the woods, see my parents leave, and then make our move. Denise and I could steal the whole service and they wouldn’t have had a clue. I never sat with my folks, I had my own little network of friends at church: John Jackson or “J.J.,” is what we had called him back then, Peabo Pierce (because he looked like a “Peabo”) his name was actually Prentice. Bryce Grant, or “Goon,” and Gary Franklin were my other buddies. But Denise was at the center of them.

The woods were a little chilly and the trees swayed overhead keeping us hidden in shadows. “You got condoms, right?” I remember she asked this, confirming the lewd visions I’d began to have of her in class. “Yeah, of course.” I said, studying the foot traffic passing by. I
wanted to make sure nobody spotted me sneaking a girl into the house. Denise had crouched
down next to me, she smelled like clothes fresh out the dryer. My excitement was unprecedented,
I felt very new and alive. True enough Denise was a slim girl, but a lot of the girls I knew back
then were slim, too. And they all were growing boobies, including Denise. I had the firey fifteen
year old need to see them boobies — touch them, do whatever you did to them. She and I had
sneaked kisses before and awkwardly pawed at each other, but what we were about to embark on
we’d never truly attempted or even talked about. The nature of our relationship generally worked
around our likes and dislikes about the larger world, talking on the phone late nights — that was
it. Sex? The conversation maybe came up once when Denise mentioned something about penises
and how she thought it’d have to be the size of an average banana in order to satisfy her. Other
than that, we hardly talked about it.

I saw my father step out the house looking razor sharp, my mother was right behind him.
He pulled his hat down low. His tan cashmere topcoat matched perfectly. My mother, a fox stole
draped over her shoulders, looped her arm through Pop’s and they walked up to the church like
they were going to see the angels. Denise and I waited until we couldn’t see them anymore and
ran out the woods as random as deer. We both were determined to see this through, I certainly
was. This was it! This was the thing all my guys talked about; this was the thing that was going
to feel better than a glob of lotion mixed up in my hand — this was the real deal! With a real
girl! Denise Wilson!

I tried to be cool jogging up to the backdoor. My heart raced in both excitement and
nervousness, though. Denise was right behind me. I yanked my tie loose and fished my keys
from out my undershirt. A simultaneous kick with the turn of the key opened the door and we
moved urgently down into the basement. I fumbled for the lights, clicking on a lamp. The room appeared in a dim tangerine glow. Old furniture, Pop’s jazz records and theology books were mostly stored in the space. Denise was already sitting on the couch with her shoes off, unbuttoning her top. I could hear my heart thump. It banged in the swift syncopation of a rites of passage rhythm. I began pulling my clothes off. Denise was down to her panties. Up her skinny legs went and she rolled them off lying back on the couch comfortably. I gawked at the mound of black hair that rose from between her legs. “Damn, girl,” I said. “Hurry up and come on,” she said in a low voice. Getting naked in front of a girl was something I hadn’t anticipated, I’d never even once thought about the awkwardness of it. I was standing in my undershorts with the embarrassment of stripping them away and exposing my eagerness. “Let me see it,” Denise said. I pulled them down slowly and she sat straight up. I felt like a tease. My penis aggressively poked at my shorts. I pulled down further and it sprang out. Without her glasses on, I actually saw her eyes widen in amusement. Not shockingly surprised amusement, but more like ‘that’s it? Okay, fine,’ amusement. “No banana?” I said. Denise didn’t say a word but just laid back. I’d never forgotten that moment and what I’d do the next time I found myself feeling insecure, anxious, and incredibly nervous all at once. I inched toward her, humbly cupping my fruit. I reached out with one hand to turn the lamp off and found my way on top of her.

“Turn the water off, that’s cute,” she said.

“Yeah, I made it up.”

“I know, you just told me,” she said. She folded her lips like she was considering something else to say. As if I were a gigolo, or a pimp, I boldly said to Denise, “Is your faucet still running?”
“What?”

“Nothing,” I said, picking at the last bits of food on my plate.

“What did you say, Kersey?”

“What do you think I said?” She and I intensely zeroed our eyes in on each other.

“Listen, Kersey. We’re too old for this, say what you meant,” she said firmly.

“You’re right, Denise,” I said. I paused to carefully choose my words. “I didn’t know what to expect when I came to see you at the library yesterday. John Jackson told me he’d seen you, and —”

“You asked John about me?”

“I did,” I said.

“He didn’t say anything?”

“About what?” I asked.

She leaned back and said, “He didn’t tell you he and I don’t talk anymore?”

“No, he didn’t,” I said. “Why? What happened?”

“To be perfectly honest?” Denise said, “J.J. was my ex-husband’s lover.”
“Who is the devil?” Binta said, “Pause and think about it.” All the girls, most of them tall, some short, high yellow, deep dark African black or in between, listened while they changed into their costumes. Tweety, Black Fantasy, and Gena Hump, the new girl, giggled nervously. The rest vainly studied themselves in the big mirrors by the stage door, or in the row of vanities, perfecting their makeup and sprucing up their hairstyles. The business of the club bustled in the back dressing area as usual: liquor deliveries were made, girls hopped in and out of showers, the deejay starting a new shift sorted his music. A serious looking black man, the assumed owner, dressed in a grey slim fitted suit, a huge gold pinky ring, hair slicked back like a Black Elvis, directed the hastiness of delivery guys and dancers alike. Rich flowery smelling perfume hung seductively in the air, and some of the girls sat on small wooden stools rubbing on oils with glittery residue. Some, as an unofficial ritual, promised to tattoo a part of their body each week. Silver waist chains, spiked piercings, and colorful fertility beads (worn by two bodacious Jamaican girls), sexually accessorized the near nakedness of each dancer. It was close to show time for most of them and they looked flawless. Binta, peering deep into a vanity mirror, her amber eyes enlarged, was slicking her eyelashes with a mascara brush when she repeated, “Who is the devil?” The same few girls giggled again. Big Nell from the Bronx, the biggest, but sexiest, because of her proportioned weight shouted, “The dude who don’t pay me!” They all laughed, including Binta who responded and said, “Nope! He’s the same motherfucker you sleep with! Say, Buenos Noches Bitches!”

For a long time she thought she was the devil. Binetta Morgan was her name before she shortened it to Binta — before she left her hometown of Washington D.C., before she danced in
some of the seediest strip clubs in Atlanta, Georgia. Enough girls from up north, however, were down south moonlighting as strippers, and going to one of the many universities in the area. Most were really just trying to make a way for themselves and their kids. But northern girls were definitely different than the southern belles, who happened to be innately more cordial and polite, yet, they shared the same premise as the other girls. Get money!

Binta still had some of that southern hospitality left in her. Because D.C. was considered the south by most. She’d only been in Atlanta for three months, which seemed to tally into a lifetime. She’d settled in pretty comfortably, had found a place, made some friends, met a few characters, joined a small country tabernacle, and saved money. The ivory hands of the Bible belt had just enough reach, right before crossing the Mason Dixon line, to grab at her and keep her mindful of the Christian principles carried over from the Fatherland. Maybe that’s partly the reason why Binta moved down to Georgia right after high school. Her mother’s roots were already in the south, as far as Louisiana. And given the opportunities that had attracted Binta, she was essentially in the south to start over and reconcile the errors of her past.

Binta grew up in Northeast D.C. with her sister, who she never had much of a relationship with; a mother who worked all the time, and all the crime and juvenile delinquency a striving African American neighborhood inadvertently permits in its community. It was enough non-sense going on in Northeast and sneaky teenagers, the kind Binta had been, couldn’t be controlled by a fledgling army of parents who’d often find their leadership in fathers tremendously compromised. It was mothers who manned the households and they just had to trust that after-school, their kids, daughters especially, would come right home and get smack into their homework.
Sex education Binta could teach anyone. She specifically taught a lot of boys in the neighborhood after school. She taught them about their breeding qualities, how to use their apparatus, the operating speed of it, and timing. Timing was very important, and most boys, at least the totally, totally, inexperienced ones, had trouble with their timing. “When you feel like you’re about to bust open,” Binta had said to Andre. “Pull it out!”

Back before she gambled her dignity dancing, Andre was the new boy in the neighborhood from North Carolina who all the girls thought was cute. Only if they knew, he didn’t know anything about sex until Binta taught him. She taught him good. So good, that his stoke became impeccable. After awhile he began using it on other girls around the neighborhood. He also learned, surely from this newfound experimentation in sex, how to put his words together to tell the girlies things they’d want to hear. These were the facts — I’m just sayin’.

Five years ago, Andre professed his teenage love for Binta in the fall, and unknowingly for Dre, it became a secret contract. He was shit talking like nothing to it, but Binta was quietly dissolved by his confession. It was her constitutional right as a young black female, as it was for the others, to take love exchanges serious from boys. To have love for herself wasn’t a real consideration at this stage of her life. But to have it from a boy, a boy she liked, an elected official of her heart, who she trained to appease her sexually meant everything. The funny thing about Binta, however, was that it didn’t faze her to know Dre was running around on her. Everybody knew, and Binta never acted like she didn’t. She felt like she owned Dre. He was her man regardless of the competition, who relied heavily on giving it to him as much as they could. Binta played the game. Hell, she invented it! She fucked Dre often, too. She also ran around like a loose girl when her appetite became abundant. Those were the tricks that came along with her
sensibilities. “What’s good for the goose, is good for the gander,” she’d say dialing up Lawrence Parks from Greenbelt, or Michael Peaston, a high school basketball sensation she met out in Anacostia. They both had been students of hers once, and sometimes she’d see the two of in the same day. It was a matter of her feeling up to traveling to southeast D.C. or way out to Maryland, or vice versa, depending on who she had a taste for first. Whatever the case, Binta had options.

She was decisive about the baby, however. November 18, 1989, Andre came over after school. Same routine between the two of them, they’d get the sex out the way first, and then, if she felt like it, she’d make him a grilled cheese. Binta controlled the house, her mother was at the hospital working, and Angel, her sister, hardly came out her room. She manned the stove, flipping the sandwiches, and then slid them off the spatula onto plates. She gave one to Dre who was putting on his sneakers. She sat the other plate in front of Angel’s door and tapped it lightly. Dre watched her come from out the darkness of the hallway. “That’s a first,” he said. “What?” Binta looked at him strangely. “That’s the first time I’ve seen you do something kind for your sister,” he said, stuffing a corner of the sandwich in his mouth. “I’m full of surprises, boy,” she said. She sat down on the couch and pressed her palms together like prayer hands and stabbed them between her legs. Since he had come over, she worked hard to keep the worry she had inside. She’d definitely have to tell him. But how?

Dre mushed the rest of the sandwich in his mouth, brushed his hands together and heaved his parka on. “Why you gotta leave now,” Binta said. “Don’t your mother come home soon?” Dre said. “That never stopped you from trying to get seconds,” Binta said emphatically. They looked at each other like they could easily see their nakedness. Before she rolled her eyes at him, she studied his face and imagined what their son might look like. Dre had one droopy eye she
found adorable and was tall, over six feet like Michael Peaston. He had a slender nose and a full set of the prettiest teeth she’d seen on a boy. His hands were big and manly and nicely kept for a sixteen-year old. “So, does that mean I can have some mo’ ass?” “No! You still got time to make it to Cynthia’s house for that!” He immediately put those teeth on display with the biggest grin he could give her. “Who’s the devil, Dre?” she asked. “Think about it. I see how you lookin’.” “Hey baby, I told you about that. Me and Cynthia, we just friends,” he said. He sat down on the couch next to her and said, “Cynthia’s just a friend. Her family is from Raleigh, like mine. So we talk about it all the time.” “Look, Dre. I’ve known that girl since like third grade — fought her in the fifth. I know how she moves. You fucking her!” Binta said. “We just friends, Bee,” Dre said softly. “You know you my baby.” He stood up in front of her and stretched his arms out to hug her. Never was there a time she could resist Dre. She got up and hooked onto him tightly. Her eyes were closed and she wished she could feel this way forever. She had her man and some. “Dre, I have something to tell you.” He bent his head down to kiss her, “I know, baby. I love you, too.” The warmth of his lips made the juices heat up in her body all over again. The nature of sex happens to run through young people erratically, much like a toddler whose full of spirit and recklessness in his demonstration to walk for the first time. Their deed was done again right on the floor. Binta toppled and dominated Dre. He had lain back on his down coat with his jeans at his ankles. She wound her thick brown posterior into him until he was overwhelmed with actual feelings of inevitability. “Don’t pull out, Dre,” she said, breathing heavy. And he didn’t. That happened 5:27pm, at 5:29, wheezing with exhaustion Binta said, “I’m pregnant.”

Babies were merit badges for young black girls. They meant some boy loved you, or someone would definitely love you. The baby loved Binta already, though he floated helplessly in the darkness of her womb, she felt his affection each time he kicked. Right before graduation,
Dre acted like he didn’t know her anymore. He’d see her and ignore her. If she tried to speak to him, he’d curse at her and arrogantly sling his arm around the shoulders of his rumored girlfriend. It didn’t matter anymore to Binta, really. The biggest dilemma she had, besides moving out her mother’s house, was the secret of trying to determine who the father really was. Her math was good, but trying to calculate each time she slept with Larry or Michael, and Dre, is where it got muddy. She didn’t even include Keith Merkins from Landover because she had cut him off weeks before her tryst. Binta, at one time, thought for sure it was Dre’s baby, but she wasn’t so sure now; and truthfully, it really didn’t matter to her, with the exception of explaining her son’s attributes to friends and family. They might ask, “Where’d he get those eyes?” Her response could be anything she made up. But to be fair to her prince, her tiny king, who’d trample through the house joyful as a dwarf singing “Hi-Ho,” she might need to know exactly who his daddy is, just because, he might one day ask.

She left on a Sunday morning and the ride was long. In the back of the bus, Binta thought about finding work and getting a place — everything that needed to happen when she got there. Chubby-Boo, what she mostly called him, stayed back in D.C., surprisingly with Angel, who’d taken a big interest in her nephew. He was six-months, and Binta was determined for him to be back with her before he turned a year. The little government job she had gotten after high school, she overheard people talking about Georgia, and how the cost of living was cheap, how things were progressive for blacks down there. She figured she could start a real life down south, her and the baby. The cold cheap apartment she’d been living in wasn’t going to cut it for her any longer, and exodus just wasn’t a story exclusive to Moses.
The lights of the skyline made her feel nervous. “Atlanta,” she said under her breath as the bus glided through downtown. It looked nothing like D.C. But there was a feeling of opportunity swirling in the air. Peachtree Street was lit up like a Christmas postcard, full of gold and silver lights. It was March, right before spring, however. “We’re going to make it big, Chubby-Boo. Me and you.” Binta got off the bus, got her bags, and walked out into the streets.
Everything about Salome was grown. She was often mistaken for an older girl. But it wasn’t so much the full-grown body she had, it was the way she thought about things — how she saw the world at sixteen. Sure, at sixteen there’s a world of experiences one has that could be filtered into millions of stories. But none like the one Salome had to tell. First of all, she lived in Brooklyn. Flatbush, specifically. The daughter of a very determined Haitian mother who had the power of God and other forces, dark and light, to determine the fate of the weak was Salome’s keeper. She lived with her off and on. But the last time Salome’s mother punched her in the face, which was a little bit after sundown, Salome came to an abrupt conclusion and said flat out, “She’s got to die.”

Thin moonlight drifted into her room and coalesced with the darkness and dark thoughts Salome had lying in bed that night. She smoothed her hands along her belly asking herself questions, the kind of questions that should only be queried privately. Nobody has to know the terror concocted in the bowels of deep thought, and even for the thinker to know these deadly thoughts is enough to self-indict and point a judicious finger. But Salome wasn’t afraid to plot possibilities in killing her mother. Who’d care? She’d be another Caribbean immigrant perished and among the faceless, fallen and gone. Salome’s mother drove a cab and came to New York eleven years ago without family or friends. The world she built for herself and Salome might as well have been on the far end of an un-colonized island. A black fist and a sharp tongue were this island’s military and policy, and has been the tyranny Salome’s lived under for years. But now was a time for rebellion.
In the morning, right before leaving her room, Salome checked herself in the mirror. She slicked down her hair and rubbed the excess grease on her knees. Her uniform skirt floated right at her beige thighs, and the well-starched white academy shirt had a custom fit delicately working around her breast and waist. When she walked out into the kitchen, her breakfast was still steaming and neatly placed on the table. Salome unraveled the fork and knife from the napkin and cut into the liver and boiled bananas. Staring into space and chewing without any particular interest in the food, her thoughts from the night before still held her captive. She searched around the apartment placing her eyes on objects her mother acquired over the years. Gaudy pieces, she thought. For instance, the mauve lampshade with the golden tassels she always hated, as well as, and with undoubted contempt, the Victorian couch that pompously sat in the middle of the small room. There was a certain way you had to move into the space to sit because the end tables and couch had a monopoly on square footage. Salome was only eight feet from the room and, the kitchen was distinguished by the obvious: a stove and refrigerator, and just earlier that year decorated with black and white checkered floor tiles. Sometimes manners escaped Salome and she snatched at the corners of her mouth wiping away gravy. She was done, and got up. She ungraciously dropped the plate in the sink, and before she walked out the door, she slung her book-bag around her shoulder and turned to look at the apartment as if it’s the last time she’d see it.

In 1987, Brooklyn still had that winner takes all attitude. Salome’s Flatbush was full of Caribbean people, who looked pained in their struggle to master survival but somehow relentlessly endured. Somewhere in their heads an immigrant’s song played loud and rallied some gumption for nationalism in their respective homelands, as well as continuously invigorating them with the ideas of prosperity America had to offer.
On her block Ms. Wilson, the trini lady at the corner swept up all the garbage in the streets. Others who’d share in the responsibility, too, also kept up the block and their properties, in an unspoken yet spirited competition. But Ms. Wilson would be the first up in the mornings attending to the task of making the neighborhood picture perfect. Salome was busy wiping at gravy she’d gotten on her shirt when she walked past the lady. “Good morning, beautiful. I good, yes?” Ms. Wilson said. “Mornin’, I good, oui.” Salome said in return, looking up surprised that she’d made it down the block so quickly. She turned up Ocean Avenue and headed straight to the bakery to buy her favorite sugar cookies. She saw Hood. He had entered one of her dreams last night and was the very person she wanted to talk to. So, there was no real irony she’d see him early this morning, perhaps it was that she dreamt him up?

Salome swept her hands past her hair, tugged a button undone on her shirt and took a grown woman’s stride towards him. Hood saw her coming. He always saw Salome coming — he and other men, who had eyes and dirty thoughts likewise.

“What’s the specs, little mama?”

Salome deliberately ignored him and walked into the bakery. Hood crept in behind her, a giant mass of a black man, long spider-legged dreadlocks crawling off his shoulders. He’d easily be mistaken for a thief, a killer perhaps — or even a rapist. He stood behind Salome faking an interest in satisfying a sweet tooth. Focused on staring down her shirt, Hood flagrantly bumped up against her as they stood on line. “Be easy, Hood.” Salome said. “Everything in here comes with a price — including you.” Salome collected her change and playfully brushed past him. He was out the door right behind her.
“What you talking about shorty?”

“Let’s talk,” Salome said, the bustle of the avenue moved past her.

“Yeah? What you got to say to Hood?”

If there was a particular look for cockiness, Salome had that look on her face. Hood had it, too. She turned her back on him and headed to the park on the corner. Without question, he followed — bopping with his cheap confidence. Salome squatted on the benches and popped a cookie in her mouth. She flung broken pieces to pigeons strutting at her feet. Hood plopped down next to her.

“What’s good, shorty? For real.” He stretched his arms out and landed them on the bench’s railing. Salome, as sly as she was, inched into his wings.

“I got a problem,” she said.

“What kind of problem,” Hood said.

“The kind of problem I know you can help me with.”

Hood was a chess player, and good at it. If he didn’t catch his daily game with the old timers at Sonny’s, the barber shop up on Church Ave., then his diabolical way of approaching life compensated a gentlemen’s match and left him in some of the most compromising positions — a series of checks and checkmates, so to speak. The chessboard exercised more probability than the sloppy variables life throws at you, and Hood was aware of this. When he was twelve, a shoot out with the cops over on Dorchester gave him this ability — to see life as a sixty-four
squared board, full of choices and precise calculation. By the way, the shootout was a circumstance of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But for the rest of her life, Hood’s mother questioned how one randomly negative event could change the face of her loving son into the larger than life persona of the street thug he’d become. See, Hood made his choice when he saw the bullets ricochet and blood leaking from the bad guys. He knew he wanted to be as aggressive as a knight and move through life with force.

“Spit it out sweetie, and say what you gott’a say.”

“Darcel told me you do a little of this and a little of that.”

“Which ‘that’ are we talking about ‘cause you too pretty to start taking medication,” Hood said.

“That’s not the ‘that’ I’m talking about,” Salome said

“Well, spit it out, shorty!”

It took Salome a moment to say what she wanted. She was perturbed that she couldn’t say it as direct as she had thought about it in bed last night. Instead, the abuse her mother imposed came to mind, even the unloving way she talked to Salome. She froze, and began to recount her motive.

Last night was like many nights she’d had. What happened was simple: suspicion should’ve been the fourth person living in the apartment with Salome, her mother, and her mother’s off and on again boyfriend, Guilliame. It was one of those peculiarities Salome’s mother overlooked when things seemed to be going right between her and him. Guilliame, too, was a native of Haiti. A dark man. Big. Taller than most members of his family back in Jacmel.
He kept a wandering eye on Salome. She was, to him, nothing but a duplicate of what her mother used to be. But much more younger. And impressionable. Guilliame had dark ideas of his own, and Salome coming from school as she did, a little bit earlier than he’d expected, launched his expedition for the new territory he’d sought. He was sitting in the kitchen with just a robe on when Salome walked in.

“Ah, Cherie. How was school today?”

“Fine,” Salome said, making a B-line to her room.

“Come,” Guilliame said, “talk to me.”

She had stood in the doorway for a minute, apprehensive and then finally sat down at the table with him. “So, what did you learn today?” Guilliame said. He put his newspaper down and directed his attention to her. “I need to go do my homework,” Salome said. She was getting pretty good at detecting bullshit. Besides, when did Guilliame become interested in her schoolwork? She knew something was strange and got up from the table as abrupt as she’d entered the apartment. “Salome,” Guilliame said, in a voice that might be used right before dying. “Look,” he said. He untied the thick blue terry-cloth robe. It slid off him. His middle-aged physique, covered in patches of curly hair, was exposed. But even more obscene, his austere black statue proudly extended from his lower waist. Salome hadn’t seen one before. She’d mythologized it in girly conversations with some of her close friends at school. Guilliame gloated. This was merely a case of sticking his flag in the sand. And he admired it far more than she did. As a matter of fact, Salome turned away from him in shame. “Come,” he said, “touch it.” Salome leaped for the door. And like it was orchestrated by the cruel intentions of fate, her
mother walked in. “What the fuck is going on!” she said. Guilliame recomposed himself and slipped into the bedroom. Salome’s mother immediately attacked her. “You Beech! You Dirty Beech!” Salome tried to run out the door. But a hard blow caught her on her jaw. She hit the floor violently. “This is what you do? You take my man?”

On the bench, Salome finally mustered the courage and made her confession to Hood.

“Look, I need to make somebody go away,” she said.

Hood sat up intrigued, “Yeah?”

Thoughts began to bloom in his mind, and you could tell he made three to four different moves by the way his eyes rolled up in his head. For him, the prime motive would be to mastermind the perfect crime, a flawless homicide. The perfect game — every move concentrated and aggressive. Or, the even darker motivation would simply be to exercise his passion for mayhem, which came to him relatively easy — his choice. She softened her eyes and followed Hood’s face; the way his mouth twitched, to how he squinted his eyes, and to how he indecisively shifted his view from the morning rush of students and working people zig-zagging through the park, to the guttural sounds of pigeons feeding. He seemed to come to a conclusion when he turned to search her face and everything else below her neck.

“What’s your offer?” he said.

“You mean how much?”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” he said. “How much are you willing to pay?”

“I need to give you the details and everything,” Salome said.
“No. You don’t. All I need is a recent picture. And —”

“And what?” She knew what. But wanted him to name it.

“And meet me tonight,” Hood said, “Stuff like this I wanna do quick — if you can meet my rate, shorty.” Totally self-assured she pulled a picture of her mother out her bag.

“Oh, you’re dead ass,” Hood said.

“Where do you want me to meet you?”

Hood’s block only had one lit streetlight. That was at the corner in front of the bodega. The rest of it was covered in darkness as if a vampire lived on East 9th Street. Salome cut down the block with an internal light of righteousness beaming inside her, this was the right thing to do she felt. Her mother choosing a man over her love and loyalty made her blood boil. She strolled into Hood’s building, past the drunks and druggies who solicited the lobby and, skipped up several flights of stairs and knocked on his door. She was right on time. The door creaked open and he watched her from the darkness. “You got heart, shorty,” he said, “Come in.” A patch of smoke shot up from his lips and he pressed the door closed. There wasn’t much to his space but a mattress on the floor, some CD’s, stereo equipment, and a microphone. Three wide canary colored candles burned on the windowsill and flashed shadows off the walls that looked like wandering spirits traipsing back and forth. “Here I am,” Salome said girlishly. Hood turned his back on her and flopped on the mattress. His shirt was off and every muscle from his arms to his chest looked perfectly sculpted in the candlelight. “Come closer,” he said. Although everything on her body was big enough to molest, Salome had never been touched. Prior to Guiliame’s advance, there’d been some close calls with the boldness of strangers who’d made assumptions
about girls from Flatbush riding up building elevators alone. But other than that, she had no experience. “Take those off.” Hood fanned his arm up and down her body. She knew from the jump this would be part of the trade off. The reality was here and as many times she’d play it out in her head, she never quite knew how she’d really feel. She moved broken like a robot and dropped a wad of bills on the floor undoing her shirt. Hood put his cigarette out. Hopped out his jeans, and laid back on the mattress tucking his hand down his undershorts. You Beech! You Beech! is what she heard on that radio playing loud in her head. Her skirt hit the floor and her mother’s baritone got louder, the throaty charges and sheering curses. By the time she stood stark naked in front of him, there was an orchestra of insults causing dissonance to what she really thought about herself. “Come, here,” Hood said with sugar in his voice. “I won’t bite you.” A pillar had risen in his shorts and the might of it intimidated her. Of course what she was physically feeling, too, was natural, her body making lowly confessions — the sweat and secretions happening all at once. She lied down next to him as stiff as a corpse and he rolled on top of her and whispered, “Man, I’ve been waiting for this.”

The dream Salome had was reoccurring. She had become all too familiar with it and the Houngan that stalked her in it. But the dream ended differently this time. The usual happened in the beginning: she’s lying on a bed in the middle of nowhere — outdoors however — what looks like Haiti, with its steep hills and panorama. And there’s a ceremony going on around her. Dancers are moving wildly. Kicking up dust. They’re wearing clothes donated from the States and other places. Fire is burning. The sun is down. Out of nowhere, the Houngan appears at the foot of her bed. He’s wearing a four-foot mask in the image of an elongated skull — splotches of neon green are on the face around its cavernous eyes. He’s six feet tall and slim, bare-chested in a loincloth. This was how it was every time. No fear gripped at Salome in this dream world, only
curiosity, especially when she and the Houngan took flight. They’d fly outer space, silver moon dust falling on them like a ticker tape parade and they’d visit the twins. The boys were tiny but kingly, grey eyes, powerful entities like Romulus and Remus, and always appeared from a cosmic cloud of purple dust. What was different this time is that they didn’t speak. In the other dreams she’d have, they’d give her advice but they said nothing this time and the Houngan seemed much more aggressive. He floated in a slow orbit around the boys and Salome. But then suddenly grabbed her from behind, and as if a trap door opened he and Salome began to plummet, falling past planets and stars, breaking back into the earth’s atmosphere with force and dignity, then gently cascading like falling paper. It was beautiful, Salome thought, in this world of magic and wonder — seeing the earth’s royal blue crest and white clouds swirling and hugging its expanse. The Houngan still holding Salome turned and said to her, not in kreyol, which she spoke and understood clearly. But some other language he had said softly, “Fata nu eska sala wei.” He repeated it cradling her like a baby, his worm then snaking out of his loincloth and sliding up her chest and around her neck. She was choking and they began to pick up speed, the colors of the sky and land becoming indistinguishable in their decent, finally the two bodies slamming hard back into the bed where they began.

Salome shot up gasping. Hood rose up slowly, rubbing his head and slunk his arm around her waist. “What’s wrong little mama?” She threw his arm off of her and got out the bed. “So you know what to do — tomorrow, right?” He looked at her like all the crazy bitches he’d known. “Yeah, right. I got this. Don’t worry,” he said. “Why don’t you come lay back down?” Frantically dressing, Salome pulled together the rest of what self-respect she had and said, “A deal’s a deal. I delivered. Now it’s your turn.”
It was about two years later when he reappeared. I remember how different he looked. Those long dreadlocks that fell disorderly on his shoulders were gone. He wore a white tee-shirt and Timberland boots with his jeans tucked loosely into them. I didn’t recognize him at first, he looked darker than I had recalled. That night he showed up in town, I was at a bar drinking. It seemed like he stepped right out the shadows and said to me in a thin voice, “Peace, God.” I remember slipping my hand over my drink and looking hard into his face. He looked uncertain as a child might, disheveled and mischievous all together. Something sad and pitiful suggested his lazy posture. He held his head low like he didn’t want to be seen and sat down next to me. Nothing should look rugged under soft indigo lighting. But he did. He’d aged considerably, gray hairs peppered his chin, and he had a long scar running down the right side of his face.

I watched him eye the bartender. I had been checking her out for a while myself. She was very sexy — thin, long neck, slender manicured hands, and Persian eyes — a little Georgia peach. “I remember that’s how you like’em,” he said, rubbing the stubble on his face and hastily swallowed a beer. “You remember that about me, huh?” I said. I called the barmaid over to bring him another one. I was anxious to know his whereabouts since he had disappeared, so I asked. “Where you been, Hamza?” He dropped his beer from his lips, had cut a swift glance that silently interrogated me. I tried to keep my composure. He had the look of something feral and I was intimidated. I’d imagined giving it to the cute bartender on the bar-top as his eyes ran over me with deep suspicion. I took a nervous swig from my glass, and he shifted his view back to the barmaid. He then looked out into the crowd, a handful of bluish looking shadows, and back to me. Then, with a partial smile he said very cavalier, “I been around.” I wasn’t exactly sure what
he’d meant, but I knew better than to keep asking by the way he’d hardened. I fumbled around in my head trying to think of something to say to make the situation lighter. “You still tearing people up with your freestyle, kid?” He threw his head back draining the beer and brushed at his lips, “That was the last time I saw you,” he said, “Shorty had on the red dress that night,” he chuckled, “Man, she was ugly!” We laughed and it began to feel comfortable between us. He ordered the next few rounds and we kept drinking.

“We definitely need to keep up, kid,” I said. “We do,” he said. Hamza kept a close eye on the door each time it opened, it seemed like he was waiting for something to come get him. The bar was a dive, just a dark hole-in-the-wall full of locals. Country folk is what they were. Bluesy good-time people, who were loud, popping their fingers to Al Green on the jukebox. I looked at my watch, I had to be getting along soon. I had a new wife and kid to get home to. I sipped on my drink and snuck looks at him, this dark menacing creature sitting right next to me who was once a friend of mine.

He and I used talk about hip-hop all day — everyday just about. I had worked retail over at the mall and knew all the little hip-hop events happening in Georgia. I worked at a Mom and Pop record store and Hamza and I had easily connected ‘cause we both loved hip-hop. That was the section I was in charge of at the store. Hamza came in sometimes before he’d set up his fruit stand. We’d sift through flyers, listen to new releases, and plan to hit up all the spots where there was a DJ and a mic’ — or a battle, trying to do our thing as aspiring rap artists. I rhymed back in the nineties. Hamza rhymed, too. East coast rappers were our favorites — cats like, Grand Puba, Big Daddy Kane, OC, and KRS-ONE. But right before he disappeared, Hamza had begun to have an affinity for Tupac. Perhaps it was the improvised theories of thug life ‘Pac expressed in
his interviews, or even, the overall chaos and cosmos of his divided soul, which permeated on records he spoke on. Irrespectively, Hamza was easily drawn into ‘Pac’s darkness. He’d show up to these places where he’d get on the mic and destroyed just about anyone with his freestyle alone. Point and case, there were these parties these cats called “The Universal Jam Boys” would throw. The parties would be in some huge loft space with big industrial windows and hardwood floors. They were the exact kinds of jams that got us off as novice rappers. The DJ would plug in the mic’, put on a break-beat, and let cats like us battle for a spell. This was always right after the tribal-like dancing and slow grinding — when the party was almost over and girls were cooling off on the walls. Hamza had gotten on the mic’ and dissed this chick in a short red dress who was hyping up her two male friends. Now, by our standards, ‘cause Hamza and I, we considered ourselves purist, too. But to be a rap group meant you had to have skills. These guys rapping that night weren’t “Nice and Smooth” or “Run DMC” by far. They were very basic in their lyricism, no better than Dr. Seuss. So Hamza exploited their inability to rhyme. He grabbed the mic’ out this gap-toothed, short, pimpled-face chick’s hand, and dismantled one of her guys by rapping about his style of dress. Boom! The other guy, a light-skinned pretty boy trying to rap like a tough guy, Hamza had cleverly questioned his genetic make-up, implied that his slave owning ancestors raped his African mother; and pointed out how disingenuous his rhymes were, then suggested they’d get a better looking chick to hype them because, “shorty in the red dress is ugly,” Hamza says. Double Boom! Of course, he had made this brilliantly rhyme between jungles of beats the DJ mixed on the turntables. The crowd had lost it. Hamza deliberately dropped the mic’ and stepped off the makeshift stage, and walked out into the darkness of the party.
On my way to work that week, Hamza’s fruit stand was gone. I didn’t hear the tininess of his speakers fighting through the street traffic. I didn’t know where he’d gone. I’d randomly search MLK and Ashby Street looking for him. But none of his familiarity was there — no hip-hop, no fruit.

I downed my last drink. Hamza offered to buy another. But I declined.

“Wha’ cha doin’ after here?” he said.

“Nothing,”

“How about I take you home?”

“Sure,” I said, and clumsily slid off the barstool. “But first let me pee.”

We got into a long black car. I didn’t see him put a key in the ignition. I told him where I lived, but I don’t think he heard me. I noticed when we pulled out the lot we were headed towards a really shady part of town, “The Bottom,” a stones throw from the bar. If I had to explain to a devout southern churchgoer, or any other religious kook who feared the flames of hellfire, I’d say “The Bottom” was hell on earth. It was located on one square block in southwest Atlanta, ironically, right next to the University. “Say, Hamza?” I had said timidly, “I live about two miles back the other way.” He didn’t open his mouth, he didn’t even look at me. A possession had taken over him, and he sped the car along with a deviant purpose it seemed. I sat there in the passenger’s seat, mouth shut, watching an ominous dark world begin to form outside my window.
Hamza impatiently blew the horn when we rolled up. I’d only been to “The Bottom” once to buy weed, and that was in the daytime. But at two in the morning, I swear to God, teenagers — it looked like, were walking around, lifeless — pushing strollers, barbequing, and smoking cigarettes; young meager looking people whose heads had obviously bumped the ceiling of possibilities. Gangs of them sipped liquor from plastic cups. They gathered around a tricked out purple Cadillac with yellow racing stripes that pumped trunk rattling bass music — the kind of down south music you’d hear in strip clubs. Girls in “The Bottom” were notorious for a few things, and one of those things was tricking. Another was having a ton of babies — and robbery. Yes, robbery! I kept my mouth shut and eyes wide open. I looked over at Hamza, who sat at the wheel, zombie-like, locked away in the recesses of his mind. Thinking back, I figured out what was dark and arcane about him, (a little devil followed him if I didn’t know any better).

When she came out, the first things I saw on her were her eyes. They were butterscotch-bronze looking, bright and alert, like she’d figured something out about life a long time ago. Secondly, she had all the moveable parts a man likes in a woman’s wiggle. In a two-piece black bikini and hot pink open-toed pumps, her strut towards the car lectured sex. I’m sure I wasn’t the first person to notice how she moved like a stripper. She stood about five-five, had a womanly muscular build, short Halle Berry haircut, and complexion the color of peanut butter. The smell of fairground candy apples cut into the air as soon as she got in the car, and her voice was as sweet as her fragrance — high-pitched and child-like. She politely spoke scooting into the backseat. “Binta, this my boy,” Hamza said. “He’s working with us tonight.” I didn’t say shit! I just leaned back in my seat. We swept out the lot and headed downtown Atlanta. This girl reached over the seat and tickled the back of my neck with her long nails, “I expect you to do a good job, baby,” she said. I turned back to get a good look at her, something was just as ladylike
about her as it was sleazy. I looked over at Hamza, who kept that dead zombie-like stare as he moved the car with authority, and the streetlights reflecting in the rear-view-mirror all looked like shooting stars as they passed. Lucky me, I thought.

Pryor Street was desolate. We pulled up to the curb, Hamza shut the headlights off and we sat quietly. Finally he turned to me and said, “You ready?” For what I hadn’t the slightest clue. But something encouraged me to say back to him enthusiastically, “Yeah, let’s do it!” He got out the car and I was right behind him. We walked swiftly down the block. I kept trail enough to be in step with his long monstrous stride. I could see something change in his demeanor; his posture became erect. He transformed and was nothing like the broken ghost-of-a-man who haunted the bar. A young black dude and a petit white girl walked past us and Hamza greeted them, he spoke with an accent like the howdy-do country boys that I’d learned to despise because of their southern hospitality — I’m from Brooklyn! Hamza was acting, no doubt. A chameleon if ever, he slowed his pace. There was a man on the corner who’d caught his sights. “That’s our mark,” he said. I nodded to him as if I was thinking what he was thinking. You gotta imagine what was really going through my head: here I am, with God knows who? And I’m playing along with what seems to be the biggest joke on me? He turned to me and said, “I’m gonna get Binta in position, keep your eye on dude.” I felt as if I should’ve saluted him. This was my chance to run, I thought. But I watched this skinny white dude from across the street pick at his crotch and stand by the phone booth like he was expecting a call. He was real anxious and fidgety looking. He wore a red Hawaiian shirt and high-water pants, and those flimsy black loafers and tube socks like how Michael Jackson used to rock. Whatever was going to happen I knew couldn’t be good — but fuck it, I thought. Hamza tapped my shoulder. “That was quick, “ I said. “Let’s go!” he said.
We stepped across the street and I felt at anytime we should’ve broken into a minstrel song and dance — shuckin’ and jivin’. Hamza stuck his chest out and let his arms awkwardly hang. That whole intimidating choir of black humanity he was transformed again like it was nothing. We strolled up to the white dude real familiar like, and Hamza shouted in the worst southern twang, “Hay, d’ere Buddy?” I could see this guy turn on whatever street-smarts he had. “Yo,” he said. “Buddy, you look like you lookin’ fo’ somebody,” Hamza said with the dumbest grin on his face. “Maybe,” the white guy said. “Welp, I tell you wha’. Right down d’ere off Garnett Street at da motel, d’ere right d’ere waitin’ on you in room 110.” Dude raised his eyebrows as if to say, ‘Oh yeah? Really?’ “Jus’ way ‘bout ten minutes,” Hamza said, “and ‘d’hen head right down d’ere.” We began to walk away and Hamza said under his breath, “Got’em!” The white guy called back to us, “110 you say?” “Yeah, wait ten minutes doh’,” Hamza said. “Who do I say sent me?” The white guy asked. “Buddy, you got a lotta questions don’cha?” Hamza said. “Buh if it makes you feel betta, tell’er Hood sent you.” “So I got one more question,” the white dude said, “Is she black?” “Aww, Shucks! I ain’t a racist, buddy —” Hamza said, “Buh I jus’ don’ kno’ no white bitches!” The white guy hiked up his pants with gusto, “Oh, okay,” he said. “It’s cool. That’s just who I was looking for anyway!”

We had burst into the motel room and I stopped dead in my tracks. I stood at the doorway staring at Binta who was sitting on the bed painting her toenails. “Okay, baby! Get ready, we got a live one coming,” Hamza said. My eyes traced over every part of Binta. She got off the bed and said, “Showtime,” then duck walked over to the mirror to check her hair and make-up. Hamza handed me a baseball bat and pulled me into the closet with him. “Okay Hamza, what the fuck is going on?” I finally said. The closet was hot, let alone dark and tight, and Hamza, calling himself whispering (his breath feeling like I was under a hairdryer), began to give me my instructions.
“This is how it goes, Merce,” he said. “The guy is gonna knock. Binta’s gonna let him in. She’s gonna give him the price — ” See, I’m far from being slow in aptitude or following instructions, or maps, or anything taking me from point A to B and shit, but I had to ask him, “The price for what?” He deliberately didn’t answer me. “Like I said, she’s gonna give him the price. I protect Binta, so she turns no tricks. All she does is take her top off. He’ll get naked and ready to go. When we jump out the closet — Boom!” “Hold on, Hamza,” I said, “Boom? Jump out the closet!” In that close and intensely dark space, I swore I saw his eyes light up like the boogeyman. “Like I said, when we jump out, you swing the bat like you’re gonna Hank Aaron’em. Binta’s gonna take the rest of his money and we out! Got it?”

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He crashed on my dining room floor. I gave him a blanket and he slept with his boots on. He snored terribly. I lied on the couch thinking about what had just happened, going over it in my mind from beginning to end. I stumbled over a lot of parts that just didn’t seem real or make any sense, considering who I’d once known Hamza to be. He wasn’t a gangster, or a criminal — none of those things. But he appeared out of thin air, buys me a few drinks, and we were off to the races to do a robbery?

The giant rolled over and farted. “Somebody’s at peace,” I said to myself. My apartment was quiet. I hadn’t too much furniture but an old worn couch, a bed and crib upstairs. The place was small and needed painting. Fahti, my wife, had a list of things for me to do to make it
comfortable. She and I had just married right before the baby was born three months ago, and she moved in. Hamza rolled over again and looked like a dead man. I’d wondered where the old Hamza went and where’d this new one come from. Who was this guy sleeping on my floor trapped in a small room in his mind with the lights off?

Two years ago, Hamza had had a fruit stand at the intersection of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Ashby Street, and I remember the Nation of Islam’s temple no. 15 sat directly across the street. I didn’t know anything about Islam or any of that stuff back in the day. But the Nation brothers, if you’ve ever seen them before, sharpened up in their suits and bow ties, would come over every now and then to buy fruit. I was on a break from my gig, just hanging out in front the stand like normal, when four of them loosely marched over. Hamza was playing a new mixed tape and wanted me to hear the latest Redman track. He looked up, saw them coming over and gave me an “oh boy” look. Before they fingered any of the fruit, the brothers moved into a peculiar attack. Now, I’d seen Hamza intellectually spar with them before, and he was brilliant. He argued scholarly about strategies for building up the black community and other deep shit about Africa. He had knowledge. Brother Carl 46 X, one of the more eloquent speakers among them, and indisputably Hamza’s adversary, initiated the challenge. Before Brother Carl could say as-salaamu-alaikum, he’d condescendingly asked Hamza, “Brother, who is God?” Hamza didn’t say a word. Brother Carl insisted Hamza answer him. “Because if you knew better,” Brother Carl said, “you wouldn’t listen to this lifeless devil music!” Hamza smirked, and very coolly said to Brother Carl, “I think you know who God is — Brother? But listen —” Hamza said. “Truth be told about your leader — if you brothers could think for yourselves — ” “Come again, brother? What are you saying about the master teacher?” Brother Carl said firmly. “Well, Brother. Your master teacher knows you can’t think for yourselves. You
out here selling pies and papers for him does what for exactly who?” A deep smile on his face said everything, I could see Hamza toying with them. “Listen, Brother,” Hamza said, looking directly at Brother Carl, “With all due respect, but, selling pies and papers ain’t nation building — that’s pimpin’!” Hamza carefully rearranged a pile of oranges and swept his locks out his face, then turned the box up louder. “That’s blasphemous, brother!” Brother Carl shouted over the radio. Hamza, had continued to shift the fruit around and finally said, “Gods and devils have no color, understand?” He said this to the brother as if it was theological law. “Your master teacher organizes and manages you no differently than this bureaucratic protestant ethic we live by — this white man’s way of doing things, you see? So, Brother, until you understand the bigger picture, to ask me who is God is a question you all may need to ask yourselves.” The steam in Brother Carl’s arrogance evaporated and he simply placed his money on the stand, picked up a peach, and in the disorganized formation they came in, they all turned and walked away. “Peace!” Hamza shouted after them. At the edge of the steps Fahti cradled and bounced Nurideen lightly in her arms. “Mercer, come help me with your son,” she said. I put on a long smile as I lifted off the couch and charmingly said, “Good morning, baby.” She wasn’t moved one bit. “I’m going to say this once, Mercer. But wherever you came from? stay there the next time you think you can stroll in at God knows when — you have a family now, brother!” I had met Fahti over by the Nation’s temple where Hamza had his fruit stand. I noticed her from a distance when I came out of work. She wore the uniformed MGT white headscarf and dress; she looked angelic. We ended up talking and caught a bus together. I swore it was an allegory symbolizing we’d ride through this life side-by-side. Corny shit, I know. But that’s how I felt. Fahtiha meant “the opening,” and that’s what it was like, like the beginning of something worthwhile. She was genuinely fun and adventurous, smart and highly opinionated. She didn’t
come off rigid like some of the other sisters I’d seen by the mosque. Definitely the woman for me, at least I thought at the time. Pretty much from catching that bus, she and I were together, and then Nuri’ came along.

“Look Fahti,” I said, “I know my responsibilities, babe. I’m sorry, but — “ “Save it!” she said, shoving the baby in my arms. It was a really good thing she didn’t want to hear any excuses because I didn’t want to lie to her anymore than I’d done before. Every twisted story I’ve told Fahti will one day walk out of a closet as free as a toddler and tell the truth about me. “He needs food, go heat up a bottle!” she said. Might as well have been a shit stain on the carpet where Hamza lied, because Fahti abruptly stopped and looked down in total disgust. She carefully examined him, then stepped over him and went into the kitchen. I got a bottle and took Nurideen up to his room. No sooner than I began to feed him, I heard commotion. Fahti was yelling and raising all kinds of hell, pots and pans were clanging. “Hamza must’ve gotten up,” I said to myself. I gently placed Nurideen down in his crib and rocketed back downstairs to hose the situation. Hamza and Fahti were in each other’s faces shouting very lethal words back and forth. Fahti picked up a frying pan as soon as I walked in.

“What’s the problem?”

“Mercer, I don’t know who your little friend is, but I want him out of here!”

“Fahti, wait! Just wait! This is a good friend of mine, babe!”

“This bitch needs to watch her mouth,” Hamza said coldly.

“Whoa, Hamza — easy!” I said. “This is my wife!”
“I tell you what,” Fahti said, pointing the frying pan at Hamza like a sword. “You touch me like that again and you’ll lose those hands!”

“Fuck you, bitch!” Hamza retorted.

Fahti raised the pan high. I threw my hands up to stop her and shouted, “Chill! Everybody! Just chill!” I told Hamza to step outside. I released Fahti’s wrists and calmly said, “Put the frying pan down, please? Be nice, Fahtiha. Okay?” We stared at each other with uncertainty. “He’s got some issues,” I said. Her headscarf had slipped away from her forehead exposing her coal black locks. “You better talk to him, Mercer,” she said. “I mean it!” and dropped her arms down. She turned her back on me, then dug into the refrigerator frantically grabbing at stuff. I went out the backdoor and sat down on a crate. Hamza leaned deep into the only patio chair we had. A high wooden fence boxed us in, this was usually where I smoked my marijuana and thought through parts of my life. I reached into the grooves of the crate and pulled out a clip I had stashed.

“Word, God? That’s the breakfast of champions!”

“True,” I said. “You gotta light?”

Besides working at the record store, which Fahti kept saying was getting me nowhere really fast, I had to make ends meet. It was 1994, and I hadn’t lost my spirit for ingenuity, I was still a pretty creative cat I thought. So I put together a small business to get money, I sold weed through the mail. But selling reefer and trying to pursue a recording career was cool to do when it was just Fahti and I. With a family now, I had a lot to consider and my freedom was definitely
one of those things to think about. But the money I made and, being able to keep the lights on and pay the rent and other shit, kept me weighing and stuffing baggies.

I stretched my legs out and looked up to the darkening sky, the air smelled metallic. Hamza abruptly asked, “Is she cooking, God?” “I think so. But you’re going to have to get cool with her,” I said. “That shouldn’t be too hard to do, she’s feisty. I like that,” he said and paused like he was thinking. “And look, God, I didn’t mean that back there, I didn’t know you got hitched.” “No sweat, “I said. I passed the clip and casually asked him, “Last night — you and Binta do that hustle often?” He went dead silent and we were quiet for a moment until he asked me, sounding part worried and part philosophical, “Merce, do you believe in God?”


“I see you got a picture of Elijah Muhammad on your wall,” he said

“Right, sure. What are you getting at, kid?” I asked.

“This life is bullshit!” he said, as if he was suddenly frustrated, and slouched down in the chair. He masked his face with his large hands, blew his breath out hard and, as if talking to himself said, “Sometimes you do the right things, sometimes you do wrong things. But it seems like the wrong always outweigh the right.” He had that vacant look again, just like that zombified thing he’d been last night. I said to him puzzled, “I’m not sure I follow you, Hamza. I thought you believed in God,” I said.

“I believe in me,” he said thinly.

“What’s that supposed to mean, kid?”

“It means, nothing outside of us saves us,” he said.

The world had turned gray around us and we sat quietly again. Sinister patches of lightening flickered in the distance and the shadows casted down by rolling clouds left the earth spiritless. Hamza thumbed the roach out into the grass. That something that haunted him was snatching at his inner light.

The back door skirted open, and my dealer, my boy, Shakir, stepped out. I should’ve known these two cats knew each other. Hamza snapped back into himself as soon as he saw Shake. Shakir was a slim dark-skinned cat from Ghana. But you couldn’t tell by his attitude, or his westernized ways. Shake had flash. Everything from his Cleveland Indian’s ball cap, backpack, to socks and sneakers were fresh out-the-box or, “crispy,” he’d say. He and Hamza were so thrilled at seeing each other they just kept slapping hands. “I see you beefed up a little,” Shake said. “A little something, God.” Hamza said. They got to talking and went on about old haunts and people they knew. Shake had asked Hamza if he’d seen Binta and my antenna popped up instantly. Hamza cut a half smile on the scar side of his face before he facetiously said, “Have I seen Binta?” His sneaky glare ricocheted off me. “As a matter of fact, just last night — “ “Hold on,” Shake interjected. “When you two get together — or better yet — when we three are together, we’re running that old con down, man.” “Right!” Hamza said. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Your boy, Merce, here, stood in for you, God.” “Oh, shit! How’d he do?” Shake said. “I’ll tell you what,” Hamza drew his arms back like he was batting and swung, “he’s fucking reckless with a baseball bat! He broke a lamp, busted a hole in the wall, and nearly pummeled our John!” Shake broke out in laughter clapping his hands. “Bus’ it, Shake,” Hamza said. “The john was stretched out butt-naked, thinking Binta was going to ring his bell, right? You know the
drill, God. Binta drops her top, crawls up on the bed to the John like a sexy panther and, BOOM!

Here comes Merce out the closet! Yo, you should’ve seen him, he busted out like the terminator!” “What’d the John do?” Shake asked. “You know what he did, he started begging for his life. He hopped off the bed so fast and threw his hands up while Merce swung at everything around him.” Shake chuckled and reached in his bag, “Perhaps next time Mercer won’t have to swing but point.” Hamza and I both froze. I personally never saw a gun that close before, nor had I realized how sexual a gun can make you feel. A blood rushing warmth flooded my veins like when I saw Binta on the bed doing her toes. It was pretty. Black. Sleek. “Crispy,” Shake said, admiring its power. “I got a good deal on it.” Hamza didn’t react one bit. Instead, he studied it. Never once taking his eyes off it. “Hold it, Merce,” Shake said. I took it and pointed it to the sky and made shooting noises. “This shit is sweet, Shake, “ I said. He showed me how unlock the safety, release the clip and load it. I passed it to Hamza and he was hesitant to take it at first. He eventually held it with both hands. He didn’t point it. He just had cradled it in his palms like a newborn.

Fahti swung opened the door with a tray of food. She saw the gun and surprisingly didn’t say anything. She put the tray down and stretched out a picnic blanket. Hamza handed the gun back to Shake and he quickly stuffed it back in his bag. I waited on Fahti to break her levee and attack us with a slew of rhetoric about black on black crime, and what the “master teacher” says about gun violence. But she didn’t. Her mood had evidently changed. “You brothers sure you want to eat out here,” she said. “Out here is perfecto,” Hamza said. Fahti delicately placed the tray in the center of the blanket. “Wow, this is like back home,” Shake said excitedly. “We eat with our hands, too?” “You brothers enjoy,” Fahti said shooting a look directly at Hamza, “even you.”
They cut out right after we ate. I helped Fahti clean the kitchen. She didn’t say very much. She’d taken her headscarf off and her locks snaked down her back. I carefully wiped down dishes she passed from the sink. She had abruptly stopped and said, “Something’s got to give, Mercer.”

“What are you talking about, Fahti?”

“I don’t like your friend. What’s his name?”

“Hamza,” I said

“Who is he, again?”

“Babe, I told you about him. He used to vend over by the temple a few years ago, remember? How I said he’d just disappeared one day?”

“Doesn’t matter, I don’t like him. He’s a weak man. Anyone who is blatantly disrespectful and gets in a woman’s face like he’s going to —”

“He’s not the same brother I knew, Fahti. Trust me, he’s not. Something’s going on with him and I’m not sure what, but —”

“Doesn’t matter, Mercer. I don’t like him, or the things you’re doing to provide for us. Shakir, comes here and drops off drugs, and — shame on him! Isn’t he muslim?“ She stopped herself short of a lecture and said emphatically, “Brother Mercer 7X, something’s really got to give. I want you to be apart of Nurideen’s life, not in prison.” She took the dishtowel from me and dried
her hands. “I want you to keep following the teachings of the master teacher, too. You said you’d study more with me.”

“Fahti, listen to me. I’m not going to jail.”

“Mercer, how do you know? Because you have a beautiful and gifted way of finding yourself into the wrong things, brother.”

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The next night me, Hamza, and Shake went to a rap show. “Black Moon” was playing down at a club called Masquerades in Midtown. Shake drove and Hamza rode shotgun. I was in the backseat rolling up reefer and letting ‘Pac’s dark thesis, “Strictly for my Niggas” move through me like the holy-ghost. Shake had it cranked on ten. He leaned heavily on the driver’s door, just enough to see over the steering wheel and rolled us through the backwoods of College Park, Georgia. “Merce, you hear this nigga, Pac?” Hamza said. “Yeah, I hear’em! He’s a poet,“ I said. Shake blurted, “Nah, the nigga’s a prophet!” Hamza nodded to Shake like he’d spoken the dead honest truth. I passed a joint up to them. Hamza took a drag and curled smoke from his mouth into his nostrils. I watched him closely and wished I could do that shit. He contently
bobbed his head to ‘Pac, looking out the window, studying the thick dark forestry whisking by us on the highway. He seemed to take inventory of the life around him. Daylight was fading, and sparkles of sunlight began to vanish into a peach-plum horizon. I was high, I asked Shake for the gun. Without hesitation, he passed it to me. Secretively, though. I disengaged the clip and saw that it was fully loaded. “Shake, you plan on shooting somebody?” “You know peanut butter and jelly? bullets and guns? They go together, right?” I could see him smile devilishly through the rearview mirror.

We hit the city in no time and stopped at one of the more popular strip clubs. Shake had plastic cups and liquor in his trunk, so we poured some drinks and chilled in the parking lot. We talked to some of the dancers as they went in and out, bullshitted and cracked jokes with them. Shake ran inside to talk business with the owner, he said he’d be back in five minutes. Hamza retreated into himself again I could tell. He leaned up on the car and sipped his drink slowly. Pensively. It seemed he looked into his cup for answers to a magic question only he knew to ask. Whatever had been troubling him, he was in its custody. I sat on the hood of Shake’s car and watched a new line of girls come out the club. Then I saw Binta. I spotted her before Hamza. She looked pornographic. The black stilettos she had on raised her into the air about three additional inches, her denim skirt fitted like a tube top stretched around her hips. Lips were glossy, and her hair perfectly feathered and tapered. Bottom line was: I wanted her. That I couldn’t deny from last night.

She waved to me and walked our way. “Hey, darlings,” She gave me and Hamza hugs. Gently, she’d swept her hand along Hamza’s face and he looked at her with gratitude, like he needed that. “I saw Shakir inside, he said y’all were out here,” she said. “We’re going to see
Black Moon. Want to come?” I said. “I got another set to do, sorry darling. I just came out to say hi, that’s all.” She hugged us both again and turned to head back inside. “Hey Binta, wait!” I had reached for her arm. She felt just like I thought she’d might, soft and warm. “What’s up?” she said. I wasn’t shy with her at all, I felt like I had every chance with this girl if I wanted it. “Is there a way I can reach you, to talk?” “Talk about what?” she said, tilting her head uninterested — a game black girls liked to play. But the smile she cracked gave her away, I knew she knew what I was talking about. “Whatever we want to,” I said. She rolled her neck like she was saying yes in her head. “4-O-4-7-5-3-1-2-5,” she said, and walked away with a particular stride. I sat back on the car and repeated the number. Hamza continued to brood, and when Shake came out, we left.

Not before trouble did we make it to the show. I remember this shit like it was yesterday. The car was turquoise, a ’76 Cutlass Supreme with a white vinyl top and stainless steel trim, whitewalls and the original hubcaps. We had just turned onto Piedmont Road and stopped at a traffic light. It was a bunch of nigga’s in this Cutlass, at least three in the back, a driver and a passenger. I didn’t see them right away but Shake and Hamza did. They looked at them hard, and without a doubt, these nigga’s looked right back at us with the same attitude. They were country boys, raised under the Georgia sun with them “yessuh” values. I couldn’t stomach that bullshit. The driver’s hair was permed with finger waves slicked down tight to his skull, a real country nigga, gold teeth gleaming in his mouth and shit. When I finally looked up, his eyes were all over me. My grip instinctively tightened on the gun. The light took forever. Everything moved slowly — dreamlike. Hamza was the first to fire off at the mouth. He said something like, ‘Fuck you niggas!’ Then words rolled out of us like boulders and my testosterone shot up high. Dark and angry scowls hung on the country boys’ faces tough; and their words, too, accented and
broken with the worst english, were just as hate-driven as ours. You could see they were wearing their armour, the crests of criminals and killers puffed their chests. I saw the passenger duck his head down and pop back up. It looked like he had handed the driver something. All I heard was: “Merce, give me the fucking gun!” I froze solid. Shake reached back and snatched the gun from me, he raised his hand past Hamza’s face to aim. The gun burst a terrifying report. I saw fire-flashes leap out the barrel like little demons, and Hamza turned his head away real hard from the mechanical roar like he was frightened. The gun spat three more times, and the country boys sped off through the light driving recklessly from lane to lane. “What the fuck, Shake?” I said. “You see the fear in their eyes? They thought we was bullshitting!” “Thank God you can’t shoot, you could’ve killed them!” I said. Hamza leaned back in the seat looking relieved. He had had a look of innocence on his face, like a child might. I didn’t understand. Shake looked at him puzzled, too. “Hamza, you alright, kid?” I said. He didn’t say shit to us.

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After the show, Hamza talked to Shake over by the car. I stood by the entrance of the parking lot and mingled with some people I knew. Shake blew the horn at me and pulled out the lot. I turned back to see Hamza walking toward me. “Where’s Shake going, kid?” He brushed past me and kept walking. I felt I had no choice but to follow him. We walked through Midtown aimlessly, up and down North Avenue. After he seemed tired, we stopped and chilled in a vacant
lot. The moon had hid behind clouds and he became darker than usual, damn near invisible. He still didn’t say shit. Not one word. He leaned up on a wall and rubbed his face like trying to wriggle into a mask and finally said,

“I killed somebody.”

“Stop fucking around, kid,” I said.

“Serious, Merce. I killed somebody.”

I grew small and insignificant. I couldn’t help but look around anxious until my eyes glued onto the skyline glimmering judiciously in the distance. Lights were on in some offices. Red reflectors flashed from weather vanes. It was abnormally quiet. If you listened closely you could hear the city breathe from its electric throne. I then hesitantly asked, “What happened?” He didn’t say anything. But I could see him journey back into his memory, his eyes blinked rapidly and he moved his mouth without an output of words. I sat on the hood of an abandoned car and watched garbage roll around. Suddenly, he cleared his throat, “She was my friend.” His eyes then traced off into the surrounding darkness and he took a long pause before speaking again. “I went back home to sell drugs, Merce. That’s where I disappeared to. You know how it is down south — it’s tough to make any money if it’s legal. I basically went to New York to stack some dough and try and record. Things were good for a while. Coke, H, pills and guns, whatever — me and my cousin ran it from Brooklyn to Pennsylvania — a good hustle. Better than selling fruit.” I noticed how he’d investigate each word, making sure they were safe as they left his mouth.
“So one night we were at a party just hanging out and feeling real good, high and shit. It was just me and Darcel out on the front stoop. Darcel was a rowdy chick who ran capers with us sometimes, and she was standing right next to me.” He paused again and repeated his last words with worry, as if she’d gone missing. “You don’t have to say anymore, Hamza,” I said, “It’s cool.” But he kept talking. I think it was helping him save his life. “We had just gotten some new guns, tech nines — big shit. I was fucking around with one of them and it jammed up. Darcel started talking shit. I was just fuckin’ around, Merce. I pointed the gun at her, and cocked the chamber to dislodge the bullet, and the shit went off.” He shamefully hung his head in his chest and said under his breath, “I’m so sorry.”

“Shit, Hamza! Shit! What are you gonna do, kid?” He looked up at me sharply.

“I tell you one thing I’m not going to do is turn myself in, they’ll never take me alive!”

“C’mon, Hamza! Don’t talk like that, man!”

“Merce, I swear on my mother! I’m not sitting in no white man’s slave camp for the rest of my life, God!”

“It was an accident, Hamza! Right?”

“Yeah, it was. But her people are looking for me, and the cops are looking for me — they’ll never believe me!”

The moon reappeared from out the clouds and light bounced into the lot, it parted through all the filth and beamed right onto Hamza. If I were religious I would’ve believed it was a sign
from God because he lit up so brightly. There he was, big and mountainous, under a celestial spotlight as coy as a six year-old. He dug his hands in his pockets and said,

“Only God can judge me, Merce.”

“Sure, Hamza,” I said.

“In this life, God? It’s, I-Self-Lord-And-Master. I’ll determine my fate, not them.”

“Sure thing, Hamza — No doubt, kid. But what do you think you’ll do?” I said.

“I don’t know,” he said blankly. “I don’t know.”
October 8, 2004

Dear Nurideen,

I’ve been waiting for you to write me back. When you get a chance, please drop me a line. I’d love to hear from you soon, son.

Sincerely,

Your father

October 14, 2004

Dear Nurideen,

I got a letter from your sister a couple of days ago. She said she ran into Jamal, your friend from high school. She said he’s doing good, and that you two had seen each other not too long ago. I know she mentioned in a letter she’d written me, that he had joined the service, too.

You’re coming back from Japan in December, correct? It’d be nice if you could come see me.

I’d definitely love to see you, son.

With Love,
Your father

June 11, 2001

Dear Pam,

I probably should’ve written this letter years ago. I was in Los Angeles when you broke the news to me. I can’t say that I’ve been the same person since. I had always speculated, though. But you were adamant about not telling me. Understandably, Pam. We played a dangerous game me and you. It was good seeing you when you came to town a couple weeks ago. You’re still the same, with some exceptions. Can’t take the New Yorker out of you most definitely. You’re just as funny and cocky as you were then.

Remember when we went to go see this hip-hop exhibition they had at the Brooklyn Museum years ago? We were doing our thing hot and heavy. I think back and I feel like you were trying to tell me something then. Over by the mannequin dressed up in a Throop sweatsuit and L.L.’s red fisherman’s kangol, you stood and stared at it for a long time. “You know he’s from Queens,” you said, “Not too far from where I grew up.” Something was strange and distant about you and I couldn’t figure it out. After we left the Museum that day, you seemed to have disappeared. I’d call you and try to get you to talk to me. But you never took my calls.

Life is funny, Pam. We’ve known each other over a decade, and you’re still relevant in my world. You’re far away from New York now, but we are forever spiritually connected. We’ve had talks in the past and you’d impress me because of your insight about life. It was mature and very clear to you, in your own philosophical way. How you’d sleep with me and then go home to your husband, differentiating your two lovers. I learned to play this game good from
“Be in the moment,” you’d say to me, “Be here now.” Once I began to practice that, it was nothing to go home to Sadie acting normal, as if me and you hadn’t just fucked under the boardwalk at Coney Island.

I don’t quite know how to say this. But I can say this much: when we were at lunch when you came to New York a couple of weeks ago, I felt close to you again. We always knew how to pick right up where we left off. Like the time I came to Florida after you finally told me. I was nervous for obvious reasons. And I was quietly excited about seeing you, too. I got a room on the beach and was hold up in it like a fugitive. I smoked and drank to pass my time until you came to get me. We went out that night. We drove to South Beach and partied like old times. When we got back to the room, the inevitable has a way of making things happen. We didn’t miss a beat. The nature between you and I caught fire. After you showered, I sat on the beach and smoked a blunt. The next day was the big day. We had planned for me to meet him.

I was nervous about hooking up you for lunch two weeks ago. We met by the municipal building off of Joralemon Street. You were on the steps of the courthouse reading. I think I’ve told you before how impressed I am with your appetite for reading. When we first met you were reading Harry Potter books. I mean you ate them! Those books were fucking big and you zipped through them like nothing. Page like that intimidate me. I remember a lit’ class I took at NYU, and we had to read “Ulysses”. I thought it was interesting. But I could hardly get to the hundredth page. You’re fascinating, Pam, is what I’m saying. You fascinated me for so long. You know how to carry yourself in the streets. The office. Wherever. The funny shit I remember is delivering mail to your floor when I worked for UPS, and there was another girl in your office I was checking out. You told me much later that the girl — Wanda, I think her name was.
Thought that I had been clocking her. You, however, were the one who got in my face and said hi. I remember you inviting me out to Queens to go to a party the first week we started getting friendly. You came on strong and I knew the game immediately: we were going to fuck. At that time I had just wanted to get back in the skin I was comfortable in, or rather the veneer I knew best. Play daddy and lay low with the side chicks is what I wanted to do. I had just left one lover and wasn’t necessarily looking for another. But I couldn’t deny that you were eye candy. Built low to the ground like your mother in the picture you kept on your desk. Curvy. Proportioned just right. Pam, you had enough of everything I liked. And God knows I tried not to give you attention. But you’d call in the evenings and we’d talk for a minute. You were funny and I liked that. Soon after, we’d take lunch together and walk around Brooklyn Heights in that bubble that began to form around us. The towers were still standing then. Shit was real romantic to me especially in the spring. Things in the city were still quiet from winter. And it was easy to see the aesthetics of New York and be a part of it. I had exclusively wrote poetry to you. When we had lunch the other week, you pulled two of my pieces out your purse and showed them to me. I was fucked up, Pam. It really meant something to you then, and it still does.

Meeting you, Pam, was a turning point in my life and it was like you knew that. It was like you knew the role you had to play in my evolution. You’d say to me, “You need to get a backbone,” to deal with you know who, Sadie was really driving me crazy at the time. You helped me exercise my spine when it came to her. Whether underneath me digging your nails into my back, or coaching me on what to say and how to say it when I came in at 4am. It’s amusing to think back. Because, over lunch, you brought up shit I hadn’t thought about in years. You asked me if I remembered the night Sadie threw my clothes out the window. I didn’t know you were upset about that. You admitted it picking through your salad at lunch.
Pam, really, we were wild. Too wild! I went from minding my business, working, and going home every night. To, needing to be out in the action with you every weekend. I wasn’t too discreet about having extramarital interests either. I’d just get dressed and leave. No excuses. No alibi. No explanation of who I was talking to when you’d call. So she had every right to get mad. Sadie threw all my good designer shit out, too.

I remember it was cold waiting outside the club that night. You were already inside. I had an onyx three-quarter leather P-coat on and some sweatpants. You came out to smoke a cigarette and looked at me as if you didn’t know me. Or really, as if you were seeing me for the first time. You looked into my face lusty. I stared back at you with the same hunger. We went in and got drinks, sat down and talked. Every guy in the room had their eyes on you. You had on some white fitted jeans, white top, all your bracelets jangling up and down your fragile arms. Your hair was straightened down your back, and you wore a light coat of makeup. You were the prettiest girl in the bar.

We danced. That was our thing, Pam. You remember? We got up and danced to some reggae, and you wound our waist deep into mine. Everybody looked at us. We weren’t doing anything different than the crowd around us. But I guess the darkness of the bar, the heat extracted from us created a sun and our gravity held everyone’s attention. This is how I recall it. Like Langston Hughes. Funny enough, we ended up in the women’s bathroom shortly thereafter. When we came out our celebrity was evident by all the surprised faces waiting on line. And then we left.

We took my car down to the pier, right around Furman, up under the BQE and sat in the backseat with our underwear on. That was the night I learned what the expression “three times a
charmer” meant. You said it when we were finally done. We sat there for a while quiet, listening to the rainfall. You had told me during the act in the backseat that you wanted my soul. I watched the rain smear the windshield and you smoked a cigarette. I thought of the breathy command you gave in my ear, “I want you soul.” You said it with so much conviction, that I felt like something snatched and siphoned my blood, bones, and muscles; and arrested my fight to leave my seed on your belly. It made me helpless, and my manliness had softened significantly as we fucked. Between our sweat and other bodily secretions, my appetite congealed for you and it’s a metal ball that continues to rest in the pit of my stomach.

The summer you brought him to New York was bittersweet. Everything I remembered about him when I came to Florida that time had changed. He’d gotten bigger of course. He was sweet — real polite and respectful. He was just a baby back then. Him calling me Uncle Rocky touched me because he said it so sincerely, so innocently. Pam, I’ll be the first to be truthful. I often wondered what your husband would think if he found out. I’ve played a number of scenarios out in my head and none of them have a good ending. When my buddy from Boston came down that time, and we all went to Coney Island to walk around the boardwalk, he coined you “Dolly Dangerous” after a Hendrix song. We never kept our friendship a secret between our spouses, and I’m sure they had to be suspicious about us at one point in time. I was never good at this game of domestic espionage. I was never really good at telling lies until I met you. Once, after we had just did it at your house, your husband came home and we all sat in the living room drinking beer and talking. We acted like it was nothing. We did the same with Sadie. But a woman’s intuition is something to never underestimate, Pam. She didn’t like you from the time she met you, and from that moment she plotted to kill you. I think you knew that. Because you might’ve done the same thing.
I guess what I wonder the most is, when the time comes... when he’s old enough to understand. What will you tell him? Will you allow him to continue to live the lie he lives? Because you’ve got to be honest and admit it, Pam. It’s a lie. See, ever since I got that call from you when I was in California, these are the things I’ve thought about. I think the misconception we have about babies is that they stay babies. No. They don’t. They grow up. I wouldn’t be surprised if he retraced some of our footsteps. And if he did? I’d only hope that you’d let him live his life and not feel like a failure for making familiar mistakes. He’ll be a man one day. I’ve lived in the shadows of his life long enough. I’ll be there for him, I know you will, too. But when and if he learns who his daddy really is, can you imagine what he might think of us?

Always and Forever,

Rock

November 3, 2004

Dear Nurideen,

I hadn’t heard anything from you. Just wondering if you’d gotten my other letters.

Son, let me say it to you like this. But I guess when my hands fell limp and I no longer knew how to hold a baby is what happened to us. When you became a man, we simply grew apart. But I see your virtues. At least I saw them when you were little. Those virtues kept you an honest kid, and have also single-handedly arrested the average perceptions this world has of black men. People naturally respect you, Nurideen.
Son, what I saw April 27th, 1993 was a beaming light when you slipped out the womb. You were a bright cosmic ball of light in the doctor’s arms — a confident baby, little legs and arms fishing the air. My firstborn. A black boy. No crying. No sounds of discontent. Nothing. I knew you’d be a confident man someday, too. Definitely no crying then. A lot like your Godfather Hamza.

I understand why you had to make such a bold move and join the service, son. Even America had to declare its independence at one point. But I get it. I really do. I thought it wise, even. Compared to some of the choices I’ve made in life. That’s why I’m where I am now. I know you’re probably ashamed of you father, it’s understandable. But son, as I’ve gotten older, I’ve become more cynical and I realize the darkness adults live in, the thicket of problems we hack through, just gets tougher. Gets blacker. It’s the tall and intimidating forest of responsibilities that imprison us daily. Bills and things bite like bears in this adult wilderness. And if you’ve ever wondered about the stoicism in most adults, it’s just that we’re afraid too, son. I’ve been scared for a long time, which has predicated most of my ignorance.

Nurideen, the biggest secret I’ve probably kept from you is, it’s you who were to lead me into manhood. Not the other way around. I can’t do much for you sitting in prison. But I see how you move. Joining the Navy after high school. Making sure you don’t get trapped with some young lady who you’d care less to take as a wife. Nuri’, I was no more than twenty when you were born, and your mom was a year younger than me. Being inexperienced the way we were, son, I can honestly say wasn’t the best premise for becoming parents. It takes more. Much more than I was ready to commit to. I was full of shit Nuri’. When you sister was born, I thought I could tie things up. I thought I was ready to get serious. Your mom had stressed it over and over
again — for me to do things right. Get a job. Stop dreaming about rapping — selling weed and other things I was in to. Get serious about life and surviving. But I was headed out the front door backward, son. I never got it right. Nurideen, when you don’t know who you are — when you’re young and green? The process in becoming self-aware is critical. I not only made mistakes I’m ashamed of, I had you guys to watch me.

Son, these confessions I’m making are important for me to tell you. Perhaps that’s why you’ve considered me selfish as you’ve gotten older. I know some of what I’m saying hurts. But there’s more I need to tell. Listen son, this is how I see it: we’re all on this journey together. Most of my shame, parents would find taboo to reveal to their children. However, son. This is for you to know, to know not. I know you think I talk crazy at times. But I’m a poet. And a poet’s prophecy usually isn’t clear until he’s gone away. So Nuri’, our family broke apart after I tried to get Hamza out to Mexico. When the police came to get him. I was charged with harboring a fugitive and they found all my drugs in the house. That was my first arrest. And as you know, not my last. Your mother was ready to leave me then. But when I came out I buttoned things up for a little. We had Laila, and we were becoming normal. No more drugs and stupidity. It seemed like we were going to be okay. We’d put you in Montessori school because you were so smart, and we were making other plans to advance us as a family. But I fell back into some old habits I have, son. I liked women. I’d go out to the strip clubs sometimes (of course your mother hated it) and flirt with the girls. It’s easy to talk shit to a naked woman. And that’s what I did. I knew one girl from a few years back and she was still dancing. Long story short, we had an affair. I tell you Nuri’, I opened a can of worms when I started cheating.
The thing I really want to say is, I’m proud of you Nurideen. I’m really proud to be your father. You are a light in the world. A light from my darkness. I didn’t know anything about being a man when I had you. I didn’t understand the virtue of knowing yourself then. My adultery began with my own self-betrayal. And now, that’s where it’s ended.
Because it was the same bullshit at home, I didn’t go straight in after work. I was out the office by eight, drunk by ten, and close to having Nikki naked in a men’s room by midnight. Cypher was throwing up in a urinal outside the stall and that turned her off.

I breezed back out into the bar to grab my jacket and put Cypher in a cab. I told Nikki I’d meet her outside. When I came out, I hooked my arm around her waist and we staggered up the block. I think she really tried to keep me from falling. I just wanted to touch her some more. She had runner’s legs. They were real sturdy. Long and muscular like Wilma Rudolph’s. Nikki’s hair was dark and shiny, soft as her skin. Scalp smelled like lemons, too. A pretty black girl. Not too flashy. Real non-descript. Truthfully, the bitch looked real good.

We stumbled into a musty bodega and everything on the shelves looked expired. I wanted to duck in the store to grab some gum and a Dutch, and then head back to Brooklyn. All my recent dirty thoughts were ready to be checked off its little list. An old timer with a long white beard sat in front of the potato chips reading the paper, he looked up suspiciously when we came in. Behind the counter a young guy said something to him, their accents were funny. They both looked Dominican but sounded Arabian. I didn’t pay them too much mind curling Nikki closer to me. I thought about Cypher telling me about his hunch earlier, I had closed up shop and took the L train into the city to meet him. Cypher was funny about his hunches, it was definitely that Caribbean clairvoyance in him. When he had called me earlier, I guess he heard something in my voice and said to me reassuringly that magic would happen if I came out to happy hour. Well, no magic. No rabbits or freaky ladies split in half either. But meeting this tall glass of water, not even two hours ago and easily having my way with her in the men’s room, might’ve been the
trick I needed — I don’t know. But I did know this much, it’s whatever way this broad Nikki wanted to swing it.

I put my money on the counter and the young clerk snatched it up. He gave me a tough guy look. I shot one right back at him. But what broke the wall of ice that kept us both cold and insensitive behind the lines of reckless machismo, a white cat, perched on top of the potato chip rack, leaped down onto my hand. She purred and vibrated and fucking startled me! I yanked my hand back and Nikki guffawed — I mean she gave a real deep throaty laugh throwing her head back and slipped. ”Damn it! Pointy shoes,” she said. Her consonants sounded soupy and she began to laugh again. I jerked her close to my hip and we left out the stinky store. Outside, Nikki roped her arm around mine and playfully said, “Pussy likes you.” “Excuse me?” I said, waving down a cab. “The cat…” this chicka, Nikki, says, “… she liked you.”

Riding over the Williamsburg Bridge I felt like she was going to be in my future, my tall trophy-woman who, in the cab I’d secretly glance at. Green and red streaks from traffic lights reflected off the passenger’s window and ran down her features like face-paint. See, Nikki was about as peculiar as any single black female you’d meet in New York City. When I got to the bar she was the first thing I saw, a glass of red wine swishing loosely in her hand and talkative to everybody I remember. I had shuffled right into the pack around her before I even thought to look for Cypher and ordered a drink. Tonight, I had been a panther; I became hunter. My instincts told me to slide in between her and this Brazilian looking chick, who I was sure I’d seen Nikki kiss a few times. But first, I drank. I listened. And drank some more. Nikki spoke like she was educated, a bit of Britain latched to her tongue. I listened closely and heard the King’s English ceremoniously parade out her mouth and amuse the mixture of white and black faces
around her. I had overheard her saying she was from Trinidad and figured, because she was so
openly charming, I’d go on and make my move. I slipped in between her and the Brazilian girl,
got directly in her face and told her my name. “Rock?” she repeated. She then smiled curiously
and asked, “What’s the tale behind that tag I wonder?” I said something to her most women
would’ve considered inappropriate, and she’d given me a sly look and smiled again. I spotted
Cyph’ across the room, he held a tall tropical drink and was laughing in a circle of guys. I
signaled for him to come over, ordered us shots, and introduced him. He took a quick liking to
Nikki, wasn’t intimidated by her length at all, though he stood directly at her ta-tas. Cyph’ was
not a good-looking man. He was five-foot-seven and had a big head — ‘a thinking man’s head,’
I’d heard him say to anyone who’d talked disrespectfully about his dome. It looked as
pronounced as a new moon. But he had bought more drinks. I was okay with his little stand-up
performance, making Nikki laugh and whatnot. However, I’d known since me and Nikki started
talking, I had her in the bag. We had traded fuck glances while Cyph’ drunkenly told her his best
stories. Once he was buzzed enough, Cyph’ slammed his glass on the counter top, leaned over to
me and asked if I wanted to do a bump in the men’s room. I pardoned myself from Nikki. But
she had decided, all too independently, to follow us. Magic?

The cab came off the bridge and shifted through the streets of south side Willie B., where
we passed massive graffiti throw-ups. “It looks dangerous around here,” Nikki said. “It’s not that
bad,” I said, observing the dark museum that whizzed by. There had been a stronghold of black
and Latino families on this side of town who, in the last several years, had become surrounded
by encroaching hippy-artisans, the undermining enemy I called them — same as those who came
off the Mayflower. I thought about growing up, and standing on the block, high as hell, with
obnoxious bravado — plus, being black and poor and mesmerized by the shimmering
opportunities Manhattan was presumed to have promised someone like me. In the early nineties, when I had tried college for two semesters, “A Tribe Called Quest” made this record freshman year and I always dug the title, it was called “Midnight Marauders.” At the safe-house, where we were about a block away from, I kept it in heavy rotation. That, and “Kind of Blue.” Cypher loved Miles Davis. But the thing about this Tribe record, this song called “Midnight,” particularly, was how poignantly it captured urban nightlife — the hood, kids playing ball after dark — dice games, and guys and girls hooking up.

We got out the cab and bumbled through the heavy security door. Upstairs in the safe-house we had red lights all over, in the bathroom, kitchen, living room and bedroom fixtures. Cypher figured this would arrest any weird vibes straight from the door. Nobody but us came here anyway. Me and Cyph’ bagged our drugs up and counted money in the evenings. The safe-house was our office, our place of business like any corporate boardroom.

Nikki and I got naked and for a minute, we stood on an island of clothes kissing frantically. I pulled the sofa bed out and she quickly lobbed those legs around me. She was softer nude. Long, luxurious. Padded in the right places and, (where it mostly counts) smelled as fresh as morning dew. On top of me, she matched her face up to mine as if staring in a mirror and kissed my cheeks delicately. The heat from her breath put igloos on my ears. Nothing was rehearsed. Nothing about our song right then was flawed. We naturally moved together in one harmonious duet, hot with the type of passion that completely burns through your rationale.

She was balled up in my arms when I opened my eyes and heard Miles Davis playing. I saw Cypher walk out the bathroom naked. I carefully rolled her off me and jumped up to go to the back bedroom where he was standing at the window, his back, yellow and freckled, turned to
me. He’s startled when I ask him what he’s doing. “I never would’ve guessed you shave your pubic hair,” he said. We stood across from each other naked. With superman confidence swelling his chest, he cut a sharp glance, trying somewhat discreetly, I’d imagined, to regard the size of my member. I probably did the same. “That’s the chick from the bar?” he asked. I leaned up on the doorframe annoyed and said, “Yeah, that’s her.” He swept some crumbled herb off a box into a fonta leaf. “She looked like she could go — ” “Listen,” I said abruptly. “I told the cabby to take you home. What happened?” He licked the leaf and carefully rolled it into a cigar. “You obviously didn’t get my message,” he said. His eyes, when they zoomed in on me tried to figure me out. Everybody in the world can do this trick. People’s not really looking at you when they do it, they’re looking through you, trying to see a whole bunch of shit you deliberately don’t wear on your face. He was really trying to do that crap to me. Behind the sheepish schoolboy look he gave me, I knew he was looking for an angle to get in bed with Nikki. No doubt.

He lit the cigar and the smoke danced up to the ceiling and circled underneath the bulb. He then turned his back to me and peeked out the window again. When he parted the curtains, streetlight slipped in and moved the room intermittently between soft intimate shadows of fuchsia and pink. He turned back around to pass me the blunt. “Sadie called me,” he said. “What’d she say?” “You know — looking for you “And what did you say?” “I told her we needed to finish up some work, I was meeting you.” I didn’t hear Nikki walk up behind me. She grabbed the blunt out my hand and leaned on me; she had a sheet wrapped around her. “Hello,” she said curiously to Cypher. “We meet again, lady-girl,” he said grinning, “But not so drunk this time!” The two of them cordially laughed, I wasn’t that amused. Nikki poked her lips out to inhale the blunt and I could see she didn’t really smoke, or, give a fuck about me and Cyph,’ two grown-ass men, standing there butt-naked. I took the L from her and drew a deep pull. Through
channels of smoke I watched Cyph’ lock into Nikki’s face, and round his eyes along her shoulders, then he boldly shifted his gaze right to her cleavage. “What’s the name of this song?” Nikki asked. Cyph’ spoke up quickly, “All Blues!” “The horn is nice — pretty,” she said. She turned to me and whispered, “Do you think you can call me a cab?”

A couple of nights out the week I’d go to Nikki’s before I went home and she’d cook. We’d eat; do some small talking, and then head straight to the bedroom. After we finished we’d end up talking a lot. It was something Sadie and I rarely did anymore. We’d lie in the dark, and I remember saying to Nikki once, just kind of riffing off my feelings, which were picking up the more I saw her. But I told her that I could see myself with a woman like her. It’d only been two weeks, and I’m not sure what exactly pushed that shit out my mouth so suddenly. Nikki wasn’t my first affair. But she was the first to bring me to this curious conclusion. She smiled and, without saying much, adjusted the sheets around her, then rested her head on my chest. “My mum prostituted herself after my dad left.” The vibration from her voice traveled through me and lodged her confession deep into my own fragility. I didn’t know what to say. But this is how it went a lot of the times between us when we’d talk intimately, the darkness of our secrets had more authority in the room than just the lights being cut off — the attitudes we kept inside about real things, sorrow and disappointment, the bones of my failing marriage began to live in her room.

We were quiet for a moment. Nikki cleared her throat, “My sister Nefertiti and I would wait out in the hallway when the men came,” she said. “And do what?” I asked. “Nothing.” I stroked her hair gently and could smell her citrusy shampoo. “Were you scared?”

“Of men?”
“No, in general,” I said. “Were you afraid?”

She lifted her head up. Her face was flush with the yellowness of melancholy, and through her dark eyes, I could see the tormented memory shivering in her gut. She then spoke with a feeling of nostalgia, “I was more intrigued by how many came to see her.” “How old were you,” I asked. “About nine or ten,” she said. “Nefertiti was younger. We would sit outside her door in two big kitchen chairs and wait.” She rested her head on my chest again. “They were all different,” she said.

I tried to imagine this scene. Two little girls sitting out in the hallway, in two big chairs, with matching powder blue dresses on, white tights, and black patent-leather shoes, while their mother — certainly not for recreation, laid men to eat. My version of her story added the wardrobe for dramatic effect, of course. But it really didn’t need it. It was tragic alone. What I was wondering was, if their father had ever found out. And where was he? “I know what you’re thinking,” she said. “How do you know what I’m thinking?”

“Because you’re smart.”

I chuckled at her comment. “So, what am I thinking?”

“He was around,” she said. “Remarried, though.”

“That’s amazing,” I said.

“I was right? That’s what you were thinking?”

“Yeah, you were right,” I said.
We were quiet again, and then I had asked if they ever tried to touch her.

“The men?”


“Not at’ all. They’d look at us with pity — which was funny. Because that’s how we looked at them.”

When Cypher counted money he liked to take his shoes and socks off. He liked his feet planted flat on a cold floor when he’d count cash. He’d sit at the edge of the chair, high as a kite, and ‘d be totally focused. Sunday nights we’d sit at the safe-house, do inventory, and count money. Cypher was feeling himself pretty good this evening. He sat at the table with a wife-beater on, his arms wiry and golden. “Eleven-thousand in a week — that’s good money!” he said. He then sorted the hundreds, fifties, and singles in neat piles, slid his nose across a line and sat back with the gall of a South American kingpin. “I said that’s good money!” he repeated. I didn’t want to talk to him. “What’s going on with you, Rock’?” I was re-counting my split, and he knew I liked it quiet when I did math. He pressed on though, “Oh, I got it! It’s the bitch, right? She got you open?” I dropped the bills on the table, lifted a blunt out the ashtray, lit it, and took a long pull. He was looking close to see my reaction. That hooked grin on his face told me his intentions. Me and Cyph’, we’ve played this game many times before. See, this was the time for him to ask me when Nikki was coming back over, or something trivial about her that could
perhaps lead him to an encounter. How it’d worked between us was, if I got the girl, I’d pass her off to him when I was done with her. If I didn’t offer her right away, he knew he’d have to wait. Cypher was terrible when it came to picking up women, and since the whole Sadie debacle years ago I owed him this particular favor. But Cyph’ had gotten bold the last few times I had lovers. For instance, I was seeing a Guyanese girl from Flatbush once, a dark tiny little thing right off Parkside, and Cypher had gotten to her way before I was done. I had the girl meet me at the safe-house one day to do our thing. She turned up before I could get there and Cyph’ ended up inviting her in. When I showed up he told me about the tattoo she had, “You couldn’t see it unless she was naked, Rock,” he had said full of glory. I knew about it, though. The dragon rising from her vagina like a black smoke cloud. He’d put her in a cab and gloated the whole afternoon. “That was some good pussy,” he kept saying. It was just protocol for him to have my leftovers. But not this time.

“It’s Nikki. Not bitch, “ I said. “Now, can you shut up?” He smiled like he had an advantage and asked, “She’s from Trinidad, right?” “Does it matter?” I said. “Of course! She’s not too far from my country,” he said. “Cyph’, you’re like a fourth generation Bajan from Brooklyn. What country?” “My mother’s mothers’ country,” he said. He shaped another line on the table to snort and said, “She looks like a black Indian.” “Listen, let’s leave her out of our conversation, okay?” I picked up the pile of bills in front of me and tried to resume my count. “I tell you what,” he said boldly, “I predict she’s the one who’ll make you stray.” I slammed the money back down. “What the fuck are you talking about, Cyph’?” “You acting different about her!” he said angrily, and slid his chair back. “I call your phone and you don’t pick up right away! That’s bad, Rock! I know you’re with the bitch, too!” I took a deep drag and tried to figure his angle. “And you should be more careful, Rock,” he continued. “Sadie’s not a dummy.”
There it is! This raised a major flag. I gave Cyph’ a steely look and said, “You know something I don’t know, Cyph’?” “No,” he said and grinned, “I’m just saying, she’s not stupid.” Sadie has been, at least for the past several months, accusing me of sleeping around — it’s a new campaign she’s waged nearly every night. I’d come in, throw my keys on the desk at the front door, and she’d be in the bedroom buzzing around. As soon as I’d come into the room she’d start her attack. Saying things like, “Which bitch was it tonight?”

Cypher was too much of a thinker to just say something so blasé. He was full of it. I knew it and he knew it. The people we knew in school thought he was brainy — they were right, he was. That’s what I liked about him, he thought carefully about things. He even had that crazy insight of his, too. Cyph’ had helped me mastermind our “party favors” operation. I worked to make it as efficient as anything Steve Jobs could’ve put his hands on, legitimized our money through small investments, kept a coffee house on Bedford Ave., where all the young white hipsters hung out. And instead of earning my degree, I monopolized the NYU campus and other parts of the city with the services we offered. Because he never gave me shit and appeared to be a loyal friend, I took Cyph’ on as a partner. “No more of that corner struggle,” I had said to him back then. I knew where he came from; I was cut from the same fabric and was determined to make it, we both were. That meant houses, cars, wives, all of it — mistresses, too — they were just as much a part of a family as any dog.

“But Rock, seriously,” Cypher said, making his case. “Isn’t that how we do things?” “Cyph’, listen,” I said. “Not this time.” He sat back in the chair and cleverly, in this way he had of double speaking, he said, ” You know I was supposed to get a piece of that.” He had said it
how he used to say about Sadie, before I had to finally straighten him out. “Are we still talking about Nikki?” I said, being sarcastic. He flashed a fixed smile, much like a politician and said, “Who else?” “I gotta take a shit.” I got up from the table. I went into the bathroom, dropped my jeans, and squatted on the throne. “No! That’s not how we do things!” I yelled through the door. He didn’t respond. I heard him mumbling on the phone, and his feet smacking the parquet floor. “You heard me? That’s not how we do!” I yelled again.

I’d turn up at a few of Nikki’s soirees she’d throw from time to time. She lived in the nineties on the Upper East Side in a huge apartment. After I finished work, I’d drive uptown. She had a lot of friends and loved to entertain. She knew beautiful looking people, men as well — the professional type, suits and shit. Her girlfriends were just as Amazonian as she was, most of them poised with the graces of models, too. Fortunately, through my clientele, I knew how to deal with people from different walks of life, especially the kind whose path was paved in gold. Everyone drank wine and knew the names of exotic cheeses and shit. Each person seemed to have a confident grasp on the high life, I only fiddled in the jar for the little coins I got. At one time or another, I had secretly made some business transactions at these gatherings, because party favors fit perfectly around these types, and I was pretty good at telling who was a user. After Nikki made each guests feel comfortable, serving up drinks and talking intimately with everyone, she’d exclusively introduce me as a special somebody, bringing me around near the end of the evening. Things did move quickly between us. Some of Nikki’s friends looked at me strangely, it wasn’t hard to tell their suspicion. “From where do you know each other again?” one of her girlfriends asked. This was where I’d tell a big ass lie and leave. I’d come back later, after the party’s over and spend a couple hours with Nikki.
She was tidying up things this one night and casually said, “Tell me about Sadie — I’d like to know what type of woman she is.” I stopped cold from eating curry out the pot. Wiped my hands, and sat down at the dining room table. I simply folded my arms and said, “What do you really want to know, Nikki?” “I want to know what she did for you to be here with me.” She pinched four wine glasses from the table and carefully dropped them into the sink. I sat quietly. Calculated. Gathering my thoughts, then eventually said, “I think it has more to do with what she didn’t do than anything.” “And what’s that?” “I honestly think she’s stopped loving me,” I said. Nikki didn’t say much after that. Her backside was exposed from the black sequined dress she had on. I watched her studiously, every graceful part of her, shoulders and arms, making slow circular cadences washing dishes. She cut the water off, turned around abruptly and said with a flame of confidence, “Let’s fuck.” The drill was simple from that point, we moved right into the bedroom. That night we played this little game, a role-playing game, where I wrapped the sheets around me like a majestic robe and stood in the center of the bed posing as a king or, a God of no specific mythology. She bowed before me, totally submissive, like an obedient servant (how they should be to their master). We laughed about the shit, and then went another round before I had to get home. Listen, and let me be frank: don’t ever think men don’t care for romance, the only thing hard about some of us besides our dicks are our hands. Nikki knew how to touch me and unlock a trove of masculine secrets, the ones men really don’t want women to know about. I didn’t mind showing her my macho secret thing, it looked just like a girl’s anyway.

Afterwards we lied tangled in the dark. Elbows, legs, thighs and feet in a jigsaw, I remember Nikki saying very clearly — very sincerely in the steep darkness of her bedroom, which was about as large as an auditorium. She had said, “I want to meet her.”
The rules for affairs are easy if you know why you cheat. For me, it hadn’t much to do with sex, not like it used to — I’m lying. Sex was important. But mostly, in this case with Nikki at least, it was about affection. Closeness. True companionship. Love, even — or something close to it. The shit they say most women desperately seek to find. Having someone listen to your vulnerability without critique is golden as far as intimate human interaction. Someone to be able to completely open up to is a scary thing — and ephemeral it seems. Even in the best marriages certain doors close between people.

I had met Sadie at NYU. She came from Philly on a lacrosse scholarship. Mine was basketball. ‘Rock,’ that’s how I really got the name. When we first started seeing each other, I used to ask her, “What kind of black girls play lacrosse in Philadelphia?” She’d quickly retort, “The ones like me.” She had the type of sass I was used to in girls, reminded me of some of the chicks back in my old neighborhood. Cypher knew Sadie first, they had a couple of classes together. I knew he liked her, he’d go on and on about her until I had to tell him to shut up, and that was often. At first, because I’d see them around campus together and in the Village, shopping and whatnot, I thought he might have a good chance with her. She was a pretty girl, a deep Somalian smile, though very much American, still there was something especially exotic about her. She had prominent cheekbones, intelligence — a little on the thick side. But as an athlete she kept fit and her frame was enviously shapely. Back then, fact of the matter was, Cyph’ was Sadie’s pet. She knew how to play him and get the things she wanted from him. It could’ve been as little as a ride somewhere or a couple of hundred dollars. Whatever the deal, Sadie knew how to work Cypher. The night we all hung out changed things drastically. It was a real impromptu thing, too. I ended up running into them at a Thai restaurant in Chelsea. My date had gotten sick and I put her in a cab and sent her home. On my way out the place is when we
ran into each other and Cyph’ invited me to sit with them. Halfway through the first bottle of wine, Cyph’ had to make a run. He was working that night and had to see a client in Queens. I ended up taking Sadie back to her dorm after we walked along the Westside Highway talking. Sparks flew, we’d hit it off famously and that was that, I married her. Things did move fast, Cyph’ was blindsided. But I felt like me and Sadie had a strong connection. We were in love. Our sophomore year, I dropped out. Business had picked up considerably and I figured what’s the point? Why school? Sadie and I moved off campus, to Brooklyn, not too far from where I grew up in Williamsburg. We ended up having two kids, a boy and a girl. Vincent was the oldest. Everything was upfront with us at first, every room accessible between us. Now, six years later, our apartment was cold and hollow, dark even, with the exception of our children’s rooms, where some of the lovingness and warmth of our family continued to breathe. Unlike the living room and den, rooms we’d hardly gone into anymore that had just died off and were memorialized through boxed up photographs of our old life. Home burdened me. Reminded me of my impulsiveness, and the consequences of not being fully committed, to myself, or to my family. I allowed passion to misdirect my life.

Being with Nikki I knew wouldn’t last. But the newness of each affair I had made me feel like I was flying outside myself, seeing, perhaps, different possibilities for a very different future, with a very different partner. That room me and Nikki were creating, the room where a theatre of secrets began to live like a family is where I’d wanted to stay. Until I could figure out what’s next.

“Did I ever tell you about my sister?”

“Nefertiti? No, what about her?” I said.
“She has a prayer for everything,” Nikki said. It was as if it amused her and saddened her at the same time. Nikki had said Nefertiti still lives in Trinidad and had three kids and no man. “Once on a checkout line, before the cashier could ring everything up, Nefertiti wanted to pray with the lady.” “Why?” I asked “She wanted to thank the lord for being able to buy groceries for her boys.” “Well, what parent isn’t thankful to provide for their children?” I said. “I don’t mean anything about her gratitude,” Nikki said. “What Nef’ did I always thought was strange because, who does that? Who prays in a grocery store with their kids and a cashier?” “Your sister, obviously?” Nikki cut me a squinted-eye look I knew was meant to curse. She rolled over onto her elbows and said, “Well. Mind you. The cashier looked at Nefertiti real crazy. And it didn’t help that the boys flashed their droopy eyes to the lady, likewise.” I fluffed a pillow and sat up to listen closely to this absurd shit she was telling me. “Can you believe the cashier prays with her?” Nikki said, sounding as doubtful as a non-believer. The way she mocked her sister speaking in tongues was mean-spirited. But fucking funny. It was like she was trying to say the last name of the guy who directed “The Sixth Sense” over and over again. “So surprisingly,” Nikki said. “after Nef’ does all that ‘SHAAMALAAMA’ rubbish, the clerk gets into it. She starts speaking in tongues, too. And the boys creep past and quietly bag the groceries and leave.” “That’s crazy,” I said. “Did they get caught?” You could tell Nikki had become saddened, she cleared her throat and said, “Well, funny enough. The cashier breaks Nefertiti’s grip and Nef’ panicked for a second — like she’d been caught.” “Caught or not, your sister sounds as slick as some people I know!” I said and ran my hand over my face and looked at my watch. I had to leave soon. “My sister,” Nikki said. “Nefertiti Innocent, can be really quick on her feet at times. But you know what’s funny? The clerk threw her hands up wildly. Rolled her eyes in her head, and shouted hallelujah!” “Seriously?” I said. “Seriously. But wait,” Nikki said, “The clerk
hopped up and down, and then strutted the aisle in a sanctified march, like the silver gloved hand of a charlatan T.V. evangelist touched her brow.” I thought that was the funniest shit. Nikki said, as an afterthought, that it was a terrible thing to teach your kids, “… playing off people’s faith,” she had said distantly.

A pale light stretched into the room and had frozen her face in that sorrow. “They’re my nephews,” she then remarked in a sharp tone of protest before crying. I wrapped her up in my arms and said to her the things you might say when you see someone hurting. She hugged me tight, like a daughter who’s missed her father, or a lover who knows that some time down the road things will change, and we fell asleep.

I made my deliveries in Manhattan on Tuesdays. When I found myself uptown, I’d call Nikki and see if she wanted to hang out. She’d pull her hair back into a ponytail, throw some shades on, and stuff a Yankees cap on her head and we’d ride downtown on the F.D.R., and back up on the West Side Highway. She’d kick her bare feet up on the dash and wait for me while I ran in and out of law offices, recording studios, and dormitories. “You’d come to Brooklyn with me?” I asked her this one particular day. “I have something I want to show you.” “What is it?” “Something I think you’ll be interested in,” I said. With the confusion of, not quite knowing what I was saying? But saying it regardless? ‘cause my feelings were so robust, I just said it! We were about two months into our thing then. Years later, after it was all said and done between us, I can easily say that Nikki Innocent had a spell on me, or perhaps something like that. I felt an electricity rush through me riding to BK, and Nikki was laid back, relaxed, falling in and out of a nap as we crossed over the Brooklyn Bridge. I made sure I parked two blocks from the school when I told her to sit up. She stretched, spreading her arms wide. “Where are we?” “Brooklyn,” I
said to her. “I know. But where?” She moved her head around like a child at the circus for the first time. “Look over there,” I said. “Where?” “You see the woman? crossing the street?” Nikki pulled her shades off. “That’s her,” I said. She got real quiet, real observant. She knew instantly who the woman was and followed every gesture in her movement as she walked. I tipped my seat back. “She’s beautiful, “ Nikki said finally. They were standing directly across the street from where we were parked. “And those are your children I gather?” I didn’t answer her right away. I thought about the first time I had an outer body experience. I used to be a package courier for one of the big companies, picking up and delivering parcels to offices and shit. I was real sick this one day, very weak and cold with the chills and, I was walking up some steps to enter a building when my spirit just up and snatched away from me. I hovered one story up watching myself fold over the banister trying to walk up these steps. I was high enough to see Pam, the receptionist I was dropping packages to. It was surreal and cinematic all together, just like seeing my son hold on to his mother and sisters’ hands there on the sidewalk. I was on the stoop of a brownstone behind them, detached from myself once again, floating solemnly, and admiring his way of protection for them. He held their hands tight, like the man it seemed his conscience told him he had to become. Sadie had her hair tied up with a bright yellow African print cloth. She did look beautiful — and content, too — innocent even. I hovered right above her and thought it strange, them waiting at the corner like they did. Not in front of a bus stop, nor the train. But just standing there. I floated down to the ground and walked through all three of them, and the wind I composed in passing made my daughter look-around attentively. “Isn’t that your friend?” Nikki asked. Her shades were on the dashboard. I rose up quick grabbing them and plugged them on. What the fuck is this about, Cypher? I said to myself, watching my family load into his car. “What the fuck is this about, son?”
“If the world is a vale of tears, Haiti is the best watered corner on the globe.”

Rene Depestre

I met her in Haiti and the first time she put her tongue in my mouth I thought it tasted like raw meat. Any notions of customs and traditions I lost. And for the sake of appearing gullible, as I might have been perceived to be, I allowed my civility to rest. I joined her culture; I ate her food; I made a mockery of her language unintentionally, but English fell from my lips easier than her kreyol. It would be easy to say that our relationship was peculiar, but I hired her and there’s nothing strange about a man hiring a woman for her company.

Our first night together was dark. I had asked my business partner did he know anything about the local scene. It was my first time in Haiti and I had essentially come to make money. Bill Pearson, a long time friend, was looking into the water business out there. He had lured me from New York to see the potential and there was plenty. The island had no legitimate system of purifying drinking water, so we decided to make something of a business materialize. We stayed in Petionville, an upper class area with nice houses and well-to-do people. Bill and I rented a house up there in those dark hills. He had been on the island about a month before I came, and I knew I could trust Bill so I had asked him about prostitution. I asked if he knew any clean girls and fortunately he did. I knew he did. The things men reveal to one another when they’re alone is something to behold; it’s a secret face most of us wear unashamedly in the circle of lions. Besides, the night I landed Bill picked me up with a very young looking Haitian woman, Sendi. If I recall right, she was part Haitian and part Dominican — very beautiful, with a skin complexion that was not too dark. I do remember her looks distinctly. She had big eyes that
looked far into an unknown distance. I was startled when I had gotten in the car. Bill, with his big voice, welcomed me to paradise. Sendi sat in the backseat. I didn’t know if I should extend my hand or not, so I opted not to. I had dumped my bags in the trunk and hopped up front listening to Bill go on about the business. He had big ambitions with an extraordinary vision, and believing his assessment about our profit margin wasn’t hard to do, Bill never left a stone unturned that could make him a buck. He had done well back home. I was a believer. It didn’t take me long.

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Riding through Port-Au-Prince it was evident to see the devastation. There was a lot that hadn’t been done since the earthquake, and the faces I saw, ghoulish and eerie looking, dug a hungry fist deep inside my chest. Many were amputees, toothless and thin. The poorest of them, if I were to be facetious because poverty and suffrage were massive — they were all poor. But the poorest of them, the ones who looked as if they hadn’t eaten for a long time, seemed to possess licensure in their dignity. They were unforgiving for their condition. Sunken facial features and slumped postures, and many hobbling hadn’t forced out the toughness of these dark people, who, with some uncanny strength, were prepared to defend themselves at all costs. I’ll admit that I was partially terrified, however, my fascination superseded the terror. When we pulled up to the house, Bill lumbered around the back of the car and grabbed my bags. Sendi remained in the backseat. He told me to go right in and he would be back momentarily. I said
nothing and walked into the house. The lighting was dim and it actually looked more modernized than I expected. I moved about the rooms in a slow and curious pace sliding my hands along the walls, I felt their bumpiness and took admirable notice of the living area’s soft lavender paint job, it complemented the old style kitchen that was done in a sunflower yellow. The stove looked like it came from the fifties, a real vintage appliance, along with every other piece of equipment: the Frigidaire and toaster gradually rusting. The back door was opened. I sat down and listened to the leaves rustle while peering out into what looked like deep space. There was nothing I could see, nor did I dare to investigate. I shut the door and sat back down, and leaves continued to crackle with a playful violence. The door re-opened. For the little time I had been in Haiti, one thing I could determine with confidence, especially reflecting on the ride to the house, is that poverty continued to stink on this island and fear, the ironic impetus of its historic bravery, is a natural part of its cultural conscience. I got up to close the door again. Perhaps to see something. I walked out and froze on the deck witnessing only the dark night. Moonlight stretched over trees, and the celebratory voices from neighboring houses boomed, and the distance there was a shimmer of lights. That if I had never believed anything supernatural is when a voice dropped into my ears. I snapped my head around urgently. There was nothing. But what was strange and looked like the trick of an illusionist is how the inside of the house glowed as if the most luminous planets had spilled their cosmic beams into the rooms. I cautiously stepped back inside creeping. Careful and exploratory. The voice rang in my ears again, saying my name in a husky baritone this time. I eased down the hall. It seemed to have come from upstairs. ‘Jim,’ it whispered deep and seductive. I inched up the staircase and peeked into three rooms: nothing but darkness.
I was smoking a cigarette in the kitchen when Bill walked in. Jolly and energetic he sat down and asked me about back home. I told him everything was fine, going well, I said flicking ashes into a coffee mug but really thinking about the voice. Yes, there’s no doubt that it was strange and I know I hadn’t imagined it, but I kept it to myself halfway hearing Bill through the thickness of my thoughts. After all could be said about our endeavors, Bill shifted his ball cap off his forehead and asked what I thought of Sendi. I looked into his big red face, which seemed to have swallowed a loaf of pride, and said to him that I thought she was absolutely gorgeous. I asked if she was for me and he laughed hard. He said he had something better for me. Something completely exotic. I was quietly amused. He dug into his pocket and matter-of-factly placed a picture of a woman on the table. Her face was dark and lips full like taut little muscles. A gardenia was tucked in her hair. Something was otherworldly about her. Magic pervaded the photo. Bill reclined in his chair and said almost somber that I would meet her tomorrow. I picked the picture up, said goodnight, and made my way upstairs. Bill yelled up to me that the last bedroom down the hall would be mine.

The door creaked as I opened it and the lights were broken when I tried to click them on, but moonlight had spilled into the room through three large widows. My bags hit the floor heavy and the voice spoke as if its que was given by the bang of my luggage. ‘Jim,’ it said again. But whoever it was moaned his time, I whipped around looking, and at this point I was far beyond being curious. ‘Who is it? Who wants me?’ I had said with waning courage. The picture was still in my hand. I slowly raised it to my face and in the pale light she spoke. The easiest thing to
think was that I was hallucinating but she spoke clearly, shifting her eyes up to mine, which were fiery and hypnotic and flashed with determination. We locked deeply into each other. Her dark face was strong and serious. ‘Jim,’ she kept repeating. She moved her mouth faster than I could hear; it was like watching a poorly overdubbed movie. I had become an absolute failure in disbelief of anything extraordinary and dropped to the bed holding the picture close to my face. ‘What do you want with me?’ I said. Expressionless and in a slow ghostly motion, she raised her bound black hands. The choirboy I’d once been instantly began reciting, ‘Hail Mary, full of grace, our lord is with thee,’ which was all I could remember. I hadn’t said a prayer for eons but that’s where I was, stuck for reasonable explanations, and spiritually mesmerized. For the rest of the night I cradled the picture repeating under my breath the first few lines of the Hail Mary as winds howled and whipped its tropical music outside.

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My sleep was interrupted by the hot sun, I woke up sticky. The photo rested on my chest and immediately I looked at it. I said good morning to her. She didn’t speak. I urged her to tell me her name, but she was statuesque remaining in the same pose, her hands clasped and tied with leather straps. It was as if she were begging for something. There was less intensity on her face, stoic still in rendering, yet irrespective to the life of this world. Glory that had rushed over me before I fell asleep had to have been that of a devil or a foreign god controlling its streams of ecstasy. As an old fiend, I ran my eyes over the photo. Her features I studied. She had full cheeks
and very direct eyes, the kind that penetrated the extrinsic to get to the heart of matters concerning human relations. It looked like the picture could have been taken in her senior year in High School. She was clean looking and I imagined smelled good as jasmine. Since I came to Haiti for business, I had clearly determined, very secretly to myself and Bill of course, that my second order of priorities would be to taste the nectar of a darker fruit. My wife existed in another galaxy, somewhere far, industrious, and mechanical. From across these waters it wasn’t hard to see her in our Manhattan apartment, perhaps entertaining a guest; one of her college girlfriends, I presume, who also had little interest in at least being a good wife. Or the baby always commanded Jeanine’s attention, enough so that our marriage became stale, anti-climatic. I had once called Jeanine unexciting in an argument. She had this habit of pursing her lips and rolling her wedding band around her finger when perturbed, that’s how I always knew to say no more when there was contention between us. She had known, as well as myself, during the course of her pregnancy that once the baby was born her ability to gratify me would be tremendously challenged. This is not just sexually I’m referring to, but all those other things that facilitate the balance of a sound marriage: emotionally and spiritually nourishing Jeanine was incapable. So the white walls of our Park Avenue dwelling became boundaries, I took to the den and she the bedroom, and there we lived in our perfect white dissatisfaction. But here in Haiti, life’s bloodstream seemed to run frivolously like all the surrounding waters. Freedom was prevalent for those who dared to take it.

I heard Bill talking loud downstairs. I eased up from the bed, took a quick glance at the photo and slipped it into my pocket. Gazing out the windows at all the hills before heading down with an anxious appetite I marveled the view. There was something that smelled like fish stewing when I reached the base of the stairs. I sat at the table where Bill slashed at his plate of
what looked like bananas and tuna fish and onions. Sendi was at the stove managing an orchestra of boiling pots; steam lifted off them in quiet plumes, and she, with immovable concentration conducted their temperatures and scallion smelling seasonings. She asked Bill in kreyol to ask me if I like salt-fish. I had never tried it, but Bill seemed to like it, his arms now folded in front of his plate. She’s going to fix you some Bill said sucking his teeth. He then rocked back in his chair taking a full-on view of Sendi’s body. Beads of sweat slipped down her back collecting at her fertility chain that slinked around her narrow waist. And her buttocks, a bubble, huge and wide, was smooth looking in the fitted jean skirt she had on. She was flat-footed too, no more than five-three. Before I began to say anything to Bill about my strange experiences, I wanted to know the story about the girl in the picture so I asked. He chuckled and said nothing but that I would be pleased. Trust me were his words.

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I swiped at my plate licking the juices from my fork. Bill and Sendi had gone and I felt like I was sitting inside the sun with the yellow walls in the kitchen as bright and vibrant as they were. The back door was opened and gave me a view into a shining new world much different than its nighttime sibling. I wiped my mouth and lit a cigarette. I walked out the door stepping onto the deck as if I had just made a magnanimous discovery. This is Haiti I said to myself with satisfaction and blew smoke through my nostrils. It was hot indeed, yet I thought I’d walk up the alley to see what I could see. The evidence of wealth in the neighborhood hosted a different class
of Haitian people, who apparently hadn’t been affected by the quake very much. There were many houses still standing, SUV’s and BMW’s parked in driveways. It was quiet. No child, that I could tell, lived in the area unlike the ones I saw the night before marching along motherless in Port-Au-Prince. I came to the end of the alley before the houses were met with thickets and a winding road. Perhaps she’d talk, I thought. I pulled the picture out my breast pocket delicately. Whispering bonjourn to her did no good but my antics, an apparent stranger far from home, talking to his hand in broad daylight, prompted one of the neighbors to ask if everything was okay. He had suddenly stood over me like a shadow. I stretched my neck up to him and said bonjourn. He greeted me kindly extending his hand with fingers that had to be an inch-in-a-half longer than mine. “Guilliame,’ he said. ‘Jim,’ I said coy. Before our conversation could become easy, it was patchy and curious until I told him I was from New York. He knew the city and had lived there for twenty years. ‘Drove a cab in Flatbush, Brooklyn,’ he said. His sons were still in Brooklyn and both were evidently doing well from the big smile he released after mentioning them. When he spoke of how he missed the city there was something unforgiving in his tone, something that had exiled him from Manhattan to these mountains. Guilliame was discreet about reasons for his homecoming, but I was pretty good at reading people. You learn that in business I could hear Bill saying. Guilliame’s accent encouraged my attentiveness. He ultimately invited me into his house and was very gracious. He offered me a glass of water. His place was quaint, sufficient enough for him alone. It might have been his bachelor’s touch to things that erased the possibility of a family living there, with the exception of pictures that had lined the walls. There was one of him shaking hands with a young Louis Farrakhan who was dressed as a Calypsonian singer; and both Guilliame’s sons, I assumed, when they were little boys. And then there she was, unbelievably. In an eight-in-a-half-by-eleven frame, and the same gardenia stuffed in her
hair. The same picture Bill had given me. There she was. Respectfully, Guilliame asked me what my business was in Haiti. I eluded his inquiry and told him I was vacationing. He laughed and shot back incredulously, ‘In Port-au-Prince?’ I laughed with him as if I didn’t know any better. ‘If I had to guess, I’d assume you were here on business, looking for opportunity. The earthquake left us vulnerable for the hunters,’ he said earnest. ‘Listen,’ I said, ‘Can I ask you about the woman in that picture?’ Gulliame slowly scanned his eyes along the wall locking them into the photo. ‘Is that your wife?’ His face turned stone. Our conversation ended. He pointed toward the door and nodded to me zombie-like, gesturing in what I thought a strange but kindly way to leave. I stepped out his house back into the mighty heat, perplexed. I had to have stood there for at least a sound minute after he had closed the door and figured that on this island peculiarities had all too sudden become familiar to me. I made my hand into a visor and looked to the sky. Already, before the day’s peak, I had earned a full sweat. So I walked back to the house to shower.

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A nap had overtaken me and put me in a dream state where I saw her full-figure. From a crowded street I followed her into a dark church. I followed every part of her that epitomized the perfections of her sensuous Caribbean species: breast, legs, hips and ass. I chased her around desperately with a hunger growing inside me, and in this dream her name was a formality — it was essentially useless to me. I knew her in a cautious and unspoken sense, a lot like the
growling inquisitions of hungry animals. She continued to move speedily and wouldn’t allow me to catch up to her. We zipped down a corridor aligned with torches before coming to an immense door. The neighbor, Guilliame, stood guard. His facial expression was blank; eyes bulged. He wore tiger-striped white and gold face paint and a top hat. She motioned to be let through. I stepped up to him to pass also, and he flashed a killer’s smile. I backed away. The auditory of his drawl, when he opened his mouth to speak, was at a Godly volume and equally frightening was his fanged teeth. He offered me a riddle as ancient as the Sphinx. I had two chances to guess. The “or else” he additionally presented with the riddle was not an option. Through that door, I knew she waited for me, at least I sensed it. Guessing correctly I spoke my answer in kreyol and he opened the door. Now, I’ve seen a purple sky on the Moroccan coast unite with other colors so exotic that these oranges, indigoes and variations of violets I’d seen may not truly exist in the family of colors as we know them, but even beyond an African sky on evening’s cusp had I not witnessed anything so beautiful, so spacious and inspiring. I moved slowly through the threshold into a valley, which was generous in its verdure, balmy and full of ridges. A river flowed pacifically and I stood on its embankment in wonder as a honey smelling fragrance passed thinly through the air. The water was teal, sparkling. I was now under pursuit, she moved in to arrest me from behind. I turned to face her and she laughed indiscriminately. Welcome to Oshogbo she said. Boldly, I hooked my arms around her waist, and she kissed me with a terrible ferocity. I woke up gnawing on my bloody hand.

Night had fallen, and like waking from a dream into another dream, she stood at the edge of my bed. Bill was next to her wearing a wide grin. He introduced us and left the room. Her name was Oshunbe. She untied her dress and got into bed with me, and when she kissed me lightly on the neck, a battalion of soldiers marched down my spine. Her breath was warm and
sugary; her dark body dominated my paleness, and rhythm bounced between us as if we had played this tempo before. This was magic! Laboriously I pumped to keep in time, to remain in this universe where we were the only two that existed.

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Oshunbe said to me that she was born by that river in my dream. I was mystified as to how she knew… who? This magic lady, who is she, exactly? Her heavy voice had once again muttered she had found me. She sat naked on the dresser like a perfectly delicate ornament. Dawn was just breaking light into the room and I laid in the bed still. I lit up a cigarette and asked her why me, and she said that the Houngan had kissed the picture Bill had given me, whoever that photo was given to would be instrumental in bringing her to the United States. I kept quiet and watched a subtle ambition grow from her. There was money next to her on the dresser, it was hers, but she was none-the-wiser. I placed it there in the middle of the night while she had lain cadaverous in bed. She told me Bill secretly worked for the Houngan and that I might want to consider resigning from the water project. Bill was a zombie she said and Sendi was his keeper. What he had traded to make business work successfully in Haiti wasn’t worth my expense, and if I didn’t leave the island things could become fatal. I believed her… I believed her.
It was breezy in New York. I entered the air terminal not exactly knowing what to expect, Oshunbe was coming. It had taken some months, but I was able to get her a visa for six months. When I came back I had found the spell that I had fallen under in Haiti was unshakable. Oshunbe stayed on my mind and we spoke in dreams. All the particulars concerning the legitimacy of her visitation to money, we talked about by the river, beyond the big door. It was her genesis, her birthplace, and ironically my exodus when the steel world overwhelmed me with its relentless power. I had left my wife many nights to see her. We’d sit by the calm water in that ancient place where only Gods and Goddess were born. My rights to see what the world continues to pray for—the kingdom of God, was exclusive and cherished. I secretly kept Oshunbe’s picture and gazed at it waiting for her at the gate.
It wasn’t until Africa sat down at my table at the India House that I’d ever been inspired to think of some of these things. This concept of God he professed. “Islam,” he said, “is a beacon for man, a justice for humanity.” The things he told me made me think. He had initially asked me if I knew my purpose. This is the first thing he says to me after joining me at my table. I had put my magazine down intrigued; I answered him. At least tried to with the best of my ability. Because honestly, I really didn’t know. Hadn’t thought about it. And for the rest of the afternoon we talked more about destiny. The brother knew everything it seemed. Astronomy, and the origins of theology he explained effortlessly. His regal features were chiseled — stony and pronounced, like the ancient face of Ramses. And the veins in his dark hands intricately trailed along like Congolese rivers. Those hands trembled, too. He didn’t have to tell me he was from Africa, a history was weathered on his face. When he said he was a University professor at one time or another, it made sense. He’d lectured in all the things I’d needed to hear right then that afternoon. I lived alone. Had come out of a divorce pretty banged up. My ex-wife and daughter lived a few blocks from me, and I was trying to reevaluate my life — picking up a lot of the roofing that had fallen. Africa entered my heart. Took his shoes off. And followed me around in my feelings to learn my deepest passions, and to coach the natural appetite of submission out of me. Because quiet as kept, I did think about stuff like this — God, and whatnot. And the big bump that had just rocked my foundation in my personal life required me to find something like God to make sense of it.

We didn’t speak much after the adhan was called. The stillness in the mosque had a way of making you lose your words. Africa walked in before me. When I finished my wudu, I
humbly stepped into the musallah. Faint golden sunrays passing through the large windows stretched delicately along the floor and turned the room into late autumn. Everything shined melodramatically in the musallah. Sitting atop the bookshelf, the metallic embroidering stitched on the Holy Qur’an refracted flashes of diamond-studded light. Beautiful, blinding light.

I looked over at Africa who sat on the floor seeming to be in a trance. His lips moved and his eyes were half shut as he quietly fumbled his fingers along some beads. A tall man, the size of an Ibo tribesman, who had called the adhan stopped singing. For months I had wanted to know what went on behind these doors. The mosque over on Bedford Ave. had a big set of double doors that looked imported from another country — Morocco somewhere, with all the curvy designs and symbols of stars and crescent moons. I’d imagined, at one time or another, opening those doors to be revealed the secretive wisdom of the universe. The loud speaker on my block calling out to worshippers kept me up a lot of times. Or even woke me out my sleep. My apartment was adjacent to the mosque, and most evenings when I was writing I’d stop. Although I was disturbed hearing its seductive and melodious crooning, I also became fascinated. I used to wonder, until Africa explained, what it said — what it meant. “The adhan,” he said, “is a call to worship. Five invitations daily muslims are to set aside business and the frivolousness of life, to remember the eternal guiding purpose of our humanity.” He also said that our service is to the one true God, Allah — “submission, it’s the premise of our way of life,” he said. Like the professorial champion of religious fervor, he’d hold his index finger up indicating one. For, “One God.” If I sound brainwashed, or like someone who’s become a zealot. Then, so be it. I am. I believe. At least I think I do. I believed in Africa and everything he told me. I’ll also admit, too, that I was falling in love. I was falling into a deep love affair with the idea of peace.
Brotherhood. Practicing it with the Ummah. A docile and an ardent subscriber to the injunctions of the unseen is what I was becoming. And I couldn’t help it.

All the men who lined up to pray was from some part of the world where their rice and chicken was spicy, their women forbidden, and their religion under fire. The tall Ibo tribesman stood up and sang aloud again. He really sounded beautiful. And another man, who had a voice as attractive as Homer’s sirens, stood to lead us in prayer. I struggled with feeling attached and detached all at once. I still fought with this three months after my testimony. Something in the sweetness of the Arabic called out to me. Made me want to submit to its command. I was divinely intoxicated, if you will. Even to know that these were not my people. But then again, they were very familiar. Working from another accord other than neighborhood or nationality. They’d treated me with the dignity and respect of a human being. That’s how Africa also made me feel. Regardless, I still wrestled with connecting like I truly belonged. Not fully knowing the language. Or the customs. Or all my prayers. And sometimes not fully relating to other brothers who came from Pakistan, Ghana, Jakarta, all over. Africa wasn’t like guys I grew up with in Cincinnati, we didn’t trade girls or smoke reefer and get high. I couldn’t imagine doing things like that with him. The men he’d introduced me to, were sincere in their worship for all I could see. But me, I was on the edges of faith curiously working my way to the center of its power.

When I was a kid, I thought this life was bullshit. Religion a farce. I got that attitude from witnessing the imperfections of my family. Uncle Jimmy. My Mom and Dad, particularly. The two holiest people I’d known, who had the misgivings of temptation beating at them. They were churchy folks presumably. Every Sunday, they’d put on their best and go sit in the pews as if they were entitled to every blessing for seeming to be pious pillars in their community. As
much as my father had a curious nature about learning the Bible, Pop had a little nip every now and then. Gin and tonic to be exact. He’d have his ladies, too. But, ‘til this day he doesn’t know that I know anything about his infidelity. Neither does Ms. Margaret, my old babysitter, who’s also a member at my parent’s church. I saw her every Sunday up until I left my folk’s house, and I used to think each time she’d put on a phony benevolent smile thick with dark brown lipstick: who leaves a child in front of a T.V. for hours to disappear into the bedroom? with your father? When Pop would come get me, this is what would happen. Quite often, actually. I had learned then that certain sounds register in you. Moves your soul. You may not know why the sounds of things make you feel a particular way. But they do. They can strike fear and absolute terror in you (just listen to scary movie music), or the moaning from carnal satisfaction, how the sound of it disturbs the delicate rest your sexual nature takes when it’s not busy. Dig. Sound has this power. So, the latter is what I felt listening to Pop and Ms. Margaret through her bedroom door. Grunting and breathing heavy. The face my father sported on our ride home told me something about men. Women, too. People in general — ‘cause kids weren’t exempt from this equation either. But I thought, “This is bullshit!” We got home and Pop was overly affectionate with Mama. I watched his performance closely. My father, the actor. I think I was around four or five at the time. But I observed this behavior like a psychoanalyst and began to understand that the thing that lives in us, the soul — the spirit, whatever we choose to call it — in tandem with the flesh is a joker. Makes us jokesters.

Now, when I got married I fooled around, too. And had the uncanny talent for lying with a straight face. Well, evidently I wasn’t that good. Toya, my ex-wife, found out about all the young girls who’d work temp at my job and confronted me. Rightfully so. These girls were easy targets for me. They were young and hot, and I made a sport out of fucking them. At my job we
had a problem keeping a receptionist, and the agency always sent good-looking girls. They’d
temp for no longer than a month and that was my challenge. To screw them before they were
reassigned. I guess I was at a place in my little game of conquest whereas I got sloppy. Real
sloppy. I started slipping bad. Random phone calls after midnight I’d get from some of these
girls. Bullshit like that. Perhaps I wanted to be caught? Maybe. But the guilt of coming home
with the stickiness of another woman on your penis, and all the shit you can tell your wife, who
you’d imagine to be non-the-wiser while you’re banging a hot Dominican girl, or whoever,
during a lunch break, eventually catches up to you. Outside the boundaries of your marriage you
could live dishonorable and reckless. Believe me, the shit catches up to you. Because a woman
knows. You’re never fooling them. They always know. But I played my game until the jig was
up. Until all the foreign numbers in my phone were called, and the suspicion that had been racing
through Toya for months had been confirmed. She left me. Took Pia, our little girl, and left. Not
to make excuses. But this was a trend with most men in my family I found out. Mama told me
she’d known about Pop for years. But chose to stay. In the midst of the storm between Toya and
I, Mama counseled me a lot. She said, “Some of the Graves men have recovered from things like
this and got their wives and children back. You may not.”

To try and ground myself, I embraced the knowledge I was getting from Africa and the
mosque. The peace. The wisdom and understanding. Most importantly, the faith. Africa, inviting
me just a couple of weeks after we’d met had been my savior, really. He’d ultimately asked me
at the India House one day, “Would you like to come see for yourself?” This is how I ended up
taking shahadah. I took it the very day we went. It wasn’t like I felt pressured or nothing. But I
was sincerely moved by our talks. And I felt extremely moved that first time I walked into a
mosque. I got emotional. Close to tears, even. However enthralled by the vibrational presence of
the unseen, it was like one of those tractor beams in the science-fiction movies you’d see. Pulling you closer and closer to an unknown enemy. But in this case, pulling me closer to an absolute wisdom hidden to most men. This used to puzzle me until I was able to put my finger on it. The secret to brotherhood was just that, to feel the presence of something higher than ourselves — through ourselves. As one. Despite our cultural or linguistic barriers, that was the job of the believer, who could range anywhere from being an Arab to Irish-American. I had just felt a need to be in that space, where prayer was constant, and in the company of people who were reaching for their higher selves. Man, woman, and child. Reaching for the mercy of God. To hold him close and preserve all the majesty we’ve assigned to him.

Not too long ago, when Toya and I were together. I had actually first encountered Islam then. Toya was really into exploring spirituality. She was interesting like that. She thought religion would help ground our family. We were young and both somewhat skewed in our views about institutionalized religions. Perhaps I was more skewed than Toya because she was wiling to try something. She became gung-ho. First Christianity. And then Buddhism. I wasn’t really interested in either. When I think about Toya, which I try not to do often because of the bad blood between us. But I do think about how relentless she was in her pursuit to figure out the mysteries of God. To live right. Ultimately, for her own reasons of course. She had tried it with both Buddhism and Christianity. The Islamic thing was a whole different story.

Toya had come home excited about meeting this woman from the United Arab Emirate. I didn’t even know where the shit was on the map. But it sounded exotic and interesting. She was taking a CPR course to recertify her training as an EMT and met this woman in her class. Toya and the lady took lunch together, by default. They ended up at the same deli. Toya told me the
woman was fascinated with her hair, she kept it natural with little twist. “She said she never met a black American before, Kersey.” I laughed when she’d told me that. I think I said something like, ‘New York’s crawling with us.’ But what I remember most is how excited my ex was. She acted like she’d met Jesus. I guess a lot like how I felt when I met Africa to think of it. Toya said she and the lady went on and talked like best friends. “After I let her feel my hair, we got along like we’d known each other forever,” she said. She described this mysterious woman with hyperbole, as if the doorway between her and God lied behind the black veil she wore. When I met Maryum I was skeptical. It was weird enough I could never see her face. But her infatuation with Toya wasn’t normal. And I don’t think it had anything to do with being fascinated by cultural differences, it was just peculiar how often they had to talk on the phone. Cackling late nights like teenage girls. Or they’d have to meet for lunch every other day. Maryum was clingy I found. And once or twice I thought something else might’ve been going on between them.

Eventually Toya solved the riddle to life it seemed. I didn’t get it then, her fixation with praying. Reading the Qur’an. Having to go to the mosque all the time. I guess through Maryum, Toya begun to understand the things I’m now learning from Africa, although she flip-flopped after awhile. Confused. Not knowing if she wanted to remain a Muslim. Practice Buddhism again. Or perhaps go back to Christianity, even. But during their friendship, Toya had definitely become different. Dressing like Maryum. Black Jilbabs covering her from head to toe. Face, too. She tried to mandate me going to the mosque with her. “Like a good muslim brother should,” she’d say. And I’d have to tell her on many occasions that that was her thing. Not mine. She’d put a scarf on Pia when they’d leave the house. All types of weird shit I thought. I especially felt uncomfortable when she’d try to get me to socialize with Maryum’s husband, Abdul-Haqq. He’d make me feel like a complete outsider talking to him. He spoke mostly in Arabic. Not to
deliberately be rude but his English was chopped. And he’d pray all the time when we’d visit. It didn’t mean much to me then, but he was an Imam and hafiz, too. Terribly knowledgeable in the sunnah of Mohammed. Politically connected in his country. And just too fundamentally rigid. I watched him at the mosque one day. Of course, I was there against my will. But I at least found entertainment in being voyeuristic. I watched everything. The men. The women. Children. Him particularly. I was on the balcony looking down at the sea of worshippers folding themselves over in prostration. Abdul-Haqq led them in prayer. It was like watching a serene synchronized sport. Slow and calm movement like Tai Chi. Something inside me had felt peculiar even then. Like love was starting. But I couldn’t let Toya know that, I was the acting atheist in our house.

I should’ve recognized Toya’s psychosis among other things then. Because here she was: Toya Lechelle Frances, a twenty-four year old black woman from Richmond, Virginia, raised by a mother who could barley keep her balance on the poverty line, speaking with an Arabian accent. I didn’t know her anymore. She’d left her own “down home” identity behind. It was, really, the beginning of the end for us. To watch her go from one belief to another confused me. I was young and quietly began to form a critical opinion about what was happening to her. To us. Toya was changing. And at the time, I allowed myself to believe it was for the better. Nonetheless, I ignored seeing what was really going on. I actually encouraged her and Maryum’s friendship. Because honestly, they did have a sisterly connection. But I learned they’d also become lovers. This was probably the loudest thunderclap Toya confessed to me when she decided to come clean after learning of my infidelity. “We loved each other,” she said. And I could see it in her eyes. It was evident in the sadness that wrapped her up in the bed, depressed for weeks, after Maryum returned to the UAE.
What’s ironic of course is, here I am now. Wearing one of Africa’s white Galabiyyas. Also a kufi he’d given me. My beard is starting to grow in thick. I’m praying regularly. Reading and studying everything Africa gives to me. Learning this way of life, basically. All the things Toya did before me. Here I am. Doing it now. Did I think about Toya? Sure. Did I miss her? Definitely. When I’d see Pia, I couldn’t help but see that part of my little girl that’s made her a petit little thing. Has given her the wide smile and intelligent almond-shaped eyes. Seven years old and she’s easily the reincarnation of her mother. Sometimes, in the middle of the night when I’d wake up, if I couldn’t put anything down on the page, I would think about how to put my family back together. I didn’t think it was irreparable. But I could be naïve like that. I prayed for our reunion more than often. It was the focus of my prayer today. Sitting next to Africa after the salat, I held my hands out like he’d taught me to make dua. My prayer was always for my family first. And then the dead. If my uncle Jimmy was still around, he’d know what to say to me about Toya. He was the only man I knew I could’ve really turned to. Pop? Too much of an actor.

Now that Uncle Jimmy’s gone, I think about him a lot. He was tall and fair skinned and an awesome dresser. He had a graying Fu Manchu styled mustache, and only sported tailor cut suits to fit his slim physique. Hats, bowties, scarves and suspenders. Gold watches. Jeweled accessories and whatnot. Sharp! Uncle Jimmy was. A man’s man most definitely. Pop’s handsomest brother easily. A ladies man for sure, if not lady-killer. My auntie, I always thought was the perfect woman for him. She had style too, auntie Nina. Not just in her attire. Dig. But a style about everything she did, which of course complemented everything about Uncle Jimmy to the tee. He almost lost her after a serious affair he’d had with one of her girlfriends. I remember pretty good. I was that perceptive kid again, watching. And it had gotten bad. Real bad. I remember seeing my aunt charge at this lady with a knife. It wasn’t hard to tell why Uncle
Jimmy “stepped out” (that’s how the older folks said “cheating”) with this woman. Even as a kid, I recognized the sex tumbling off this woman’s big breast. Had her titties out every time I saw her. She was loud and live, too. Like a drunken party girl. Threw her body around when she walked. You knew what she was about the way her perfume snaked out a room she’d exit. Imagine that?

Mama told me Uncle Jimmy had wanted to come clean. He had eventually confessed to auntie. “Jimmy was really a good man,” Mama said. At Uncle’s house, we’d spend a lot of time where the cooking was done. Him and auntie Nina’s kitchen was spacious with state-of-the-art appliances. They were the first people I knew whose refrigerator spat out ice cubes from a dispenser. I thought that was cool shit. This loud lady, I think her name was Vicky, was over. Talking strong with a cup in her hand, and saying things kids really shouldn’t hear. Thinking back, auntie Nina set her up lovely. Got her talking wilder and crazier. Poured her a few more drinks. I remember auntie had gyrated her hips at the stove and engaged Vicky in a conversation about sex. Bait. That’s what it was. Vicky bit it. She got raunchy, describing some of her encounters with men and then out of nowhere auntie Nina said, “Tell me about Jimmy’s dick?” My big cousin Bernie was sitting next to me and started poking me in my ribs with his thick hot dog fingers. Vicky’s mouth dropped wide open. Auntie picked up a knife next to the stove and lunged at her. Vicky hauled ass. Auntie ran that lady straight out the house. Snatched the woman’s wig off and threw it at her as she ran down the driveway barefooted. She walked back in the house with the knife still in her hand, and went straight into the bedroom. Closed the door. And howled. She wailed like she’d lost a child. It sounded horrific. Uncle Jimmy burst into the room. And they began to shout. The next thing you know, Mama and Pop hustled me out the house and we left.
Uncle Jimmy spent a lot of time over at the house. He’d call auntie Nina everyday. She mostly hung up on him in the beginning. But he kept trying. He’d put on one of those slick suits of his to go meet her. Somewhere random. Like a sneak attack. Auntie didn’t know he’d show up at a movie theater, where’d she go to sit in the dark, in the company of strangers, and not feel alone. Uncle would pop up. With flowers. I watched him sleep on our couch and every day he’d have a different plan to pursue auntie Nina.

She let him come back home after about six months. I was over their house with my parents sitting in the kitchen. Drinking and talking. I watched auntie make uncle Jimmy a sandwich. It was just a fucking burger. But she did it with so much care. She caramelized the onions and marinated the meat with Worchester sauce, salt and pepper. Garlic, and finely chopped up a green pepper, mixed it and made a paddy and put it in the skillet. She sliced some Monterey Jack, threw it on top with the onions, cut the heat after it fried for some minutes, and put a top over the skillet to let the cheese melt just right. My uncle and aunt used to eat those exotic breads with multi-grain seeds and weird shit, raisins or whatever pressed in the slices. She put the burger on some of that strange bread and cut it in half. Auntie took her time to make him this burger, and it smelled really good. Mama, Pop and I thought so. Every ingredient worked together to move through the house and even called my big-ass-football-playing-cousin Bernie into the kitchen. When Bernie asked if she could make him one, auntie Nina simply told him no. “This is for my man,” she said. It seemed like she had let everything that happened go and just recommitted herself to her marriage. I remember Uncle Jimmy peeking in and asking if it was ready. She said it was. The burger was neatly garnished with parsley and sitting on the counter. I was at the dining table right in front of a bay window that looked out onto the pool. I remember Anita Baker was on the radio when Unc’ checked on his sandwich, and the damndest thing
happened — because they both really loved Anita’s music. They took each other up at the stove and danced. He didn’t touch his sandwich, he curled auntie gently into him, like a priority, and they pressed on each other firmly and danced. Uncle Jimmy smoothed his hands over auntie’s butt and I could see she submitted to her man. Auntie Nina rested her head obediently on his shoulder. Bernie, Pop, Mama, and I might as well have not been in the room because they fell into a groove and nothing else mattered, it was clear. Unc’ controlled auntie all over the kitchen leading his dance, and Anita’s sultry croon made him passionately sweep her around us. We just sat there. I thought they looked as graceful as Ailey choreography. For this particular song? It was made for them. They’d done this before I was sure. But I’d never seen them do it again. Somehow I knew that this was the way adults danced. Found faith. Lost hope. And did it all over again. But there was something still seething underneath all this. You don’t know it. But you know.