

K. JARED
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TOGETHER
WE ARE
SPIDERS

*This novel is forged
from the love of liberty,
in pursuit of liberty to love
unambivalently.*

-1-

Charlie and Albert

Charlie Stewart woke up with the same thought he had woken up with since he turned eight, *Today I don't have to be Charlie Stewart at all.*

He could be Björn, he could be Karl, he could be Javier, he could be Salvatore Jørgen Vladimir Ngor Jean-Baptiste Godard. But today he decides he'll be Dean.

Dean Einstein Alexander.

Albert Einstein had once said about his relativity theory, "When you sit with a nice girl for two hours, it seems like two minutes. When you sit on a hot stove for two minutes, it seems like two hours. That's relativity."

This quote had been inspired by a black Trinidadian girl named Abigail Walker. And they did more than just sit. Einstein had also been known to say, "If one studies too zealously, one easily loses his pants."

And this was exactly what happened.

Little was known of the details of how Albert Einstein came to have sexual contact with a Trinidadian girl in 1919. But it was most likely somewhere between his divorce to Mileva Marić in February and his marriage to his cousin, Elsa Löwenthal, in July later that same year. Maybe Albert needed the Caribbean breeze. Maybe he took a little vacation to *bruk out* for a week or two to congratulate himself. After all, on May 19th, 1919, a total solar eclipse in Principe and Brazil was observed, and his theory of general relativity was then confirmed by one Mr. Arthur Eddington.

Putting the details and motives aside, the main rib of the saga was that Mr. Einstein, fresh out of a divorce, met Ms. Walker, twenty years his junior, sat with her, lost his pants, *dingolayed* with her in bed and nine months later, Dean's mulatto grandfather, Timothy, was born.

And then Dean's father, Andrew, some thirty years later.

And finally, Dean, some more after that.

Mr. Einstein's paternal absence affected these three generations of men. Dean's grandfather, Timothy, had left when Andrew was two years old to find his father.

He never returned. But Andrew had never held anything against his old man. He figured if his father was Albert Einstein, he would've used the opportunity to meet him too.

Then 17th April, 1955 came. An abdominal aortic aneurysm sent Albert Einstein to the hospital.

The following day, he was dead.

Timothy mailed a letter to his family saying he was going to attend the cremation in Trenton, New Jersey, for the scattering of the ashes. That was the last anyone ever heard of Timothy. Nobody ever knew if he had ever met Albert. Or if he had ever even made it to the cremation on time.

Andrew, himself, disappeared when Dean was born. But there had been no extravagant story or pilgrimage to back it up.

As for Dean, to be the great grandson—estranged or not—of Albert Einstein, a name synonymous with genius, was quite a burden. Quite a shadow something like that tends to cast.

But for anyone who was familiar with Charlie knew this was the way his imagination ran. They all knew what Dean Einstein Alexander exactly was. Only Charlie thought that his life story was going to climax with some plot twist concerning his lineage and ethnicity. But Charlie was Charlie, with not one inkling of German-Caucasian in his blood and no trace of Einstein in his genes. It was what some Trinidadians would refer to as *gobar*.

That's Hindi for *bullshit*.

Most dismissed it as just simple clever playful delusion, one that this eighteen year old red-skinned boy played off not

just in his mind, but out loud, like how that one hyperactive child could get a little too involved in a game of cops and robbers.

"I will never achieve the genius of my great grandfather," Charlie lamented, as he settled into the backseat of Bobby's taxi.

"Yeah?" Bobby said, starting the car and driving off. He looked at Charlie in the rearview mirror and asked, "What gramps do with himself so?"

Charlie counted them on his fingers. "Special theory of relativity, founded relativistic cosmology with a cosmological constant, founded Zero-point energy, EPR paradox, quantum theory of atomic motion in solids."

Bobby glanced in the mirror and saw a palm full of words and terms that would never matter to him in his life.

"True talk?" Bobby remarked. "My great grandfather used to beat mine. Which cause my grandfather to beat my father. And you could guess what was coming next." He lit a cigarette and puffed two rings of smoke out the car window.

"Mine was a great man," Charlie said, looking out the car window with a gentle wistful smile on his face. He then turned to Bobby and said, "You know *Time* named him Person of the Century?"

"Time?"

"*Time*. The magazine."

"Oh. Yeah? That so?" Bobby laughed. "You a very lucky boy." He blew another smoke ring. "And how school goin'?"

"It good." Charlie bit his fingernail.

"What happen? You don't like talking bout your real life?"

Charlie kept quiet.

"But you will go and run your mouth about your grandfather."

"Great."

"What?"

"Great grandfather."

Bobby nodded. "Great great great. Sorry, boss."

Charlie said nothing for the rest of the ride. When they arrived at the church, Bobby parked along the side of the road. He observed the other cars in the adjacent church parking lot and remarked, "Boy, I still can't figure out why you leave your house to come so far for Saturday evening service. It have a church right in Edinburgh, you know."

"Confession."

Bobby cocked his eyebrows. "You is a Christian?"

"Christians don't confess, Robert. Catholics do."

Bobby sighed. "You is even a Catholic?"

"Don't have to be Catholic to confess."

Bobby looked at the cars. "Them other people here for confession too?"

"Some of them," Charlie said. "Some of them just sit there and say nothing. And I think one of them just likes chocolate chip cookies."

"They does serve chocolate chip cookies at confession?" Bobby asked, not expecting a proper replied. And he didn't get one.

Instead, Charlie just pitched four crumpled dollar bills into Bobby's lap and uttered, "I'm late."

"Jeez-and-ages, Charlie, don't pelt the money," Bobby grunted. Then he furrowed his brow and added, "How you could be late for confession?"

Like the White Rabbit, Charlie glanced at his watch and kept up, "I'm late, I'm late," as he hopped out the taxi. Bobby shook his head with passing concern before driving off.

Charlie made his way into the church, headed to the left and ducked through a low doorway into a small room. People sat in a circle at the center. The purple curtains fluttered with the fan. The big ceramic Jesus peered down upon them all in perpetual agony. Two smaller Jesuses at opposite ends of the room faced each other.

"Ah, David!" Pastor Anderson exclaimed to Charlie. "I almost thought you weren't coming!" Pastor Anderson was a burly man who always folded his legs and jiggled his feet.

Charlie smiled. "A little trouble with the babysitter. I'm sure you all know how *that* can be!"

"Ah, yes, yes," went the women in unison. Then scattered murmurs. "Very hard." "Tough nowadays." "All too well, Dave, all too well."

"You should just bring your little Sadie here, David," Kathleen said. "She sounds so absolutely *darling*." Kathleen is a white woman in her mid-thirties who always wore sandals, bright-hued frumpy-looking dresses or flower-patterned tops and gawky costume jewelry. She let her long blonde hair hang loose

and her nails would usually be painted zany colours like bright orange, electric blue or mint green. Charlie often wondered if a rich fat Trinidadian businessman imported her from Romania and got killed by a heart attack a couple years later. And her perky attitude was her only means to deal with the grief.

"You know he can't do that, Kathleen," Gloria jumped in. "Same week you does say the same thing over and over."

"It's always worth a shot," Kathleen giggled. "You don't even carry photographs of the girl in your wallet even, Dave?"

Charlie took a nametag from a plastic bowl and, while searching for a pen to scribble *David*, related to her, "You know, I used to do that. Before my wallet got stolen. Right next to some ATM in Chaguanas. I had five pictures of my Sadie in it that I didn't have copy prints of. Stupid, I know. Now, I just keep extra careful because I don't want no blasted bandit owning no picture of my baby."

"Yeah, and they're lurking everywhere nowadays," Kathleen said, frowning. She then added with a disgusted shudder, "And those *kidnappings* nowadays. You heard about that new one with that poor girl who was bicycling near the airport? Absolutely appalling what this country has come to!"

Charlie nods but said nothing. As he went to take a seat, he noticed that there were two new people that week. A frail looking woman in a sundress. Her nametag read *Indra*. And a man looking in his thirties, wearing a grey flannel shirt and jeans. His nametag read *Michael*. Charlie shook their hands. "Always glad to see new single parents here," he said.

Charlie sat opposite Mr. Hamid. That's what it read on his nametag—*Mr. Hamid*. "Can't wait to hear bout your little bundle of joy this week," Mr. Hamid said to Charlie with a smirk. In the four sessions he had attended by that time, he had never revealed his first name. In fact, he had never even spoken about a child.

Charlie sat between Kathleen and Gloria, whom had shifted their chairs away from Mr. Hamid's. Mr. Hamid wore the same jersey to every meeting, with the same peppered curry stains on the collar.

Mr. Hamid reached into his pants and produced two crumbling chocolate chip cookies. Gloria's lifted her eyebrows, then twisted her mouth in scorn. "Hog," she muttered under her breath.

Pastor Anderson gave a nervous laugh. "Who wants to start off the meeting? Does anyone have anything they want to share with the group?"

Mr. Hamid got up and went to the table. He peered at the jug on the table and grimaced. "No lemonade this week?" he grunted, his mouth still full with the cookies.

Pastor Anderson turned around. "Not today," he said, "We have orange juice. From the pack."

Mr. Hamid poured himself a cup. "A damn shame," he said. "The lemonade will be missed."

"Mr. Hamid," Pastor Anderson said. "Perhaps you would like to share something this week?"

"I'll pass," he replied with a chuckle. After a long pause, he shrugged and added, "I might need more time. I don't know if I

comfortable yet. To share all these feelings I have inside of me, and whatnot."

Gloria snapped, "I could eat a bowl of alphabet soup and vomit out a better excuse than that. Is it so hard for you to stop stuffing your face and just share something with the group, Mr. Hamid?"

Pastor Anderson bit his lower lip. "Please, please, Miss Gloria—"

"See," Mr. Hamid said, folding his arms. "Now I definitely not comfortable. Once again, I pass." He tipped his juice cup to Pastor Anderson.

Kathleen cleared her throat. "Well! Now that *that* is over, I think I'll start off the meeting. This week was a good week. I've been picking up good auras from Jonathan. You know what colour I saw in him yesterday? Yellow! Yellow! That means his creative juices are flowing. He's been drawing all week." She unfolded several drawings and passed them around the circle.

A sunrise.

A pink unicorn.

A buttercup.

A child doing ballet.

Mr. Hamid scoffed at them.

"These are very optimistic things!" Kathleen giggled. "We just have to look for the things to make us optimistic."

"That's no surprise," intervenes Sandra. "Your glass seem like it will always gon be half full even it fall down and shatter to pieces."

"Your aura is very muddled red, Sandra," Kathleen said, squinting her eyes.

Sandra grimaces.

"Miss Sandra," Pastor Anderson called out. "Is there something the matter? Something you would like to share?"

Sandra fidgeted and sucked on her teeth. "Everybody expect a single mother to be this *supreme being*. I was always the go-getter, the dependable one. Always the one with all the right answers. Always taking care of everybody. My brother when he sick. My father when he drunk. My mother when she sick of seeing my father drunk. Me. Now two little children all by myself. Who is there to care of *me*?"

"Oh, Jeezus Christ," Mr. Hamid scoffed. "Not this *again*." He got up to get an orange juice refill.

Sandra continued, "You see them man nowadays? Lost causes."

"Girl, you better off by yourself. You really want to lose your independence *again*?" Naomi pitched in.

Gloria added, "Trust me, *them man* is no good. All they could do is drink rum and gamble away your money. You really want that around your daughters? Shame on all of them. Woman, use this opportunity to show them you are a strong, successful, independent woman."

Michael, the new man, slumped in his chair.

Gary averted his eyes to the ceramic Jesus.

Mr. Hamid went back to his seat and pronounced, "I miss anything? Carry on, ladies." He noticed Michael slumping and

whispered to him, "No wonder all their man pack their bags and gone. Sometimes I does wonder how these bitter people even get custody."

Michael eyed the floor and steepled his fingers.

Charlie stood up suddenly. "I think you all have every right to be bitter," he declared. "Every damn right!"

All eyes shot to Charlie.

But he said nothing else. He took his seat. And for some reason, didn't feel like speaking about Sadie for that session.

When the meeting concluded, he tried to avoid any further conversation with the parents. No new thing. He avoided them every week. He crossed the road and watched them chatter away, before getting into their respective cars. A faint sadness always in his eyes. Perhaps a longing. Perhaps alienation.

Kathleen pulled her Grand Vitara over to the sidewalk and asked Charlie if he wanted a drop home. He politely declined. She then asked him if he wanted to go for a drink. He declined once more.

She peered at a lone blackbird, perched on an electrical wire. Her eyes followed it as it zipped away. Its speck dissolved into a long rising cloud of smoke hanging over a brushfire in the distance. It was here her eyes became transparent and Charlie saw lonesomeness behind them. It was here he started to feel a sharp pang of guilt that: *No, Kathleen, you cannot see where I live. No, I cannot have a drink with you. I am afraid you might see through the go-bar. So no, you cannot talk to me outside this meeting.*

"So I'll see you next week," he said.

"See you next week, David," she said to him.

She gave a single nod. Lingered for a while. Looked at Charlie. Then looked forward. Maybe looking out for that blackbird, though she knew it was gone. Then she drove off.

And Charlie could not help but wonder what colour his aura was.

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Soraya and Claude

Soraya rocked back and forth in bed. There was no time or place in her head for morning prayer recitations. Allah could wait, she thought. She had to dispel this nervous heartbeat first. She had a dreadful nightmare. In it, her mother had given birth to a ghastly pale baby whose skin could have made gypsum look like coal. Displeased, her mother handed the wailing newborn to Soraya as if handing her a clump of dirty laundry, and told her to take the baby out to the shed in the backyard and bury it.

And so Soraya did.

She dug the hole and set out to put the baby in it. Soraya knew it wasn't like putting a plate in the sink or putting the clothes out to dry. As the shovel struck the soil, she looked at the

baby's swollen eyes and realised it was not crying. But laughing. Like the baby had figured out a punchline for some unknown joke.

Despite being a Muslim, all Soraya could muse about in the dream at the time was Jesus on the cross, just itching, just waiting to say those words every thug-life slum lord would struggle to say after catching a cutlass to the neck: "It is accomplished." Just to feel like they had been living something grandiose.

She finished with the hole and she set the baby inside. She shoveled the dirt into the hole and onto the baby, which still laughing and gurgling as the soil and shit was being dropped into its mouth. The laughing didn't fade until she woke up.

Haseena, her mother, knocked on the door. She spoke, never faltering from sternness, "Soraya, you did Salat? Say your prayers?"

Soraya answered, "Yes."

She hadn't.

Soraya had been lying to her mother a lot lately. With her mother there, the house wasn't a house. It was the Third Reich. And when she told Soraya to do something, she had to do it. No questions about it. No complaints. No fuckery. She always knew to shut her damn mouth, get up, move her ass and do it.

Turn down that TV.

She did it.

Stop talking to that girl. She did it.

Sacrifice that goat in the name of Whomever. she did it.

It's just a goat.

Bury the baby in the dirt.

It's just a goat.

And it's just a baby.

Soraya rocked back and forth as she fantasised about her own birth. She knew she was born at home and Mrs. Zahra had come over to be the mid-wife, so she envisioned this first. And she imagined herself to be there, as a specially invited guest looking on as her baby self's head emerges. And then observing the look on Mrs. Zahra's face, straining as if casting a gaze upon a damn *jumbie*. Couldn't blame her. When one was born with a palate and cleft lip as severe as Soraya's was, it tended to be shocking to the formerly unexposed and uninformed.

Soraya wondered what Mrs. Zahra was thinking, seeing a baby with its mouth being swallowed up by its nose. Just this awkward loss for words.

And Soraya imagined as Mrs. Zahra tried to hand the new mother the baby, she screamed out, *Shaytan!* Haseena refused to hold it. A baby *Dajjal*. And then Soraya had to hold the damn thing instead. She tickled her younger self's chin and it began to suckle on the tip of her index finger. And when Soraya's father saw the baby, he could only turn to his wife and say, "Haseena, one of us had to be a *fasiq* for this to happen."

It was a Wednesday.

And Soraya recalled that stupid Mother Goose nursery rhyme. Monday's child is fair of face. Tuesday's child is full of grace. Wednesday's child is full of woe.

She imagined Mrs. Zahra saying something about giving birth to the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Or that maybe the baby was still inside, dead, and instead of passing out a still-born, she had passed out the wraith—the demon—that ate the remains.

Then Haseena gave fantasy Soraya the killing order.

Bury the baby, girl. Bury it alive. Bury it with the *sin*. That's what she said. Bury it with the *sin*. The *curse*. A curse? A cleft lip? This was just a living breathing Wednesday baby, Soraya thought. Instead of burying it, Soraya kept her baby self in a cushioned box.

Wednesday's child was full of woe.

And she always thought that nursery rhyme was so sad and unfair. But when she thought about it—really thought about it—she figured that maybe they were trying to say something. They were trying to tell her that she waited one damn day too late to squeeze her head through the end of the tunnel. You coulda had all the grace, they wanted to tell her. But now your ass stuck with the woe.

They were trying to say that some people were just born with their best parts sliding out as the afterbirth on the shit-stain on the blanket. Some fellas were born with comic book hero faces. And some were born as wallflowers fated to peephole fantasies. Some girls grew up to be killer-diller dutchesses, flashing their backdoors, getting smooched and catcalled by some of the damn finest men. And then there was the litter of

cleft-lipped yard-dogs who had to keep to the dog-house, licking their own labias, whenever heat season rolled around.

Soraya slipped out of her pyjamas. She stood naked, tiptoed and stretched her arms out. She closed her eyes and pictured herself on a hill with the cool breeze that eddied around her long dark hair. And she began to hover as the wind took the form of manly palms that wrapped around her torso and waist. The clouds parted and the daylight stroked her skin—areas virgin to the wind and sun. Free of the black pantaloons, free of the hijab that caged her hair, free of the black niqab that swathed her jaw and cheeks, free of the abaya robes that billowed amorphously from neck to ankle.

Then she opened her eyes.

She attired herself in her daily uniform: abaya robes, hijab and niqab. She went to the bathroom and washed her hands. Her attempts to avoid eye contact with the pedestal sink mirror failed and she not only ended up looking at herself, but leaned in and clutched the niqab in her fist. She lifted it up to take a closer look at her cleft lip scar. She thumbed it with the other hand. Up and down the small little ridge of furrowed coalesced flesh. Left and right. Right and left.

Wearing the niqab, the fold of cloth that concealed the entire Muslim female countenance save for the eyes, had been her choice. Wanting so much to hide the scar of her cleft lip, she had contemplated the niqab to be a socially acceptable equivalent of a brown paper bag with two holes cut out for the eyes.

"Breakfast at the table," Haseena called out. "Hurry up."

Soraya joined her father at the kitchen table. The newspaper concealed his face up to his white taqiyah skullcap. The headline read,

BICYCLE CHAMP GOES MISSING

He lowered the paper from his face. His bristly grey beard concealed his hardened features. His breakfast had already been eaten, Soraya noticed, crumbs of toasted bread lain scattered on his plate. Yet here he sat with his paper, instead of in the gallery. Soraya expected her mother to join the table soon, cornering her as she began her first meal for the day.

Haseena's fork beat vigorously against the eggs on the teflon pan. Soraya noted, quite hasty to break the silence, "I need pads. I think it's going to come in a couple days."

The fork stopped.

Haseena said, "No mosque next week then," not to anyone in particular, but as if taking a mental note. She rested the plate of scrambled eggs on the table and walked over to the calendar with a ballpoint pen. She proceeded to draw a line through the Friday of the following week. She dragged the tip of the ballpoint pen to the Friday three weeks prior of the same month, also marked with a line. Haseena then declared, "This is your second period for the month."

Soraya's father looked at her.

"I've been stressed," was all Soraya can muster.

Haseena pulled up a chair next to her husband. Soraya kept her head down. "Keep eating," Haseena told her as she produced a letter from her pocket. Immediately, Soraya's heart hammered, even before Haseena unfolded the piece of paper and began to read out loud: "Soraya, my love, I can't wait until our eyes meet and until our bodies converge. Can you imagine how wonderful that would be? I want to pleasure and make you c—"

Haseena stopped. Her tone was scornful. Offended. But still she continued.

Soraya set her fork down. She clenched the rim of the table and ground her teeth. She kept her eyes on her food. Her ears searched for other sounds to concentrate on but there were none. Not a distant radio. Not a fucking bird. Fucking nothing. She wanted to fall to her knees and faint. "No," she let out in a whimper.

"Quiet," her father hissed. "Keep eating."

But she couldn't eat.

Haseena continued, "Perhaps one day I can come to Trinidad. Do you know any secluded beaches? We can have *sex* on the shore and let the waters wash our bodies after." Though that was not the end of the letter, she stopped there.

Soraya remembered the letter word-for-word. The pleasant excitement as she tore the envelope open. Her monthly subscription to personalized erotica. A verbal lap dance. She remembered writing her first letter to him and eventually marveling at how a simple ad space with a pen pal request led to this.

Though she had realised his words were sometimes more of an exercise in purple prose and fantasy than sincere sentiment, they did not stop her heart from glowing and her palm from slipping down to her crotch. In a way, that was what she preferred. Because she was never going to meet Claude Laurent, anyway, she thought. She didn't want to. He would discover she would not be the twenty-one year-old belly-dancing island princess she had made herself out to be, but a hare-lipped secondary school girl of seventeen. Then what?

He would not be the twenty-eight year old slim, charismatic, poetic Parisian gentleman, but rather a hairy-chested, hairy-backed overweight late-thirties slob with male pattern baldness, a paunch and a dog-eared copybook of plagiarized quotes from Parnissian literature.

"*Haram*," Haseena uttered, waving the letter spitefully in Soraya's face. "You will stop writing to this *Claude* at once. I don't want these letters in this house. Such filth is not allowed here. Finish your breakfast. Then I want you to bring all his letters to me and we will start a small fire in the back."

She wanted to retch as she finished the eggs.

After, she went back to her room, locked the door and gripped along her shelf to locate the P volume from her *Encyclopedia Britannica* collection.

P for Paris. P for Pleasure. P for Private.

The P volume had been her secret treasure chest, located in a rectangular paper alcove between pages 121 and 523, painstakingly whittled and hollowed out by a kitchen knife one

Friday night eleven months back when Claude's first letter had arrived. Aside from Claude's letters, there had not been much other contraband stashed there. Coldplay's *Parachutes* and The White Stripes' *Elephant*. Haram. All haram in the Rahman household. Even *Animal Farm* was haram. How dare a pig try to run a farm?

Soraya clutched the letters against her chest one last time. She was at least thankful that her mother had not read these. Each one expressed how much Claude wanted to fuck Soraya, in great detail. She was further thankful that her mother would never have the prospect of reading her replies. If his letters had been haram, her replies would have induced *jihad*.

While she had written of her impractical desires to visit him in Paris, eating terrines and patés on the verandah of their hotel room, strolling through the Louvre between walls of Matisse and Monet and getting eaten out in some hidden nook in Notre Dame Cathedral, she had never really spoken about herself. And he had never really spoken about himself. Except that he had once studied French Literature and was a big supporter of Olympique Lyonnais.

She knew he was just a horny Frenchman. And that these letters were one step above chatroom cyber-sex. But scribbled on them were real names and real addresses. Not silly monikers. Bits of paper with stamps of the Arc de Triomphe that had travelled miles just for her. French paper. She tittered at the thought of all of this, not in girly vanity but at the absurdity of wanting to fuck someone she had never seen.

Claude Laurent was an absurd man indeed, she finally convinced herself. And it had been a pleasure to be given the opportunity to be equally absurd with him.

Her eyes welled up.

She slipped the P volume back into the shelf and carried the letters to her mother in the backyard. A small fire danced atop a few twigs and coals. Soraya laid them down immediately on the fire, denying her mother the opportunity to read them out loud. The letters burned and folded slowly into themselves. Like dying wilting flowers. "I am surprised these slipped past me," Haseena said, her eyes fixed on the fire. "I check the mailbox every morning. What I would like to know is when you have been replying."

"I give someone to post them for me," Soraya said.

"Who?"

"At school."

"Who?"

"You won't know them."

"How am I going to be able to trust you, Soraya?" Haseena sighed, looking at her, "You keep this filth in your room. Things unfit for a young girl's mind. I find this letter—where?—in your school textbook. When your mind should be on studies, it is on boys. We are here to protect you. Look, the other day. A girl kidnapped. Last straw. Me and your father talked about this. We don't want you going out anymore. If you do, one of us has to come."

Soraya's jaw dropped. But she kept quiet. Opposition meant getting a resounding slap. A minute after, she heard hammering from inside the house. She ignored it at first.

Haseena continued, "It is not safe. After school, I will come pick you up. You come straight home. And this business of you hiding things—we want to keep a constant eye on you."

The hammering sounded louder.

"We must make sure you get back on the Straight Path." Haseena placed her palm on Soraya's back and led her back inside, to her room. To Soraya's shock, her door had been removed and lain against the wall. Her father stood before it, with a rusting hammer in his hand, and wiped sweat off his brow with his sleeve.

This was followed with no whirlwind of teenage frenzy. No fight for rights. The only protest came in the form of one question: "Where will I change my clothes?" Promptly responded with, "In our bedroom."

Her mother and father walked away. Then she went into her room and sat on her bed. From there, she could see out to the kitchen. The door-shaped hole in the wall was like a fresh wound in her room. A crucial organ excised. She balled her hands into fists. She wanted to pound the mattress with them. She wanted to punch the wall. She wanted to tear the pages out of her textbooks. And slam her body into the cupboard. But she had been denied those rights. Finally realizing this, she began to cry.

But her right to cry in her room had been denied as well.

And she had no choice but to take her woes to the bathroom.

-3-

Asha and Shala

Vishala Persaud had woken up around five in the morning to the alarm on her cellphone, which had been set to the tune of rock band Queen's *Bicycle Race* with Freddie Mercury already belting out, *I don't believe in Peter Pan, Frankenstein or Superman / All I wanna do is bicycle bicycle bicycle / I want to ride my bicycle bicycle bicycle..*

A hat-trick Silver Cyclist award winner, Vishala was determined to have the Golden Cyclist atop her mantle for the 2009 Annual Cyclathon 100km. With an avocado sandwich, her shorts, her helmet, her red Converse, an iPod with a carefully handpicked and organized playlist that included the likes of

Olivia Newton-John, Bananarama and Cyndi Lauper, she was ready to race with the birds and pedal against the wind.

She was expected to be back home by half past seven.

Her 9am scheduled tutorial for PSYC 2003 Physiological Psychology did not care about her golden trophy. Seven thirty came and, not wanting to be humbugs, Mr. and Mrs. Persaud did not call.

Eighty thirty came and Mrs. Persaud dialed her number with the words already rehearsed in her head, "Shala, if you going to gone for so long, you have to call we!"

It had not been until the third time that a man answered in a stammering hush, "H-H-Hello?" with the roar of a plane flying overhead.

"Who is this?" Mrs. Persaud exclaimed in a hasty tone.

The man on the other line had been just a driver whose eye was caught by a licked-down Raleigh Burner BMX lying sideways on the asphalt of the road beside the airport hangars. The bicycle lied next to a single red Converse sneaker tossed onto a nearby tuft of grass.

When Ashutosh heard Shala had gone missing, he did not say anything about her. But he drove straight to the spot on Golden Grove Road. The Persauds were already there, along with some of the local law enforcement. Ashu stood behind the yellow tape, his fingers jingling loose change in his pockets. He stroked his chin and quietly observed the wrecked bicycle as if it were a museum display of bizarre post-modern art.

He averted his eyes to Shala's little sister, Ali, whom had been observing him. He pretended to smile. Back at the Persaud residence, he paced around with her parents, releasing a spiel about the ransom, politics and the rank state Trinidad and Tobago had been in since the upsurge of kidnapping, but not one word about Shala herself.

Ali's eyes followed his feet.

Ashu had known Shala since they were both three. When Ali was born, Shala had already been seven and already in one year into a relationship with Ashu. Both at twenty-one now, the fifteenth anniversary of their relationship had been two months up around the bend. Ali was the only person who had known that they called what they had during those primary school days a relationship.

When they were younger, Ali would join Shala under her bed, and Shala would tell her about her relationship with Ashu, whispering secrets caught in quiet breaths that she hoped would stay with her little sister or seep into the floorboards and remain forever. She would talk about stolen kisses on the back porch of their house when they were sixteen, about wilted begonias and mimosa blooms she kept in her Bhagavad-Gita since she was fourteen, about how they would put their bookbags over their hands so no one would see them holding hands on the school maxi when they were eleven.

No one had known about this. Her parents thought Ashu and Shala had only started their relationship when they were announced it at fifteen.

Shala's eyes lit up when she told Ali these things, as if she were a nostalgic old woman undergoing some sort of abreaction that had been in the post for too long. Even though Ali knew she probably only told her because she could tell no one else, she appreciated being the only one privy to Shala's cache of quixotic fables.

Ali had often wondered if Ashu had these similar catharses.

However, the relationship slowly rotted as the years went by. It was annoying that everyone treated them like a married couple, always making them act as couriers and telegram readers for each other, always shoving the other one into the frame when one wanted to take a photograph alone.

Always expecting one to be responsible for the other.

Ali knew she had been guilty of that too. Despite this, their longevity was still considered a marvel by people, as neither Ashu nor Shala had the will to leave the other.

Even for the ones who would pry into whatever business they had, it was difficult to deduce if they had actually despised each other or not. Few had witnessed exchanges of truly tender moments between them. One Divali night, they wandered off together. They sat on a knoll that overlooked the village. There, the breeze was soft and crisp. They let themselves be lost in the swaying, quivering lights of the deyas around them on the bamboo scallops.

Ashu back then thought nothing of his best white kurta getting speckled with dirt, and Shala paid little mind when her

sari wedged into a thorny bush. They just held hands and played with each other's fingers in absent-minded glee. They pecked each other on the lips whenever the rockets flew up and exploded into giant luminous swallowtail butterflies.

By the time Ali turned ten and Shala turned eighteen, she stopped telling her about Ashu. Four years after, it was still the same story. When Ali asked her about him from that point, Shala just sucked on her teeth.

Ashu's lips seemed forced into a frown. Was he thinking about stolen kisses on the back porch and under pinwheel shimmers, desiccated hibiscuses, secret schoolbag memoirs? Or about the discontent of acting as envoy and mailman for her? Or the thousand photographs he wished to take without her feigning a smirk next to him?

Ali studied his face. There was no sign of tears in his eyes, or any sort of emotion save a paleness in his face she had never before seen. As if spooked by Shala's apparition already. Ali wondered if he was oddly thankful for the situation. And she could imagine Shala feeling the same way. If she was gone forever, this was finally be the pivotal moment they were both waiting for, where they could finally leave each other and take comfort in knowing that they both never had a choice.

The ransom call came later that night. Shala's parents always sent Ali to another room when the kidnappers called.

They wanted one million dollars in exchange for Shala.

While Mrs. Persaud wailed and blubbered Hindi and Mr. Persaud sat on a chair facing the wall, cursing and holding his

head in his hands, Ashu watched television. Ali sat with him sometimes. He made no attempt to talk to her. All his focus was on the Game Show network.

The next day, a puja was held at the Persaud residence. Ashu and his parents involved themselves. During the prayer, Ali's eyes kept fluttering open like shutters during a storm. She peeped at Ashu. He had his eyes closed the whole time, but was he praying for her? Does he want to tell them, *Pack up the Lakshmi murti. Blow out the incense. Throw those flowers away. Throw water on that fire. Stop those bhajans from playing. Send that pundit home. Come on, people, accept that she is dead and let us never speak of it again.*

Ashu asked to go up to Shala's room. Ali tiptoed, following him, her palms grasping the corner of each wall to peek before continuing along the corridors. She peeped through the slant in the doorway of Shala's room. Ashu browsed Shala's film posters of *Lagaan* and *Kal Ho Naa Ho* as if he were viewing a classical art exhibit.

He then stood before her bookshelf. He took the Bhagavad-Gita from one of the stands. As he opened it, two flattened, dried-out peace lily petals fell out from it, drifting towards the carpet like crumpled paper planes. They alighted on his shoes. He looked down at them for a long while. The vacancy in his eyes was no longer there. They were now filled with tears that trickled like dewdrops atop the dead petals.

But he quickly wiped his eyes with his sleeve and put the flowers back in the book.

~~4~~

Jai and the Crocus Bag

Jai Bhanji never was too interested in his schoolwork. His father—they called him MISTER Bhanji— had to keep *donating* money to keep him in his private secondary school and eventually for his admission to university.

Jai passed his second semester finals with C's and D's. While most other upper-class Indian parents would have raised hell for this, Mr. Bhanji found it as a reason to celebrate.

But even with tiny successes as these, Jai had no idea what he was going to do with his life. He seemed unfit to hold down any job he had taken during this summer. After getting fired three times, he came to one conclusion:

Because badman doh work for the man.

The only thing Jai was genuinely good at was track-and-field. He ran until his muscles burned. His father privately scoffed and called it "running in circles". Jai could have run and run and run. He could have done it for two hours straight and at an unfaltering pace. He felt uneasy whenever he wasn't moving.

So, about a year back, when he was kept strapped down to a flimsy wooden chair with a crocus bag over his head, Jai almost went insane. The place had been hot as hell too. And that damn crocus bag smelled like someone pulled it out of an elephant asshole. His wrists and ankles were bound to the chair he was sitting in. *Well, shit, this is a hell of a way to start the August vacation. Or a hell of a way to end it*, he thought.

At the time of the kidnapping, he was twenty-one and a virgin. Now, one year later, he was still a virgin. But he couldn't have cared less. He had had two relationships, both of which ended in disaster. Three failed opportunities to experience penetration, all of which ended in tragedy. The first with a toddler sister walking in, the second with a security guard storming the bathroom stall, and the third with a girl he discovered was a second cousin immediately before the damage could be done.

Because badman doh commit incest.

Jai had kissed three girls and three even worse experiences with fellatio. He had fallen in love with none.

Because badman doh fall in love.

Jai had never felt the need to have a girlfriend, anyway, so he decided not to bother.

And pussy never crossed the boy's mind during the whole ordeal. Instead, the first image that came to his mind was a man sitting in an electric chair. But while that man was shaking and shitting his pants, Jai's hands remained steady. He breathed normally. But could not get rid of that feeling in his stomach – that permeating gurgle. He felt it crawl way up to his head. He wondered if he was ready to die. There was no wraith before him. No Holy Ghost. No Shiva, God of Destruction.

But there was a Rottweiler. A rabid grimacing Hellhound. Cujo's estranged cousin. Nah, worse. The fucking Balrog from *Lord of the Rings*. But he knew that sonuvabitch was just a memory, pulled from dark recesses of childhood. He was hallucinating. He remembered the dog as big as God's bicep. Poised in the middle of an old decrepit alley. Its bark as loud as a cannon. Its eyes pale and grey and sharp like a scimitar. Licking its face, its rictus twisted and impatient.

It howled, "I WANT TO PLAY!"

And then that big sonuvabitch began charging towards him. Jai did not flinch. He just stood there and waited for the monster to hurl itself at him. But the dog stopped just inches from him before its leash, now taut, choked him, making him yelp out a shrill squeal.

The questions in Jai's head came in fragments. How did I – Who are these – Where am – Why can't I finish a damn q—

Calm down, jeez-an-ages, he tells himself.

Is death near? He wanted the answer whispered in his ear, not shouted.

He heard insects trilling and an owl hooting in the distance. Also a strong breeze rustling leaves in the distance. It was probably night, he thought. Probably near a forest. Maybe even near the mountains.

Or maybe up in the mountains.

The incident had not been the first time Jai found himself tied up with a rope. And that had not been the first time his father had reported that he had been kidnapped. When he was fifteen years old, four of his classmates had tied him up on the last day of Form Four. It was a strange masculine ritual in their class that they would pick someone to bind with a nylon cord or rope and leave their ass at the back of the school. The knot they always tied, however, was loose.

But Jai could not slip out of his.

At first he twisted and flailed like a chicken in a cage, but soon gave up. One of his shoes flew off and he was sweating so much that his uniform, covered in dirt, stuck to his skin. He stared at his shoe, lying in the grass, now the new base for an ant colony. He looked at all the formations the ants made. Some marched in straight lines along the sole, some marched in zig-zags along the laces, some marched in circles around the heel.

He thought about these patterns and fell asleep.

While he was sleeping, his father had alerted the Principal of the school that his son was missing from his usual pick-up spot and could have possibly been kidnapped. The Principal

asserted that security would have noticed if a stranger was seen to be picking up Jai from the premises. Nevertheless, they informed two security guards to search the grounds for him.

Jai was not discovered until one hour after, lying near a bush at the back end of the school. He had still been asleep. The first thing he saw when he woke up were three men standing over him, a security guard, the Principal and his father, all looking equally perplexed. Mr. Bhanji's confusion, however, was short-lived and was shortly followed by his temper. He demanded a meeting with the Principal and the Head of Security of the school in the Staff Office. Jai standing on the sidelines, now free of his binding.

Mr. Bhanji bellowed, "How you could let this happen!"

The Principal, sitting at his desk, rotated his chair left and right uneasily. He steepled his fingers and turned to Jai. He said in the calmest voice, "How *did* this happen, Jai?"

Jai then went on to explain and tell about his classmates' annual ritual. Neither the Principal nor the head of the school's security had known about it and were both equally appalled by it. Mr. Bhanji's tone changed, however, to a less angry one. He began to speak, as if of chagrin now and not rage, "So you could not get out of those knots?"

The Principal intervened, "It doesn't matter if a child can or cannot! That is behaviour we do not tolerate in this school and an end must be put to it! Jai – tell me who were the culprits!"

Jai barely opened his mouth to respond when Mr. Bhanji interrupted, "You can't expect him to snitch! You want the boy

to be known as the rat of the class? Crying to his daddy when someone plays a joke on him—"

"Quite frankly, Mr. Bhanji, I do not, *at all*, see this as a joke—"

"They were just having fun. Let them be—"

"You can't tell me *if* to punish them or not—"

"I am *telling* you to punish them when you catch them in the act, ridicule them in front of the whole school, give them a thousand lines, suspend them, make the ground quake, rip the sky open, do whatever you want, but *don't* make my son out to be a weakling snitch along with the process. He break free of them ropes and he went home as usual. End of story."

The Principal and head of school security wondered why Jai just lied on the ground and did not scream for help. Mr. Bhanji's mortification of his son not being able to slip out of a simple knot matched and reflected Jai's own embarrassment. Jai did not scream because he was ashamed to cry for help – that a classmate would hear him and the story would relay to everyone else how he was crying out for help.

Badman like Jai would not do that. Badman doh call for help.

He would be found sooner or later..

And back during the incident, that was a main question in Jai's head, *Would I be found sooner or later?*

The owl hooted again and a mosquito bit him on his forearm. He forgot his hands were bound and he tried to swat it.

He ended up nudging the chair a little. He was lucky. If he had exerted more force, he might have thrown his own ass down.

He realised the crocus bag was not strapped to him. It just hung on him like a lampshade. The faint scent of burnt-out cigarettes wafted under the bag and floated into his nostrils. The fear set in at that moment. He let it settle in his lungs. What was out there was scarier than carcinogens, he thought, worse than cancer.

He stretched his toes down to touch the ground and shuffled them left and right. He had half-expected a wooden floor. To feel the creases between the planks. Despite knowing no one who had a wooden house. But instead he felt dirt and stone. Not like a stone floor. Coarse stone. Untouched by man. He felt a swift kick to his ankle and then his kneecap.

Ugh! Motherfucker!

The laughter of two men. Deep voices. "Brother man," one spoke. "We forget the water. So you gon have to do without for now."

Jai said nothing.

The other one spoke, "We rollin there. Important business. And don't run away, you know. If you even dream bout runnin away, you better wake up and apologize. Or we gon slide a razorblade down your lil cockie."

Anytime he recalled that line about the water, his throat suddenly became parched. And he had to rush to the sink and drink a whole tall glass of water.

Even when Jai tried to forget everything, his throat wouldn't. He leaned over the sink and gulped water straight from the mouth of the faucet, hungry like a breastfeeding baby.

The clock struck five.

He snatched his car keys from his desk. Mr. Bhanji caught him on the way out of the house. "Mister Man, where you going and you tell nobody?"

"Arouca, sir."

"What it have in Arouca, bossman?"

"Just meeting some people, sir. Not staying long."

"Well, call me when you leaving. So I would know when to expect you home."

Ever since the incident (and that's what they always referred to it as – *the incident*), Mr. Bhanji had been less cautious with Jai than with his fraternal twin sister, Val. He probably figured lightning wouldn't strike twice. Jai sometimes regarded *the incident* of it as an initiation. And he had made it into the club.

Who was going to fuck with him now?

Who was going to fuck with the crab that you heard leapt out of the callaloo and threatened to stick its chelipeds into the chef's tongue if his teeth even as so much grazes the carapace?

The drive from Barataria to Arouca took about an hour because of the traffic. Jai pulled up and parked on the side of the road. Common was rapping from his car CD player, "*It's a cold war / I'm a colder soldier*." There were several other cars there.

They formed two queues on both sides of a two-story house. The evening breeze hit Jai's face as he got out of the car.

The mailbox at the front read, "The Persauds". He turned his eyes to the bouquet of multi-coloured jhandi flags flapping atop the bamboo stakes placed near the front gate of the house. Faint bhajans played from inside, accompanied by barking dogs, probably tied to the backyard fence. Vines and hibiscus stems ran wild and entwined the burglar proof and the walls at the front of the house to form a verdant aesthetic. The house itself was modest, comprising that typical structure with the main upstairs residence being upheld by massive concrete columns and the downstairs being usually empty.

Except for that evening, where rows of plastic chairs lined that vacancy. However, out of nearly eighty chairs, only about thirty seemed occupied. A small gathering of middle-aged men stood before the gate. They chattered about Ricky Ponting, Mahendri Dhoni, Shivnarine Chanderpaul and the latest cricket test match in India. They paid Jai no mind when he walked past them. No one noticed him. This boy who knew no one and no one knew.

He sat behind a group of old women in saris. They talked over each other about their sons. Jai's eyes were fixed on the podium before him, where little flames wobbled from tiny golden pots at each side of a stand populated with ixora garlands and miniature porcelain Shivas, Vishnus and Devis, ranking like figurines of the Hindi Deity Action Figure Collection. Saucers of chopped up banana and rice, and porringers of milk and juice sat

beneath fragrant lines of smoke rising from the incense candlesticks.

On the stand, a single picture frame stood, depicting an Indian woman in her early twenties clutching a green helmet against her hip as she leaned against a Raleigh Burner BMX bicycle. Her fringe hairdo flitting in the breeze was captured nicely in the photograph. Her smile uncovered her dimples. Jai approached the podium, leaned over and looked closer at the picture. Especially at her dimples, uncovered by her smile. He tipped his head to the side slightly. Like a puppy dog hearing a strange noise.

"Excuse me," said a girl coming up beside him and nudging his side to place two more scented candles on the podium. She and Jai exchanged looks. Her lips were pursed with silenced concentration. And her eyes were weary with sleepless sadness. They were almost hidden behind her bangs. A pink-and-purple sari draped her small, peripubescent body. She furrowed her brow at Jai.

Then a woman called out, "Sonali! The pundit will be here just now. Go tell your mother to come downstairs. Bring Ashu too." The girl then hurried up the stairs, the bottom of her sari dragging on each step. A blackbird perched on the small wooden podium and then on the picture frame of the bicycle girl. Jai waves his palm at it and it flies away.

A voice sounded from upstairs. Unintelligible and sounding so laden and deep with pain that its femininity was almost unrecognizable. The sitting row of women and the cricket

conversationists all gathered near the staircase. They peered up at the doorway atop the stairs. None bothered to ascend. Jai watched also, but from afar.

He imagined what it must have been like when his parents had first gotten the news of his disappearance – the incident. But it was not like this.

Mr. Bhanji once ran across the street, commanding traffic to a screeching stop, to grab and shake the collar of a man off-loading Pepsi crates whom was wolf-whistling Val and telling her, "Baby, baby, how you lookin nice so? Like you know I was goin to be here. Your father workin for Kodak or what? I askin cos you so well-developed."

Another time, there was a story on the news about a jeweller who burned a robber's face with a cup of acid he kept under his counter. Mr. Bhanji applauded in the living room.

But upon first hearing of *the incident*, Jai could only imagine his father offering this prayer, "God, help me find these shit-hounds and give me the strength to kill them."

The Persauds' puja went well. But Jai did not stay for the whole thing, especially not to socialize, though he recognised the victim's boyfriend. He had nothing to say to him. He remembered seeing him at campus also.

She always trapped herself into rounds and rounds of All Fours card games in the rec hall, chattering loudly and brashly about this shitty lecturer and that shitty coursework mark. He, on the other hand, had been less visible, and much less audible,

studying under stairways and managing the printer in the computer lab.

She probably used to fuck him like a tiger, Jai's thought.

As he started walking back to his car, he felt like he hadn't yet accomplished what he really went there to do.

-5-

Fernando Luna de Vera

A football rolled up to Charlie's shoes as soon as he stepped out of the taxi. His right and left feet exchanged the ball as the group of neighbourhood kids looked on from down the street. "Oh God, Charlie," Alvin said, sucking his teeth, scurrying across the street, "or whatever your fuckin name is today. Stop playing the ass."

"Alvin, boy, watch your *bloomin* mouth, eh!" old Sargeant exclaimed, who had been sitting and peering down at the drain, chewing his own spit the whole time. He tipped his boonie hat at Charlie. He wore his old beat-up grey suit jacket, smelling funky from not being washed in weeks, with a pair of crinkled-up khaki

cargo pants. Seventy-seven years had left his face looking like a dark brown bruised mango with a thick white mustache.

Charlie said, "Read a dictionary, boy. Learn some other words."

"Listen to the boy, Alvin," Sargeant said. "That is Albert Einstein great grandson, you know. You know who Albert Einstein is, Alvin? He discover gravity." And this was why Charlie preferred not to talk to people while Sargeant was within earshot.

But he somehow always was.

The old man would believe anything. Every scammer with a doctored raffle sheet. Every lying politician that came strolling past Edinburgh Village. And once, an illegitimate son in need of boarding, meal and eight hundred dollars to pay off some *hidden debts*. But that one is a different story.

"Stop talkin shit," Alvin said.

"Watch it," Sargeant said. "Where you learn to talk so? What standard you in again?"

"Four," Alvin said.

"And your mouth already so hot?" Sargeant remarked. "Little black boy, go to school. Now. Go now. Go to school now. Ting-a-ling-a-ling. Schoolbell ring!"

"Is six o' clock in the evening," Alvin scoffed. "You can't tell time or what?"

Sargeant replied, "I surprised your mother didn't come bawling after you yet then. Is past your bedtime."

"I surprised they ain't put you away yet."

"Alvin," Charlie pleaded. "Obey your elders."

Sargeant rose, grabbed the football from the ground, hobbled back to the drain and hugged it against his chest. "You ain't getting back this ball until you answer three questions from me."

"Just gimme back the ball!" Alvin shouted, furious that this old man was holding his new football right over the rat-infested drain with an arthritis-ridden grip.

"Easy, easy questions, boy," Sargeant notes. Then he started, "Question one. What the national flower is, boy?"

Alvin sucked his teeth.

Sargeant retorted, "Answer me, black boy."

"The balisier," Alvin said, rolling his eyes.

"Wrong. Boy, you gon fail social studies," Sargeant said. "The national flower of Trinidad is the Chaconia. And the national flower of Tobago is the Cocrico."

Charlie and Alvin exchanged confused glances. Sargeant said, "Question number two. What is the national animal of Trinidad?"

"I ain't know," Alvin said, shrugging, "Is you?"

"Wrong. The answer is the pot-hound. And this country need to show them more respect. Just the other day some coolie man chop down the bush by the park. The damn dogs – pot-hound, pom-pek, bulldog, pitbull – all of them used to assemble there to do their number two." His voice raised. "People feel dog is bird. Bird don't have a care in the world when they doing their number two. They just flying and let it go in your ox-tail soup."

The dog has nowhere to do the number two! And the dogs is suffering! You know what Christopher Columbus say? He say a nation should be judged by how it treats its animals! What kinda pappy-show nation is we then?"

"Gandhi," Charlie corrected him, despite his intention to shut his mouth since quiz question one.

"What?"

"Gandhi said that. Mahatma Gandhi. Not Columbus."

The band of other neighbourhood children, six in all, crossed the street, fed up wondering what the hell was keeping back the game. Sargeant was pleased by this. "Well, look the other children decide to show up for class. Teacher Sargeant is pleased."

"Give we back the ball," Rashad, the leader, said with a solid tone.

Sargeant ignored him. "Question three," he said. "What is the national motto of Trinidad and Tobago?"

"The national motto of Trinidad and Tobago," Rashad said, "*Is give we back the ball before we push you in the drain.*"

The other children laugh.

"Wrong." Sargeant shook his head. "The national motto is: *Together we are spiders, together we are thieves.* I bet none of you dunces did know that!"

A pause.

And then a lone voice. None other than Deepak, the bright Indian boy whose mother didn't like him playing with the other neighbourhood children, whom she dubbed as the *lil Negro*

rascals. Deepak uttered, "The motto is not: *Together we aspire, together we achieve?*"

"Aspire to be what?" Sargeant said, wincing, looking like someone just squeezed fresh lime juice on his tongue, "Achieve what? How that make sense, coolie boy?"

Deepak pouted. "How *yours* make sense?"

Sargeant got to his feet. With one shove of his palms, he tossed the football into Rashad's hands. He straightened his suit jacket and dusted off his cargo pants, confident that he had gotten the children's attention. "It have two types of people in this world," he began. "It have spiders and it have thieves. What spiders like? Flies, right? Spiders, them, catch the flies. Spiders work hard. Except the flies getting bigger and bigger everyday. *Bustin* through the cobweb." He punched the air, then weaved his fingers together. "See, spiders, when they all get together, them could weave a web that could tie up a lion."

Sargeant stood proud, as if having just delivered the Sermon on the Mount. After a silence from the children, Deepak asked, "Well, what you have to say about the thieves then?"

"What it have to say bout thieves other than they is damn thieves?" Sargeant said, "There is no honour among thieves. A thief is a thief."

"Jah!" Alvin exclaimed, "This man crazy, oui!" The other children laughed and then all scampered back down the street to their makeshift goal posts. Sargeant shook his head and returned to his post at the drain. The bulbs on the light poles all switched on, illuminating the street and casting an orange spotlight on

Sargeant, as if he were a tragic character in a musical, hunched over, his face hidden from the audience. Charlie almost expected him to lift it and croon a sad song.

Instead, still holding his head down, Sargeant spoke, "No respect. Nobody have respect anymore for the elderly. Ages ago, you know, I used to be the talk of the town. I had the ladies lining up for me. They all wanted to see what it had so with the *Sarge*. The Sargeant was not just a boy or a man. The Sargeant was something more."

He contemplated, trying to find out what that *something more* was. He raised his head and said, "The Sargeant was like Louis Armstrong! And the ladies, them, all wanted to know what this wonderful world Sargeant was singin about. The Sargeant was the charmer and he charm he share of ladies but there is the one the Sargeant jus couldn't get."

"The one who got away?" Charlie obliged.

"You shoulda see her, boy. Is what you young people would call a *red ting*. Redder than you. Red, French Creole red. If I was the Louis Armstrong, brother, she woulda be the Ella Fitzgerald—no, no, wait—the Lena Horne. She woulda be the *LENA HORNE*. Tall. Big eyes. Big smile. Smooth skin. Elegant. Like a tip-toeing ballerina, boy."

"So you didn't try?"

"Men tried, I tell ya, boy, men tried. M' lady was *immune* to flowers. Just name it. Carnations, red roses, white roses, orchids, tulips, all them flowers you actually have to pull money out of yuh pocket for, m' lady was *immune*. Chocolates, sweets,

you could import a blasted chocolate factory from Switzerland, boy, she ain't givin you the time of day. Poetry. M' lady used to stroll around the village in that white skirt readin all them white people words. Walt Whitman, Em Dickinson, Liz Browning, she know all the words by heart. I say that is the only way to get the girl. So I lock myself in my room, tryin to write the perfect poem. You know how much paper I crumple up and throw away?"

Charlie asked, "What did you write?"

"I end up copying down a poem by William Blake."

"Did she like it?"

"Yes," he said, "Unfortunately. I underestimate how much white people words m' lady used to know. I shoulda pick a more obscure one. I is a man, I get beat up a few times in my life. From since I was five and I jump in to take some licks with my best friend from a neighbourhood badjohn, to when my father drink too much puncheon on Saturday night, to when the police hold me and beat my tail silly, I know what it is like to get some serious blows. And I still coulda keep on my own two feet."

"So what happened?"

"The words she lay down on me that day, boy, my knees grow weak. The words she use. *Insipid. Mendacious. Charlatan.* Boy, I still cannot remember what them words mean but even to this age, they leave the scars on me. I shoulda just learn to write. Write the blasted poem. And title it *Marina*—that was she name, Marina—and maybe I woulda get her. Instead, some Yankee

come waltzing in her, wearing this blinding white suit, and snatch up my Marina. Carry she to Miami."

"You ever saw her again?"

Sargeant looked at the ground and shook his head.

"She doesn't sound like she was worth it," Charlie said.

He looked at Charlie with heavy eyes. "It don't have much new I could probably tell the grandson of Einstein, but I gon tell you something."

"What's that?"

"When you love somebody, boy, when they ask you to jump, you don't ask when, you ask them how high. Understand?"

"Got it."

Sargeant got up and inhaled the cool evening air. He put his hands in his pockets and trudged down the empty street, mumbling to himself. The children had all gone in their houses by then and Charlie found himself in an unusual solitude in the section of the dead end street. He crossed the street and walked to his house, the last one in the street. The smell of cooked catfish and breadfruit oil-down filled the kitchen.

"Charlie," Genieve said from the living room. "Do your mother a favour and go down by the parlour and buy a pack of menthols. Thanks."

Charlie headed back down to the little red kiosk at the end of the street. When he stepped inside, the old curmudgeon inside immediately shot him a mean glance. When he handed Charlie them cigarettes, Charlie saw that they were placed in the glass case right next to the Tic-Tacs and salt snack display. He

remarked, "You really shouldn't put those where the children could see them."

"Boy, go your way," the man said, shooing him.

Immediately after, a voice called out to Charlie. He spun around to find Josette in the road, standing akimbo in her track pants and a sweat-stained plain white T-shirt one size too big for her. Her hair was fashioned into a ponytail, hanging out the back slot of a cap. She jogged up to him and grabbed her knees and stretched her calves. "I was lookin for you whole afternoon, boy! I was thinking we coulda make a plan to run together. Running solo gets boring fast."

"Next time," he said, eager to get back to the house.

"Bullshit. Don't do me so."

"I don't do you in any way."

"If you ain't asking me, I asking Jack."

"I just not in a jogging mood," Charlie told her.

She started jogging on the spot, talking in gasps when she spoke, "Well – you just – tell me – when – you are – you know I always – looking for company!" then she left, her sneakers kicking up a trail of dust behind her.

Charlie went back to the house to find the kitchen table set. Two bowls of breadfruit oil-down with a saucer at the side to place the catfish bones, and a glass of portugal juice. His mother had already started eating. He set the cigarettes down on the counter and joined her. He paid little attention to the evening news playing in the background on the TV. "So Mr. Einstein—that is what I hear you callin yourself today—how was church?"

"It was good."

"Service on a Friday, eh?" she said, smiling. "And quite up north you going and you can't join your mother for Sunday service right here in Edinburgh? Too early for you?—careful with the catfish—Why you can't come to church with me just one Sunday?"

He didn't replied. A whirl of evening breeze rippled through the kitchen window and flapped the curtain.

Her lips curved into a smirk. Her tone not strict but lighthearted when she spoke, "You should choose your stories more wisely. Is not a good thing to say you going to church and you going to do *something else*. God don't like that. God would frown upon that. I know young people will be young people. Which I have no problem with, I hope you know that. You could go where you want. But no need to bring the house of worship in this."

A silence. She knew she was not going to get an answer but trying couldn't hurt, she had thought.

"This girl you go to meet—she pretty?" Genieve asked, finally.

Charlie kept eating. There was a long silence between both of them, until he broke it with, "We have pictures of Petra when she was a baby?"

"Petra?" Genieve furrowing her brow. "Your baby cousin Petra? Why you want pictures of her?"

Charlie gave an exasperated tone. "Do we have?"

"In the album in my room. Don't lose them. No mischief." In the same breath she said, "That Josette girl come lookin for you earlier today. I dunno why you are friends with that girl. I don't like that girl. Josette. Sound like a prostitute name."

"She's not bad," Charlie said, avoiding eye contact with his mother.

"Not bad?" Genieve scoffed, astonished. "You ain't see how that girl does get on when Carnival time come?"

"No," Charlie said, shaking his head. "You know I don't like to leave my room for Carnival. I hate Carnival."

"Nevertheless," Genieve continued, "Don't let me catch you dealing with lil *jamette* girls like that."

Charlie finished his meal and stashed his dish in the sink. He rushed upstairs to his room. A small, humble room with barely any walking space after the addition of the bed, the dresser and the desk. But he ensured to decorate the walls with print-outs of a young Al Pacino, Albert Einstein and Nancy Sinatra. He lied in bed and put on his headphones. He closed his eyes as Peter, Paul and Mary's *Lemon Tree* faded in.

*Lemon tree very pretty / and the lemon flower is sweet /
But the fruit of the poor lemon / Is impossible to eat*

Charlie had known fully well about Josette's behaviour around Carnival time. When the Carnival weekend struck, Josette let the salacious Creole starlet in her run amok in town. And it had not been true that Charlie always stayed in his room during the Carnival season, despite his hatred for soca music. He

always claimed fetes to be the equivalent of a massive organized game of *Simon Said* set to proper percussion and trombones.

Simon said, *Wine!*

Simon said, *Jump!*

Simon said, *Wave yuh flag!*

It had been the Carnival of the previous year that Josette had convinced him to leave his room. "We'll have an adventure," she had said, "It'll be interesting, Charlie, c'mon."

It had been a shot in the dark, but fortune had been on her side. Charlie had borrowed three books from the library for that long weekend. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Nabokov's *Lolita* placed on his desk, read. He was too lonely and depressed to read all the poems in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.

It had been pivotal that on Carnival Monday night, the electricity shut off. And even more important, that same morning, Charlie had decided to be Fernando Luna de Vera, the ancestor of Domingo de Vera, whom had set up the first Spanish settlement of St. Joseph in Arawak-reigned Trinidad and Tobago in 1592. The story went:

Beneath the burning blue sky, a young Arawak woman, Madinina, sat on a log near the coast with baby crabs in her cradled hands, giggling as they scuttled along the lines in her palms and wrists. She got up and kneeled at the shore, placing her knuckles on the sand. The crabs all descended from her fingertips. She strolled along the beach, kicking the water lightly as she went. Then she noticed the waves getting rougher.

With one hand perched over her eyebrows, she looked to the horizon, where she saw a tall shadow approaching. She had heard folktales of a giant fish that would swallow canoes whole. And she had heard about the fair-skinned iron-clad men who steered their vessels here looking for some golden city called El Dorado. She prayed for it to be the latter.

The ship came into view now, the carillon of sea-birds being punctuated by its low moan sounding as it drifts slowly but surely over the ocean crest. The rest of the village had already come striding from the village, from their huts, hammocks and cassava and corn gardens, and lining up at the shore with trembling hands grasping feeble wood javelins. Domingo had seen Madinina through his spyglass as a blurry olive silhouette. When he alighted his ship, he recognized her at once.

At first, he had been caught off-guard to see such a beautiful woman's body bare to the day. Long graceful limbs toned with slender muscle, sable-coloured hair, breasts that glistened in the morning light. Red dye coiled and spiralled along smooth sun-kissed skin, each inch exposed save for the neck, which a seashell necklace and amulet entwined, groin, draped by a cotton sash stopping just before the kneecaps.

Domingo removed his iron helmet and bowed to Madinina. The Arawak chief—the *cacique*—a dark brawny man named *Goagoanare* with gold plugs in his nose, large silver earrings and large feather headdress, stepped forward. The Arawaks, a peaceful tribe, had no intent to fight and they dropped their javelins to the ground. Domingo and his men, looking for no

more than a settlement for their quest to El Dorado, flung their broad swords on the sand. Madinina smiled.

When they threw the night festival, the smoke from the burning lumber carried the spices from the pepperpot and the sweat from the dancing Arawaks. The men beat on snare drums and wooden gongs and women danced and played reed flutes.

The packed barroom in Chaguanas smelled of sweat and rum and Charlie was already drunk but Josette was pouring yet another Carib beer into his mouth, one hand grasping the bottle while the other caressed his Adam's apple as it trickled down his throat. Her waist swayed side to the side to the blaring soca music. She grabbed Charlie's hands and planted them on her hips. "You think you could take me, boy?" she said in a drunken slur.

Domingo had his eyes fixed on no woman but Madinina, on a rock beneath a halo of fireflies and her thighs gleaming from the fiery embers before her, her sash swaying before her crotch like window curtains to a secret room, like a taunting red cloth being waved before a snorting *toro*. No words needed be said. She looked back at him with equal draw for his shimmering metal and coarse linen attire and for the foreign flesh buried beneath it. He traced his feet along the dirt and the grass as his comrades drank cassava juice from calabash bowls and told jokes about what they would do when they found El Dorado. Madinina then got up and made her way into one of the round huts.

The first kiss happened over the pool table. Charlie was pinned beneath Josette. "Little miss thing!" an irritated woman snapped at her, chalking her cue. "I know this is Carnival time but have some manners and go find yourself in a guest house!"

Charlie, flustered, managed to get Josette off of him, whom had clung to his chest like a locked-jaw pitbull. She let out a girlish giggle as she lifted his jersey and traced her fingers along his chest hair.

Domingo took baby steps into the hut. No light in it but the moonlight and the fires from the distance. At the tip of the hut, where the canes thatched into a cone, was a hole where a single beam of glimmering moonlight was allowed to enter. Standing at this spotlight was Madinina, at the center of the circular hut, where each *zemi* faced, as if they were all worshipping *her*. He stepped up towards her. Their chests touched. Their palms touched. Their fingers entwined. Their eyes transfixed in the dark. He kissed her flat forehead. She kissed his mustache.

After five torrid kisses, Charlie noticed that Josette's watermelon bubblegum was now in his mouth, sour now from the acidic tang of beer and rum. She had taken their affair from the bar to the car park, clasping his wrist, her nails digging into his skin like parrot's talons onto a shoulder, between the back row of cars and the piss-stained walls. Both of them sat on the concrete. "No one going to see we here," she said, looking around before sitting in his lap.

"I dunno if I want to do this," Charlie said, his heart beating fast.

She put her finger on his lips and shushed him. We girl was going to get what she wanted, whether it wanted to be got or not. She took off her top. Charlie shut his eyes tight. "We will get caught, you know," he said, "We shouldn't be doing this. Let's get back in—" She grabbed his face and kissed him silent. His hand trembled along her mid-riff.

Domingo laid Madinina down on the cotton blanket. Him completely nude, her still in her sash. She lifted her waist from the ground and untied it, throwing it aside. He covered her loins with kisses.

Josette slipped Charlie out of his shirt and sucked on his collarbone, working her way down to his navel. "We going to get in trouble," Charlie said. She began to undo his belt, fumbling drunkenly. He prayed that she would be too drunk to unloop it. "No, no, no, no, no," he said. "We going to get in plenty trouble if somebody sees." She unhooked the belt and unbuttoned his jeans. His zip went down with double speed. He gnashed his teeth, his muscles getting tense.

Domingo held Madinina in his arms, rubbing his palms over her back as they made love sitting up.

Josette said with a smirk, "You gon like what I could do," and licked her lips.

"No, Josette, no, no, no," Charlie said, shaking his head, flailing his lower body.

"Stop moving," she said.

He wanted to throw a tantrum. He wanted to yell, even though no one would hear over the booming music coming from

the bar. "Who are you today? Fernando Luna?" she said. He was surprised she could remember that. "Fernando Luna. Conquistador. How much Spanish women you bull already, conquistador?"

Madinina moaned into Domingo's ear words he did not understand. He did the same in hers. Love songs in their breaths blending with the howling wind peeping through the doorway. They matched their rhythms to the drums and gongs in the distance. The crickets chirped and the cicadas trilled. The cacique merrily cackled away outside.

"No, no, no, no, Josette, no," Charlie continued, but to no avail, wondering why, *oh why*, he thought this would be less depressing than reading *The Bell Jar* with a flashlight. She pulled his jeans down to his ankles. To her disappointment, there was no bulge through his shorts. But she could work on it, she thought. Like a mechanic would know how to fix a car, like a technician would know how to re-wire circuits, she would know how to get any limp cock back into motion.

She pulled the front of his underwear down and took the shaft into her mouth, sucking, licking in circles. This was one vehicle she could drive home while drunk. Tears leaked down the sides of Charlie's eyes as he thumped the back of his head against some car's number plate.

Madinina bit Domingo's shoulder, drawing blood from it. He propped his torso up with one hand and used the other to grab her neck. She arched her neck and gagged. She came. Then he came.

Josette took Charlie's penis out of her mouth and looked at it. Not the faintest sign of turgidity. She examined it like a mechanic would a broken engine. Maybe she was too drunk. Maybe he was too drunk. Maybe he was nervous to be doing it outside. Maybe what she was holding was just the carcass of a penis. He squirmed and kicked his feet.

She decided to try again. As soon as her head went down, he slammed the back of his head against the car trunk, activating the alarm. He scrambled to get to his feet, his shoe soles grating against the concrete. He hooked his belt and zipped up his pants and he didn't run, he walked, like one would walked away from a crime scene. When he was gone, she realised how exposed she was. In a car park. By some bar. Under a small wall light.

She put on her top. She called his name but he didn't come back.

Madinina begged her father, the cacique it turned out, to let Domingo stay so he granted them the piece of land known as St. Joseph. Madinina bore Domingo's baby while he left for Guyana in search for El Dorado. His throat was gashed by the Kalinago there.

Josette had sex with an American tourist on Carnival Tuesday. As he laid on top of her, she looked at the motel ceiling fan. Her head spun with it. She was too drunk to feel anything and cried the next morning while taking her morning shower.

Charlie stayed home and finished *The Bell Jar*.

Charlie got up from his bed and went to his mother's bedroom. He pulled the photo album down and flipped through

it. He skimmed the pictures of Petra. He slipped one out and observed it. He compared her features to his and observed the similarity in their cheekbones and nose.

She made a good Petra.

But made an even better Sadie.

-6-

Yasmeen's Visit

"She really burn all the letters, girl?" Shannon asked.

"Didn't pay no mind to it," Soraya said, her shoulders shrugged beneath her robes, "Whole thing was stupid, though. But good while it lasted."

Soraya flicked her toes against a clump of knot-grass. Shannon leaned forward and pressed her palms into the chain-link fence that separated their houses. An old sprinkler struggled behind her, rotating jerkily like a clock's second hand. "Claude Laurent," Shannon said in a bad French accent. "I wonder if he going to write any more letters here. I was interested to see how it would end up. You know, as repayment for letting some strange Frenchman inside my mailbox."

Soraya shook her head. "I said, it was stupid. It couldn't end any other way. What you was expecting? Some dashing prince with a rose between his teeth to come flying in on a helicopter, hovering over my house and lowering a ladder for me to climb up and we'd fly off over the Atlantic?"

"If only." Shannon paused for a moment. "How she find the letter? I thought you say you have a top secret hiding place. She was sweeping under the floorboards or something? Dusting the cobweb on the ceiling and find your lil secret passageway?"

"I forgot it in one of my textbooks. Lucky, she didn't know where the others were."

"I expected you to be more angry over all of this."

Soraya glowered at her. "I *am* angry. I have *no door*."

"That is just wrong," Shannon said, then mused, "No door. I can't even imagine that. No door. That just wrong."

Soraya shrugged. She could've told Shannon was beginning to feel the pity. The hopeless pity. The way the spring would pity the autumn. Shannon, with her contented parents, her assortment of *Revlon* and *Avon*, her boyfriend of two years, her CD collection proudly displayed on her shelf, her *door*. She had no choice but to feel guilt. She looked at Soraya and offered, "I'll really keep mailing the letters for you if you want me to."

"It's over!" Soraya snapped.

A grey Nissan sedan pulled up in front Soraya's house. Both of them turned their eyes to it. The door opened and a sandal set on the ground. Then another sandal, then the burka floating down over them. As the girl closed the door, she

checked her face in the side-view mirror and smiled. She opened the gate and waved to Soraya as she made her way across the stone walkway between the lawn.

"Who's that?" Shannon asked.

"Yasmeen. My cousin," Soraya said. "I'm not sure why she is here. I should go see."

As Soraya entered the house, she saw Haseena shaking Yasmeen's hand and smiling.

"Assalamu alaikum," Yasmeen said.

"Walaikum as salaam," responded Haseena.

But she does not repeat this for Soraya.

"Soraya! Hello!" Yasmeen instead exclaimed, beaming under her green hijab. Her smile so big that her cheeks curved over her eyes. She held Soraya's palm and gently sandwiched it with her own. Her fingertips warm as they caressed the ball of Soraya's wrist.

"How are you?" Yasmeen asked her.

As Soraya stared in Yasmeen's eyes, she felt like the autumn again to Yasmeen's spring. Yasmeen, with her cat-shaped eyes, her longer legs, her determination to stay on the *Straight Path* and the respect that was given to her by everyone, including Haseena. The *good* cousin.

And Soraya suddenly realised the purpose of this visit. But she did not condemn it. Better her cousin than the imam with steely eyes and writing Koran penance. Though she didn't like to admit it, in her letters to Claude Laurent, Soraya had imagined herself looking like Yasmeen in the passages of smut she wrote

for him. The fantasy belly-dancing Arabian-descended island princess. Not seventeen. But nineteen in this case.

"Good," Soraya responded. "Cramps, though."

"I'll leave you two to talk," Haseena said, exiting the room.

"Your room, then?" Yasmeen said. Soraya nodded.

Yasmeen walked into her room and raised her eyebrows at the missing door. "They thought it was a fire hazard?" she quipped. Soraya giggled, then sat on her bed, propping herself up on her folded legs. Yasmeen's gaze immediately landed on the bookshelf, as if she already knew about the P volume.

"No secrets," she said, still looking at the shelf. "Your mommy told me what happened. I'm here to make sure you are kept in good hands. First thing I'd like to know is..." she checked outside before whispering, "Was the Frenchman hot?"

Soraya smiled in astonishment. But she stayed mindful of Yasmeen's motives. Genuine curious girl-talk? Or an overt attempt to extract information from a interrogation trickery?

Yasmeen said, "You always are so quiet! I didn't know you had that in you. I bet you wrote some really nasty things, didn't you?"

Soraya did not answer.

Yasmeen kept on, "You have a boyfriend too? I bet you do. What is his name?"

Soraya said nothing.

"You're not going to tell me?" She sat in Soraya's desk chair and swivelled in it. "I know we haven't spoken in a while but we used to be so close."

"I know." Soraya was brusque.

Yasmeen stopped swivelling and faced Soraya. Her tone was serious now. "You think I'm going back to tell your mother all of this? I'm not going to sell you out. I really want to know what is going on with you."

Soraya played with her toes.

Yasmeen rolled up beside the bed. "I'm here because I don't want when you have to go out with who you want to go with, for your mother to be there standing over your shoulder, fixing your hijab every five minutes. I told her if she wants me to go instead, I would take you." She paused. "You think I agree with them taking down your door? I am on your side."

"I don't believe you," Soraya told her flatly. "You know I don't. You were always the good one. Going to mosque every Friday. Saying all your prayers. I tired about hearing about your scholarship. Keeping all the boys away, even though you could probably have any one. I only keep them away because I have no other choice – "

"– Not true –"

"– And your first question to me is about the *Frenchman*? My romantic life –"

"– so you have a romantic life? –"

"– is nobody's business but mine! Those letters used to keep me happy. The whole thing was stupid. It was never going to happen in real. Look, I don't want to talk about it anymore." She looked away and looked at the bookshelf with watery blinks. She grabbed her niqab and wiped her eyes with it.

"Soraya," Yasmeen sighed. She pedalled backwards with the chair and peered out the room to see if Haseena was nearby. She wasn't. "Soraya, I don't know if that is what you really think about me, or if that is the cramps talking, but look up."

Soraya raised her head. Her eyes were puffy and red. Yasmeen traced a finger along the base of her own hijab, slowly lifting it. The motion was almost sexual. She lifted it just above her collar to reveal a deep red mark. A rufescent bite-mark, fit to be left by the most fiery of soucouyants. Soraya's eyes widened. She shifted closer to the edge of the bed.

She had to inspect it, like a doctor.

But before she could, Yasmeen concealed it again behind the hijab.

"I am on your side," Yasmeen said. "Now, do you have a boyfriend?"

Soraya paused. Then answered, "No."

"Have you ever had one?"

"No."

"We will have to change that. Won't we?" Yasmeen said.

She swivelled in the chair once again, her face pointed to the ceiling. She said, "Do you know what I think heaven should look like? It's a palace. It's a golden palace in the shape of a city that sits floating on a neverending sea. We die and we wake to find ourselves on the boat that carries us to that shore. A majestic vessel that is helmed by a woman who stands seven feet tall and she shouts commands to the men. Row. Row. Row. When we

arrive at the shores, we take off our robes. These filthy robes. And we take our first dip in the waters of heaven."

Yasmeen grinned, greatly pleased by her own affinity for the English language, pulling the most colourful of phrases and metaphors from learnt poetry and literature. Her eloquence intimidated Soraya. She continued, "We can already hear the music from the city. Giant pinwheels and streamers adorning carriages going there. The cracked sidewalks are lined with faulty flickering streetlamps. The buildings tall and silent and abandoned."

She stopped swivelling and gazed into Soraya's eyes. She continued in an excited whisper, "And in the palace? Colossal discotheques. No more hijabs. No more abayas. We wear heels and low-cut dresses now. We show skin now. And everybody's there. The Hindu girls rub skins with the Muslim boys. Rabbi, imam, archbishop, nun, Indian, African, Caucasian, Chinese, Taino. None of that matters here. We all toast and drink. And we get fucked up."

"Heaven will never look like that," Soraya said. "We will never end up in a heaven like that."

"I end up there," Yasmeen said. "Every Friday night. Heaven. But in Trinidad, we call it Club Eden."

-7-

The Rise and Fall Of Sandy Grande

Ashu hunched over on the edge of his bed. He clutched a piece of paper in his hand. He had known how paranoid she always was about the cardboard box under her bed. But he couldn't help himself. Couldn't help his hands from rummaging through it. He found nothing but his own love letters, trinkets and, to him, arbitrary newspaper clippings. He was about to give up when he spotted the handwriting that was neither his, nor hers.

Whoever it was, they was too smart to sign their name. Muffled kaiso sounds from the neighbour's radio. The picture of Shala sat at his bedside table, poised sideways in a white

sundress with her left hand bent at the elbow. Her head facing front with her lips puckered to kiss the air. He picked up the picture and studied it for a while before putting it away in his drawer with the old cinema ticket stubs and crumpled up bank statements.

He opened the piece of paper in his hand and peruses it again.

"That's right," her voice whispered in his ear. "Maybe for a whole year now. Not sayin with who. How you like me now?"

Ashu looked up at the mirror again at Shala hovering over his back. A phantom Shala. A *jumbie* Shala. She was wearing her elbow and knee pads. A dried unanimated trickle of blood stained her temple.

"You see my helmet anywhere, Ashu?" she said.

"Not once I even thought bout doing this to you," Ashu told jumbie Shala.

"Not once?" she asked, resting her head on his shoulder. "Not after all the uncomfortable silences we shared in the past couple years? Not after all the movies you went to see by yourself without even telling me. Not after that night you nearly slapped me after you called me a *cunt* You remember that?"

"The things you used to tell me. You *were* a cunt."

"And what bout now?"

"A victim," he said.

She laughed and kissed his cheek.

"Who was it?" he asked.

She yawns. "For real? That really matters to you? What you goin to do? Find him and give him a cut-ass? Oh, please. Remember the graduation party in Port-of-Spain when you let that mongoloid man manhandle me? He had his hands all over me and you just stood there and watched. What happened? You probably liked that."

"I want to know who."

"Listen," she said. "Why that even matter now?" She paused. "All right. It was with nobody you know. And it happened mostly when you was pulling all-nighters for exams."

"Tell me what he looks lie."

"You serious, Ashu?"

"Answer the question."

"Tall. About six feet. Medium build but fit. Short, cropped hair. Normal brown complexion. Used to mostly wear fitted foreign button-down shirts and these stupid shades. He wasn't very smart. Not smart like you. Didn't expect him to be when I first approached him – yeah, it was I who approached him."

"Club Eden?" Ashu asked.

"Yes. I know you find clubs incredibly boring."

"What did you wear?"

"Everything you hate. The black rayon low-cut dress and the pink dangle earrings."

He scoffed. "Trashy hooker dress."

She continued, "Heels. Eyeshadow for the smoky-eye look. Small, sparkly barrettes in my hair. I put on some lip gloss and dashed some body glitter on my collarbones."

"What happened on the first night?"

"The first night, we made out in the car park. *Madonna* on the radio. The boy was driving a fancy car, you know."

"What happened after?"

She said, "He placed his palms on my chest and cupped my breast. I got wet. I reached my hand down my jeans and stretched my zipper down slowly. He was rubbing his fingers against the front of the V-shape that my panties made from behind my jeans."

"You was drunk?"

"No. I was fully aware of what I was doing. But after *he* had a Vodka Red Bull, two Rum and Cokes and that screwdriver, seatbelts became useless. I was totally upfront with the boy with what I wanted. No emotional connection. Nobody goes to a club to look for emotional connection anyway. Just the physical."

He took a deep breath and uttered, "I was right. You're really a cunt."

She smiled and continued, "And I gave him blowjobs at the cinema. Don't worry. We never talked bout you. But he tasted like you but with a tinge of pineapple." She covered her mouth with her palms and giggled.

"Is all of this true?"

Her giggle swelled into a thunderous laugh. "So naïve and adorable!" She kissed his cheek again. "No!"

"No?"

She hopped in front of him and knelt before him. Then looked up with doleful eyes. "Yes, it's true." She paused. Then smiled once more. "No, it's not. Yes. No. Yes. No. Who cares?"

"You're confusing me."

"Who cares, you caveman? And who cares about the details at this point? I am the villain here? You mightn't even see me again."

Ashu sulked. Shala wrapped her arms around him. He murmured against her neck, "Fourteen years. We have fourteen years worth of history, girl. And maybe that is too much."

She looked at him, her lips separating in slow dread. She seethed. "Ashutosh Shah, you must be *crazy* to be talking this pack of horseshit! I cheat on you, yeah, but that was totally physical. You used to ignore me. You *still* ignore me. Sometimes I could swear you fall off the Earth and spirited yourself up to your own planet. We lacked communication, boy, the uncomfortable silences would last for *weeks*."

"Pathetic." Much emphasis on the *th*.

She went quiet. She retracted her arms and bit her lower lip and her eyes welled up with tears. Still on her knees, she spoke, her voice trembling, "I kept the petals."

He lied down on bed and cleared his throat. "I saw."

"I kept everything, you know."

"Me too."

She climbed into bed with him. They both fixed their eyes to the ceiling. "You don't love me anymore?" she asked.

"Does it matter?" he said. "You can love someone and leave them."

She inched closer to him and put her palm on his stomach. She said, "Fourteen years is not too much. Babe, that is more than a good bit of married couples. We married, you know. It have no certificate or witnesses or wedding album with pictures of my drunk uncle shaking your hand vigorously. But you're my husband. You think you could just leave me high and dry like that? Without knowing the whole story? Without the marriage counselling? And the trial separation? I know what I did to you should be illegal. And I should give *you* half my belongings. Right here, right now. But I was bored, boy. So very bored. *You* can be real boring sometimes."

"Yeah. I also don't fuck other people."

She let her palm slip down the side of his stomach and hit the bed. Her lip quivered. "Did I? How bout some benefit of the doubt? Even for pity's sake? I don't deserve a little of that? Since I get kidnapped and probably being raped by some man with a cutlass to my neck right now."

A great wave of guilt suddenly washed over Ashu.

He turned his neck to her and tried draping his arm around her bosom but she slapped it away and sat up in bed. She spoke in a grave, defeated tone, "You want to picture me being with someone else? Picture the bruises on my back as it scraping against the raw ground. Picture the dirty handkerchief stuffed halfway down my throat." A semi-transparent trail of snot dribbled from her left nostril.

Ashu sat up cross-legged on the bed and looked at her.

She mumbled, "Maybe this is what the gods probably feel I deserve after disobeying the sacred oaths of our marriage."

"We made no oath, Shala," Ashu said.

"Yes we did," Shala said, "So many times. Remember when we was nine and you was rolling me around in the wheelbarrow tryin to bounce the chickens and not bounce the chickens at the same time? And I told you I would marry you if you rolled me up the tall hill? I say, *Ashu, roll me up that hill and I goin to marry you.* And you nearly keeled over but you rolled me up that hill. We coulda call ourselves married since that day."

"We didn't know anything bout oaths back then. That was puppy love."

"That was *resolute* love, Ashu. A lil boy pushing a lil girl up a hill in a wheelbarrow. What happen to that?"

He was quiet for a moment, a wistful look glazing his eyes. He chuckled. "Remember when we was eleven, after Common Entrance exams," he said. "My family rented that house up Manzanilla Beach and you came and we build a sandcastle together. We spent *whole* day on that sandcastle. And it was still ugly," Shala laughed. "And we made up this whole backstory for it. You remember what we named it?"

She smiled weakly. "Sandy Grande. The kingdom of Sandy Grande. You say being King was boring, You woulda rather be a knight. But I say, forget that—I still want to be Princess."

"And what Princess would like a lowly knight like that?"

"Well, the knight would have to prove he isn't lowly but the bravest knight in all the land."

"So the knight just settled with admiring the fair Princess from afar. Until one day, the wizard – what was he name? – the wizard, Vlad, would come down from the mountain and kidnap the Princess."

She laughed and said, "I remember you even build the mountain! What a plot twist! And the King would send his knights to rescue her. But Vlad would annihilate their asses like nothing. So the brave knight, Ashu, stood up one day with his broad-sword. Ready to die for his liege."

He said, "And he made his way up the mountain and defeated Vlad. The Princess threw her arms around the brave knight and give him a great big kiss on the cheek. But evening came and they would rest before goin back to the castle."

She said, "Tragedy would strike during the night. When they would wake up the next day, they would discover there was no more mountain. The castle and the mountain gone. No trace of any of it. Vanquished by the high tides. The kingdom of Sandy Grande totally wiped out. The King and Queen dead. Long live the King and Queen. The Princess would weep but the knight consoled her."

He said, "The Princess would become the new Queen and together, they said they would rebuild the kingdom, and she would marry him and he would be the new King. And so they did."

She said, "She said they had nothing but each other left and would not do anything to destroy that."

He said, "Then she crossed her heart..."

"...and hoped to die," she finished, her skin turning pale and her throat going dry.

-8-

Pretty-Boy

Jai rode up to the driveway two hours later than expected and switched off the ignition. The engine, along with Buju Banton's raspy voice from the radio, came to a halt. Mr. Bhanji sat on the living room couch with his sleeves rolled up and smoked like a factory. Averting his eyes to the door, he muttered, "Jai, I thought you tell me you was coming home two hours ago? Where you was?"

"Met up with some of the boys, sir."

Mr. Bhanji pushed the cigarette against the ashtray and said, "I thought we had a deal? You want me to think you get into another *incident*?"

"No, sir."

Jai seldom lied to Mr. Bhanji. But this was one of those rare times. He wasn't out with the boys. He was disappointed in his father for believing the fib.

As Jai had walked out from the puja, he strolled past the line of cars lining the street. All of them empty. Save for one. Jai looked at the boy inside. Some muscle beneath his saga-boy clothes. Sharp jawline. His face looking permanently swell-up. Hair cut so low as to be velvety to the touch. A silver stud in his left earlobe. And to be honest, this fair Indian pretty-boy, who was observing the puja from afar, looked too young and underprivileged to be sitting at the wheel of a silver Lexus IS 250, all-wheel drive, 8-speed automatic transmission with rims adorn with twinkling lights on the spokes. He and Jai exchanged glances. There was an apprehension in the boy's eyes. Jai kept staring.

Badman doh look away first.

Pretty-boy was the first to look away, but kept Jai in his periphery.

Jai walked off. He turned around and saw Pretty-boy checking out the rear view mirror. The Lexus engine started and pulled off suddenly. Jai made sure to catch a good look at the driver's plate number. He hopped into his car and started it. He waited until the Lexus was further down the street before pulling off. He followed him out of Arouca and tried to keep two cars behind him on the Eastern Main Road. He followed the Lexus right into St. Joseph, and into a semi-affluent neighbourhood. But not affluent enough for such a fine automobile, Jai thought.

The Lexus pulled up to a gate. As Pretty-boy rode up to the driveway and made his way inside, Jai circled the street before parking at the side of the road. He shut off his headlights and studied the house.

He thought, *This motherfucker would come all the way from St. Joseph to just sit in he car and look at a puja from afar? And buss it before it even done because someone give him a funny look?*

Jai figured he would stay for a while. Maybe an hour. Just to see if any new faces showed. A sour taste developed in his mouth. He chewed some mint gum. He sat and waited.

Back during the incident, Jai's legs would grow restless quickly. He would start tapping his fingers. He would start to rock back and forth. He would try to arch his back and try to whirl his arms. He needed to stretch his legs. He needed to kick his legs.

He kept rocking back and forth. The blood rushed to his head until his veins swelled. Light seeped through the crocus bag. He couldn't tell the minutes from the hours anymore.

He shuffled.

Little signs of hope slipped past his ears. The tittering of a rat – a rat that could've summoned its family to gnaw through the ropes. A band of songbirds that could have flailed about into the room and pecked the men's eyes out. The distant whirring of a helicopter – though he wasn't ever sure if it was really there. Or if he just wanted it to be there.

Someone lifted the crocus bag. Then Jai felt something cold prodding against his lips, as if giving them slight icy pecks. "Water," a voice said.

Jai parted his lips and lapped it up. The water was lukewarm, not as he had expected. Only the steel pitcher was cold. The man pulled away the pitcher.

"More," Jai pleaded.

"Dread, you feel you in a position to make demands?" a man grunted.

"Doh do the boy so," another man said. "If he want water, give him."

"Open your mouth," the first man said. Jai complied and felt a rubbery tube like a dead fish settle on his lips. The men laughed. Warm salty liquid spilled out of it. Jai drank at first before retching.

The man exclaimed, "Like he like the pee, boy!" Jai spat the urine out of his mouth and swallowed back his vomit. "I bet you wishing hard for a dinner mint right now!"

Back to present. Jai popped another mint into his mouth. Mr. Bhanji said, "You call when you coming home. You tell me where you going. If I call, you answer the phone. I don't care if you with the boys. I don't care if you in the noisiest part of the club and you cannot hear my ass. You *will* go outside if you have to and stand in the line all over again to get back in. I don't care if you in the middle of a lapdance, you push that bitch offa you and *answer the fuckin phone!* I getting through to you, boss?"

"Yes, sir. It will not happen again."

"Good. Go in your room."

Jai looked at the newspaper on his desk. He was afraid that someone would have moved it. He sat on his bed and glanced at the front page. The one with the headline in big, red and bold, reading BICYCLE CHAMP GOES MISSING, accompanied by a picture of her grieving parents. The mother absolutely destroyed. The father less so. The in-set featured a stern headshot of Vishala that looked like it had been scanned from her National ID card.

Hard to believe this smile-less girl was the same as the one beaming on her bicycle.

"Do I look pretty?" the in-set photo speaks to Jai.

"Not exactly my type. But yes."

"I wonder if I would still look pretty after them men done with me."

"If it comforts you, they had their way with me too. And I still don't look half-bad. They break my nose and buss my mouth. And, a year later, can't even tell. Scar tissue is always stronger than regular tissue."

She laughed and her phantom emerged in his room. The smiling bicyclist version. And she had her helmet this time. "I hope they go easy on me. But then again, I shouldn't expect no chivalry from them good-for-nothings."

"I went to your puja."

"Yeah?" She raised her eyebrows. "How my family holding up?"

"Not good," he said.

She sighed and turned her face down to the carpet. "They think I done for?"

"Can't tell."

"Do you think I done for?"

"Absolutely not. I'm goin to get them. I promise I goin to fight them with every inch. Til blood comes out my eyes."

"You want to rescue the princess." She nodded and paused, before telling him, "Remember I have a boyfriend. Is not like you could fight your way through the dungeon, slay the evil dragon and expect to have the princess' hand in marriage after."

"Marriage is for suckers," he said. "I just want the Princess to be alive."

"Or you probably just want to see the dragon dead," she added.

He takes a bow. "At your service."

"There should be more people like you, Jai."

"Being kidnapped was the best thing that happen to me," he said, putting his palms on her cheeks and said, "I'm dying now. You know that? But when you're dying, you can do anything you want."

"What do you mean—you're dying?" Her voice cracked.

"If nobody *do* anything, there will *always* be a wedding and a party missing one guest. I love you and, right now, there is no greater purpose in life than to help you."

Her voice broke into a whisper. "Time is running out."

They shared a kiss. But it was soon interrupted by a knocking and his bedroom door sliding ajar. Mr. Bhanji poked his head in.

"You know I not tryin to give you hell, right?" he said.

"No, sir." Jai got up from his knees and sat on his bed.

Mr. Bhanji shook his head. "What I going to do with you, Jai?"

"Don't give up on me, sir."

-9-

The La Diabliesse Of Edinburgh Village

Charlie walked out of his house to find Sargeant sitting beside his gate, chewing his spit and wearing his same old suit jacket and khaki cargo pants, with his boonie hat tilted over his eyes to block out the morning sun. He tipped it at Charlie.

"Einstein, my boy!" he said hastily. "So late you does get up? Is like eight o' clock. I say scientists would like to start their experiments early in the morning."

"No experiments today, doc," Charlie said.

"Good," Sargeant said, getting up. "Because I want you to help me with one. Where you headed?"

"Just taking a walked."

Sargeant urged, "Come take a walked with me." And before Charlie could say anything, Sargeant was already off, with a haste uncharacteristic of the deep-voiced, slow-talking old man.

Charlie followed.

They walked the length of Collins Trace, past the music vendor pushing his speaker cart down the road. He was calling out to the people around, "Mr. Vegas! Bounty Killa! Movado! Brand new tunes! Good quality!" while booming Buju Banton.

Boom bye bye / Inna batty bwoy head / Rude bwoy no promote no nasty man / Dem haffi dead / Boom bye bye

Sargeant grumbled, "Young people makin so much damn noise in my ears so early in the morning."

They walked past two large water towers and across a grassy sward. Charlie kept close behind Sargeant. It reminded him of trying to keep up with a dog that had picked up a strong scent. They stopped at a coppice behind a house. A chain-link fence separated the bushes from the barren backyard. Barren, except for a pile of rusted car parts and two malnourished palm trees. The house itself was propped on a raised concrete foundation with three steps leading up to the back door.

Sargeant strained to look to the side of the house. He tried for a long time. Charlie looked at him, expecting him to say something but he didn't. After a minute, Charlie finally asked, "What we lookin at, doc?"

"They keep it there. In a cage at the side of the house. The monstrosity she import from Guyana," Sargeant replied, still

straining. "It have no way one of these coulda be found in Trinidad.

Then he added with disappointment, "I had a feelin she wouldn't let that beast out in the mornin, you know."

Charlie winced, trying to see if he could peer through the grate, but it was too dark. "It sleeping," Sargeant said. "It roam the yard whole night. It turn back into a human. It tired now. You can barely see it in the night, it so black. All you seeing is eyes and teeth. That thing could bite your hand off with one snap."

"A dog?"

"You think this ole man go be so fraid of a dog?" he said, sucking his teeth, "That thing is a *Lagahoo*, boy. They only have those in Guyana now. Is a man who could change into a hound. It does unleash its fury in the night. They does only let it out in the night, when it in wolf form."

Charlie smiled in the way one would smile at an infant who claimed to see a jumbie under his bed. Sargeant continued, "They import the thing and not feedin it properly. If that thing ever get loose, it goin to have real trouble in this neighbourhood."

Charlie asked, "So, who import it?"

"The owner of this house," Sargeant said, "is a damn *La Diabliesse*."

The plot thickened. And Charlie said nothing of it.

"You know what a *La Diabliesse* is, right?" Sargeant asked. "I know Albert Einstein wasn't no expert on Caribbean folklore."

"Well, I thought all of those migrated to Suriname and Jamaica."

"No, boy. Where you hear that foolishness? A couple years ago I met up one quite in East. Boy, if you see that woman with she bright eyes and sassy clothes. The long dress coulda barely hide she horse hoof. She come up to me and ask me to take her home by me. But when a La Diabliesse ask you that, you never reachin home. They goin to find you dead in a river instead. I didn't figure she was a La Diabliesse at first – this East woman – but I figure out the scheme soon enough. So I took off all my clothes, flip them inside-out and put them back on. That is the only way to get away from the La Diabliesse."

Charlie stifled a laugh. He said, "So one living right here in Edinburgh Village? And she have a pet... what is it?"

"Lagahoo, boy."

"So a La Diabliesse living here with her pet Lagahoo. We shouldn't be here then. What if they come out to get us? We mightn't be able to turn out clothes inside-out and put them back on in time."

"Better stay away from here tonight too. Don't want things to look suspicious."

They made their way out of the thicket.

Sargeant spoke, "I don't think it have a way to kill a La Diabliesse. Our best bet would be to expose she somehow and call the police. You helpin me, right, Einstein? You be the brains, I go be the muscle."

Charlie concocted the persona immediately. He had to continue the legacy of his father Ashram Singh, a devout world-travelling Hindu holy man turned soucouyant-slayer known for his flamboyant apparel. A large-brimmed Stetson hat fitted over a blood-red bandana and a face mask with stitched starburst motif. Lace-front boots and thick burgundy gloves. On his torso, a long leather coat with a black cape draping over a a leather vest sporting five metal clasps. In the coat, an arsenal of knives, throwing stars and little vials of tonics, ethers and elixirs. Straight from Bangladeshi black markets.

"Someone takin J'ouvert a lil too serious this year," the people said when they first saw Singh stroll into Chaguaramas with his large suitcase. The word was that a mystical fire-breathing creature lurked on a small island off the north-west coast of Trinidad and Tobago.

It was a ball of flame, Singh had been told, flying without a wind.

Singh checked into a guest house. The young pretty clerk showed him to his room. He offered to carry the suitcase himself, claiming that very sensitive material was inside. She watched him set the suitcase on the bed and open it. He rummaged through maps, old journals bookmarked with withered leaves, medallions and old religious charms. Tiny ampoules of coloured liquids and a plethora of knives were carefully strapped to the inner roof of the suitcase.

But it was the large silver revolver that made the clerk tremble.

She cleared her throat and said, "You can't have—"

Singh lifted his head, surprised that she was still there. "Tip?" he said, reaching into his pocket.

"No, no. It's fine—that's quite an inventory you have."

He laughed. "You're looking at the gun. Promise not to tell anyone?"

"I just don't want to be harbouring a criminal. Or someone who setting out to kill somebody."

He took the revolver out of his suitcase. "What I'm setting out to kill," he said, spinning the cylinder playfully, "is no person, but a beast that doesn't belong in this realm. I, myself, have a beast, a madman and an angel in me. What can you tell me about the ball of fire with—oh, how rude of me, girl. I'm here, chattering away about beasts and angels."

He takes a bow. "I saved a Nepalese child by decapitating the three heads of a hell-hound. I've saved others from such malevolence since then and I pride myself in being the greatest beast-hunter between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. My name is Ashram Singh. And what is your name, dear?"

"Genieve Stewart."

"It's good to meet you, Genieve Stewart." She reached out to shake his hand. He reciprocated. His shake was so firm that she felt his callouses through his gloves. "Now, what can you tell me about the ball of fire that flies in the sky without the wind?"

"The soucouyant," she said.

"Soo-coo-yah," he pronounced slowly. He took out one of his journals, asked her to spell it and scribbled it in with a fountain pen. "What can you tell me about this soucouyant?"

"You better off asking the fishermen, you know. I hear one of them claim to see one about a month ago."

Singh scribbled. "Yes, yes. Thank you, Genieve Stewart. You may go." She was disappointed by his sudden dismissal and, though a major part of her believed everything he said to be chain-up talk, she didn't mind.

She went back to her desk.

An hour later, he came out of his room. He told her he would be back in the night. He came back around midnight, the rum smelling high in his breath. She wrapped an arm around him and supported him as he hobbled to his room.

Genieve was only fifteen but she heard of and admired the sweet deals between some of the local women and the American G.I.'s that passed through Port-of-Spain in the sixties and seventies. Though, this was the late eighties. No rich men landed in the docks anymore. But Genieve caught a proper glance at Singh's wallet and decided he was better than any old American G.I.

"I prepared a meal for you," she told him. He directed his eyes to the bowl of steaming hot chick peas on his desk. *Ganga channa*, the locals called the seductive hex. But it seemed the rum had already done the job. Still, he gobbled down the chick peas.

She locked the door and took off her clothes.

"How much?" he asked.

"Two thousand."

When they were done and she was putting her clothes back on and pocketing the money, the spell broke. "Witch!" He exclaimed, "You poisoned me! You fed me cursed food!"

"We had a deal."

In a rage, he snatched a syringe from his suitcase and lunged at her. She screamed and tried to push him off her. But it was no use. He pushed the needle into her arm and pushed the plunger down.

"What did you just put in me!" Genieve shouted.

He twisted her arm. "It's something I invented I like to call the *Echo's Curse*! You and your descendants will forever be doomed to spend the rest of their lives pining away for love they will never feel! Like the nymph Echo in love with Narcissus, banished to unseen glens and caves until everything but her voice wastes away, only now heard as continuously quieting and continuously ignored cries! You curse me! So I curse *you*!"

The next day, he sobered up and left for the docks in Chaguaramas. Several fishermen told him the day before that they saw the soucouyant zipping across the night sky and circling around Chacachacare Island in the Dragon's Mouth strait north-west of Trinidad. He paid a gap-toothed black man named Saul to take him there on his boat. On the way, he asked, "What business yuh have there, suh?"

"Going to kill the soucouyant there." Singh was curt, still seething from the night before with Genieve.

"Yuh best be carryin some salt with yuh then, suh," Saul said. "Soucouyant dem cah stand salt. I, myself, ent ever see one. But I hear stories."

"That's nice. Just steer the boat." When Saul stopped talking, Singh noticed the music playing from the radio on the boat and twisted his mouth. "What is this music?"

"Calypso, suh," Saul said, "Language of the Trinis."

"It's horrible. Turn it off."

Saul sucked his teeth, but said nothing. When they arrived at Chacachacare, though, after Singh got off his boat, he made sure to say before driving off, "Doh insult my country, boss. Yuh keep it up. I not comin back for yuh ass, yuh hear?"

Singh learned that the soucouyant was hiding in the old abandoned leper colony located in an neighbouring nuns' quarter. He trekked through the bushes until he got there. A dog howled in the distance and the sky grew dark all of a sudden. The rain began to pour over the island. Singh made his way into the nuns' quarters for shelter. Though the last leper had died years ago and there was no other sign of human life following that, the faint scent of talcum powder and thalidomide lingered in the air.

Singh's head pulsed. He knew he shouldn't have downed all that liquor the night before. He began to get sleepy. He made his way into the patients' ward and lied on the bed. He fell asleep by accident. He was dreaming about a bullfight in Spain when a screech sounded. "I-eeeeee!"

He sprang awake, drenched in sweat, to find the ball of fire hovering over him. In the flames, a woman's face emerged.

Flashing crimson eyes shooting waves of cinders. The room glowed in all shades of orange.

He drew knives at her but she cackled.

He pelted his stars at her but they melted in the flames.

He raised religious charms to her. But she torched them and burnt his hands.

"I want your skin!" she howled.

"Come and take it!"

She swooped down onto him. He produced a flask of salt from his suit jacket and poured it all over him. As the fires engulfed him, she screamed in pain. "Come take it with a grain of salt!" he quipped, his skin still burning as the blaze spiralled around him.

"You've doomed us both!" she screamed. The fires flew from around the face and spread throughout the ward. A skinless woman fell on the bed next to Singh. They both lied there, helpless, as the flames swallowed them both.

Singh's last thought was, *I drove stakes into the vampire's heart in Norway. I shot the werewolf with silver bullets in Lithuania. I blasted the Moroccan boogeyman with light beams until he exploded. Who would've thought the great Ashram Singh's demise would've come at the hands of a demon from, of all places, Trinidad.*

Saul came back on his boat the next day but only waited ten minutes before heading back to the docks. Singh's legacy in Trinidad went unspoken of. Genieve found herself pregnant and gave birth to her only child and Ashram Singh's only offspring,

Charlie Stewart. The Echo's Curse was never lifted. She never found love and never married.

And Charlie wouldn't either.

Charlie's skin turned pale. Sargeant asked, "You get yourself lost in a daydream or what, Einstein? I ask you if you gon help me."

"Yes." He spoke softly, retracing the fantasy in his mind once more.

-10-

The Veil

Quiet music filled the store. Girls complained about bosoms being too small and waists being too wide in the adjacent booth. Soraya shuffled her bare feet against the carpet. She stood naked, tiptoed, stretched her arms out and found herself at the peak of her secret mountain she had been denied since her door was removed.

This was why she had found herself completely disrobed in a Fashion Corner joint in the mall. Her pantaloons and abaya robes to her left. A sequin-adorn burgundy bubble dress to her right.

"Hurry up. What's taking you so long? Did you try the clothes yet?" Yasmeen's impatient voice sounded from the other side of the booth door.

Soraya slipped on the bubble dress. She covered her cleft lip scar with her mouth. She smiled beneath her palm. She put on her hijab and opened the door. Yasmeen pouted. "Take off that monstrosity," she said, pointing to the hijab, "before the fashion police lock you up."

Soraya's fingers quivered as she removed it. Yasmeen's eyes lit up. "Sold!" she exclaimed, clapping. Soraya giggled, still standing awkwardly with her hands pointed down and her legs spread apart.

Soraya donned her hijab once more after changing back into her robes.

They checked the dress out and the cashier shot them a condescending look—these two Muslim girls sneaking out to buy clubwear. Probably expecting a full refund the following day when they get caught.

Yasmeen stuffed the dress into her shopping bag.

They purchased two cherry ice lollies and sat on a bench at the center of the food court. "You always have to be careful," Yasmeen told her. "See what you did back there? We spent too much time in there. The other girls can spend hours shopping and trying on clothes. We have to remember we're always being watched. Ten minutes—tops! That's our countdown in a clothes store. I know you never shopped for clothes before. But this is how it goes. In – pick out – try on – admire – decide – cash – bag – out. Ten minutes."

"Sorry." Soraya hung her head down.

Yasmeen rubbed Soraya's knee. "You're just accustomed to living your secret life indoors. You don't know what it's like to have one outside your room. You'll be surprised at the powerful eyesight of a pious Muslim. It's almost inhuman. And how fast word travels among mothers and fathers, and imams." She paused and cleared her throat. "You like everything I bought for you? You like your dress?"

"Yes," Soraya said. "I'm very thankful."

"Friday is the night! Get a little excited!"

Soraya giggled, though nervous thinking about it now.

Yasmeen spoke slowly, "I noticed you're still a little neurotic about your..." and pointed the lolly to Soraya's niqab. "It's nothing to be ill at ease about. But it really made me think and it gave me an idea. I haven't thought of anything brilliant like this in a while." She held the lolly between her lips as she rummaged through her bag.

She produced a square piece of translucent black cloth.

Shiny cotton voile.

"They say virtue wears a veil and vice wears a mask," Yasmeen told her. "I don't think you can know either so quickly by first glance. You can be anybody when you wear this. You want to be the runaway Middle Eastern sultana? Go ahead. You want to be the member of a shadowy assassination hit squad? Who's going to stop you? What's behind the door? The yin or the yang? The lady or the tiger? The most important thing about getting people interested in you is not about giving them the

whole story. It's about cutting it off mid-sentence and letting them fill in the blanks themselves. You understand me?"

Soraya nodded, listening intently.

"I guess the theory works opposite with the hijab and burqa. It's a strange uniform that they say we should wear with pride, though now it's woven from the fear of the Muslim man, Islam knew what it was saying about men when it said women should shroud themselves from men's eyes. Because Islam believes and knows all men to be children. Little volatile boys eternally crossing over into puberty who get overwhelmed with lust at the sight of skin. Can't see something without wanting it. That's what makes it so scary, Soraya. They're children. It's one thing if an adult runs a prison. It's a totally different thing if a child runs it. Some women celebrate wearing the hijab. They say it uplifts them. They feel safe, unpressured and respected in it. I say that is a classic case of Stockholm syndrome."

Soraya asked her, "You don't ever think all of this is wrong? You don't ever feel bad about doing this?" Soraya asked.

Yasmeen shook her head. "Not at all."

"Then why the ruse, girl?"

"You know the answer to that," Yasmeen said. "Living the ruse is *simpler*. I have my clothes store countdowns. You lie about your period so you won't have to go to mosque. It's the same thing. I know your life was easier when you had your door, your privacy and your letters."

They sat in silence and finished their lollies.

Soraya didn't know why but Yasmeen's words make her skin crawl. She could have hardly believed that this was the same dutiful cousin Haseena always sang praises for. The same girl who learned off and reads the scrolls every Eid-ul-Fitr, her eyes diligently moving right-to-left, right-to-left across the Arabic text.

She had her fooled. She had them all fooled.

Yasmeen had to be a Tuesday child.

-11-

At the Troll Bridge

The phone rang, sending Ali into a frenzy. She picked the receiver up in the middle of its second ring. A deep breath of menace on the other side. It was them. She had never heard their voice but she could tell. "Y-Y-Yes?" she stammered, her voice barely emerging.

"Who the fuck is this?" the man exclaimed. He sounded like an angry snake. "Where the money? I will have to cut off some fingers now, eh. Yuh daughter *real* sweet, you know. You think she ever get fuck by a knife before?"

Ali dropped the receiver. And at the same time, her mother and father came bustling from the front yard. Her father picked up the phone. Immediately, Ali's mother summoned her to her room, to which she did not object this time. She shut the door behind her, locked it and crawled under her bed, where she found

the phantom of Shala in her white muslin nightie that stopped at her knees. She lied with her arms crossed over her chest. Her hair was loosened and uncombed.

Ali and Shala lied next to each other in the dark and looked up at the bottom of the mattress.

"We never get a chance to do this under your bed," Shala said. "It was always under mine."

"Your bed was bigger."

"Are you holding up?"

"Barely. Don't want to talk bout it."

With sudden seriousness in her voice, she asked, "Ali, do you like Ashu?"

"I know him since I born. He like a big brother to me—"

"A big brother who getting it on with the big sister," Shala interrupted, laughing.

Ali let out a small chuckle. She continued, "I like what you all had."

"The golden age."

"And I hated what both of you let it turn into. You all was an inspiration to me. If I could believe I could like somebody til I was eighty with my skin hanging off my bones, I would just think bout Ashu and Shala."

"Then came my perpetual sourness."

"You and Ashu, both."

"Good," Shala states in sudden irritation. "You starting to grow up then. That was little-girl thoughts you was having. Barbie doll talk. Time to grow out of the fairytale, girl. Let that

wither from your brain. Let real life be real life and Disney be Disney." Her breaths became more and more wispy. A russet streak printed on her nightie along her leg, leading up to a reddish-brown splotch between her thighs, growing bigger, creeping like an infection.

Ali stopped herself from gasping.

Shala spoke, her tone and inflection unaffected by her bleeding groin, "Who could live happily after all of this?" She turned to Ali. A narrow gash now ran along her cheek. "Your fairytale ends by the troll on the bridge, Ali. The freak that like to ask riddles and not goin to let you pass until you answer them. The first would be how much are the kidnappers asking for?"

"Mommy said they want a million dollars."

"A million dollars? Well, honey, *crapaud smoke my pipe* then. How we gon get together a million dollars? I guess that is the second troll riddle."

"I don't know how to answer."

"The third riddle is even if I get out of this, and they beat me silly til my leg-bones crack – forget the gold trophy – how am I ever even going to ride again? How can any of this ever be good again?" Shala tapped her fingertip against her lips, her knuckles against her chin. "But of course, no use answering unless you can answer the other riddle. Where we going to get a million dollars?"

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Nosebleed

Jai sat on the bar stool, taking very slow sips of his Guinness. To his right, Pretty-Boy was chalking the tip of his pool-stick before pocketing another solid. A soca-chutney song drowned out the clicks of billiard balls. Plastered on the walls were posters of scantily clad local black women. To his left, middle-aged women in sleeveless tops laughed as their arms snaked around balding mustached men who looked like they could be factory floor managers.

Jai sipped his Guinness every minute or so. He would be no use drunk now, he knew. A tight-rope walker couldn't walk the tight-rope when too liquored up. But his thoughts still trailed back to the days when he would drink himself silly and try to rap

Jay-Z's *Hard Knock Life* only to make himself look like a damn fool in front of everybody. And before he could reach the bathroom, he would vomit all over the couch or the carpet. Six Heinekens, a slab of grilled beef, some fries and a hotdog.

Mr. Bhanji would wake up the next day, shake Jai awake and bawl, "What the bloomin' fuck I going to do with you, boy!"

To which Jai would always respond, "Don't give up on me, sir."

It was not until a couple months before the incident that Mr. Bhanji decided that enough was enough. His son was a good-for-nothing, lazy, drunken, reckless, feckless fuck-up. He needed discipline.

Being a proud senior member of the Trinidad and Tobago Target Archery Federation, Mr. Bhanji was biased in his first decision. "It centers you, you know?" he would say, "It's self-motivating." In a sporting store, Mr. Bhanji had bought, at a ten-percent discount, an arm guard, a quiver of aluminum alloy arrows with plastic vane fletching and field-tip arrowheads, and a Browning Compound Bow. He had his eye on the Lemonwood long bow when the clerk had come to him, telling him about the superiority of compound bows to long bows and using terms such as 'cams', 'let-off', 'peak rise' and 'consistent anchor points' as if he didn't know what they meant. He had also purchased a wooden target mount he later set up at the back of his house.

When he came home, he took Jai to their backyard and there, he likened the target mount to a canvas and the arrows as paint. The bow was the brush. "You must use your brush and

paint the canvas," Mr. Bhanji said, an eminent tone of confidence in his voice expressing how impressed he was by his metaphor. "I don't expect a masterpiece because it takes time and practice for that. But try to paint *on* the canvas for now, eh." He did not bother explaining the scoring system of the concentric circles. Instead, he just said, "These circles. Let them *hypnotize* you. Keep your eye on them. They are like an eye watching you."

"But I don't want to shoot out an eye, sir," Jai said.

Mr. Bhanji reflected on Jai's blunt delivery and didn't know if he was joking or not. He gave it no attention. He placed the mount on the grass and nailed the target sheet onto it, all the while saying, "I used to hunt wild meat when I was little. I catch opossum once. Arrow right through the neck. Don't tell anyone that though, eh."

He came back to Jai, took the bow from him and placed the arrow along its string. He stood upright and then placed his legs apart. He closed one eye and, with one graceful shift of his arm, he drew his arrow.

"Pay attention, Jai," he muttered through the corner of his mouth, "This is how a pro does it," and he shot the arrow. Jai watched as it cut through the air, letting out a strange airy whistling sound before it lodged onto the 9-point circle on the target.

Mr. Bhanji showed Jai the method of drawing his bow and the stance his body should be in. Jai held the bow upright. He

pulled his arrow back. It slipped from the string and he hit himself on his nose.

He tried again. He held the bow upright. He pulled his arrow back. He closed his eye and glared at the target. His hand trembled as he held his position. He released the arrow. There was no soaring, no whistle. It fell to the ground.

Jai managed to send the arrow into flight on his sixth try. He managed to hit the target on his thirty-eighth try. His highest score had been a 2. Before seventy tries, his bow and arrow gear had been stored in a corner of his room, gathering dust.

Mr. Bhanji never even touched a guitar in his life before he stroked the mahogany neck of a fine Brazilian rosewood acoustic. It had been at the garage sale of a middle-aged man named Roberts. He saw the advertisement for the garage sale in the Classified section and thought twice when he saw that the area it was in was not the best of villages. But Mr. Bhanji would have preferred something used this time than spending the full amount like last time.

Roberts's hair was unkempt, dreadlocked and already begun to grey. It was his request that Mr. Bhanji stroke the guitar's neck. "Like a woman, eh, boss," Roberts muttered with a desperate and frail smile, "Yuh have to treat she well and she will make you happy. You and she go make beautiful music – even the Virgin Mary would marvel."

"Don't blaspheme," Mr. Bhanji said, quick and straight.

Roberts asserted, "Look here, boss, made outtalk fine Brazilian rosewood. Yuh see this neck? Dat is mahogany. Nylon

strings and steel strings. *Sturdy*, boss. And meh woman tuned already." He played the C scales. "See how she sing in key?" He played the C scales backwards.

"I know nothing about guitars, Mr. Roberts," Mr. Bhanji told him, "but this looks like a fine one."

"It more than fine, boss. This guitar have my very soul in it," Roberts said.

"If it does, why are you selling your soul, Mr. Roberts?" Mr. Bhanji asked, strumming it softly.

"Hard times, boss. It not easy again," Roberts moped. "It's been with me through all my hard times. But I have to learn to let some things go."

Upon hearing this, Mr. Bhanji looked at the guitar again. The flaws in it – a tiny dent on its side, a scratch on the mahogany, little dimples along the spruce soundboard – gave the guitar more character, as if it channeled apparitions of memories and legacies of its own, a vessel for love, joy and heartbreak. Mr. Bhanji looked at those despairing, forlorn eyes of Roberts and then bought his soul right from him.

"What about sheet music? Do you have any?" Mr. Bhanji asked.

Roberts pointed to his head. "Nah, sorry, boss. Everything I ever wanted to play is up in here."

"An instruction manual?"

"Boss, music does teach itself. You gon get the gist of the guitar once you start fiddling with it."

"Okay, thank you. Nice doing business with you, Mr. Roberts."

Music, Mr. Bhanji had thought to himself in the car. Concentration sport might not have worked because Jai was not passionate about it. He seemed to only like track-and-field, running in circles. The boy liked music. Now, he would have the opportunity to play some. Music was different because the reward was instant, he thought. Strum the cords and the music sailed to your ears. It also took less energy.

Mr. Bhanji found a basic instruction manual online, along with sheet music for the nursery rhyme *Mary Had a Little Lamb* and a poor version of Beethoven's *Für Elise*. He printed out the manual and perused it, learning about beats and riffs and frets. He was able to play *Mary Had a Little Lamb* properly just fifteen minutes after that. It was a simple song that mostly used two of the steel strings. Here was a guitar, he thought, that probably lived through the darkest of times and here it was, being reborn, echoing a nursery rhyme, as if as a lullaby to a sleepy child.

Jai was astounded and thankful when he came home and saw the guitar. He immediately took it up and began plucking away at the strings. Though it was inharmonious, Mr. Bhanji was pleased. However, Jai wanted nothing to do with the instruction manual and the sheet music. Even after three days, he was still more anxious over what sound which string made than actually playing a tune.

"This is ridiculous!" Mr. Bhanji finally exclaimed. "This guitar have a man's soul in it and all your ass could do is pluck it

without thinking! You not even holding down the strings when you do!"

"I like the way I playing it!" Jai retorted. A raised voice directed at Mr. Bhanji was a rare occasion. But Mr. Bhanji tried to brush it off.

He said, "Lemme show you how to play the blasted thing!"

Jai pulled the guitar away.

Mr. Bhanji was infuriated now. His hand came flying in a swift arc towards Jai's cheek.

But then something happened.

With a fleetness he had never before displayed, Jai grabbed his father's wrist before his palm could hit him and twisted it before pushing him back. Mr. Bhanji stumbled backward, his feet clunking against the floor before he fell over and knocked his head against the first rung of a bookshelf.

Mr. Bhanji sat on the ground, still dizzy, and looked at his son, looking equally dumbfounded as he sat on his bed, the guitar still seated on his lap. What flabbergasted Jai more was that his father just laughed, patted him on his back and walked away.

The next week, he left a pamphlet on Jai's desk. The front had the words THE KANO DOJO in bold faux-Japanese font. The next page had a summarized biography of Jigoro Kano, the founder of Judo, and a couple paragraphs of Judo. It read, "The techniques of Judo are limitless and the spirit of Judo is sublime. Judo is not about violence. Violence is for the incompetent. Judo is about strength – both physical and spiritual. By training you in

attacks and defenses it refines your body and your soul and helps you make the spiritual essence of Judo a part of your very being. In this way you contribute something of value to the world. That is the final goal of Judo discipline."

The next page was ridiculous. There was a picture of a smiling bald black man with a Colgate smile. The caption introduced him as Sensei Antonio Louis. And below that was a listing of ten rules labelled as the THE CODE OF LOUIS.

1. Falling is permitted, but fall well.
2. A half-way attempt yields much less than a half-way result.
3. You can win against a lion. You can lose against a mouse.
4. You are never too good. Remember why the hare lost to the tortoise.
5. The tightrope walker loses his balance when his mind is not balanced.
6. What you are given, make better.
7. Know when to stop.
8. Try to train on every day that ends with a Y.
9. Water extinguishes fire.
10. The real challenge is being able to survive failure.

Jai laughed. He memorized the list just for laughs. The guys back at *Animé City* would have a field day when they hear about this foolishness, he thought.

Back to present, Pretty-Boy was finishing his pool game. The score had been 3-2, not in favour of Pretty-Boy. He then walked outside and stretched his arms. Jai followed him and leaned against the front of the building.

Pretty-Boy made his way to the side of the building. The unofficial outdoor vomitorium and urinal. Jai followed him, unzipped his pants and observed from the corner of his eye. A lone figure—a shady man—sat on the lowest rung of metallic steps leading to the upstairs section of the pub. Jai forced out the little urine he had in his system.

The graffiti on the wall read, *FOCK YOU!*

Pretty-Boy and the shady man barely spoke but Jai overheard a name being called. Money passed. Then a baggie. Jai shook the rest of the piss out as Pretty-Boy hopped into his car. The Lexus IS 250 with its blinged-out rims.

Jai waited for him to leave, still pretending to shake out piss.

He zipped up his pants and slinked over to the man by the steps. His face was so cleverly hidden in the shadows that Jai wondered if he had positioned himself that way. He wore baggy jeans and a black vest that showed off his biceps. "You want something, boss?" the man asked.

"I want something."

The man waits for Jai to speak.

"I want the name of the fella you just sell to."

The man laughed, sucked his teeth and waved his arm dismissingly. "Boy, go from here. You dunno what you want."

"I know what I want."

The man sucked his teeth again. "Don't be causing no trouble here, nephew."

"You're right," Jai said, smiling, "I gonna leave the trouble-causing to the police."

"I know I ain't hear you say what you just say," the man muttered with a growl. He then stood up and pressed his palm up against Jai's neck. Speaking in whispers now, he hissed, "You want a *knife* up your cunny, faggot?"

He drew a switchblade from his backpocket.

The blade snaps open with a sharp click.

Jai kept his eyes fixed on the man's

Badman doh look away first.

"I not playing," the man hisses.

In a split second, Jai's index and middle fingers shot forward and locked at each side of the man's nose. Locked tight between the knuckles along the cartilage like a pitbull's jaw. He twisted his balled fist slightly to the side and the man blubbered in pain.

Jai hissed at him, "Faggot, I gone through much worse shit your silly ass could ever do to me. So it is *you* who need to realise it is *I* who not playing." Jai twisted his fist again. The man gasped in laboured breaths.

Jai continued, "And if you fuckin move an *eyelash*, I going to twist my fist *right around* and snap off the front of your nose like it was a *bottle-cap*."

The man's eyes watered.

"FUCK!" he yelled.

Jai twisted his knuckles again and said, "You feelin the blood rising up? *Gimme* the name."

The man breathed heavily.

"NAME!" Jai yelled.

"I dunno anything about the boy!" the man blubbered. "All I know is I think he name Giovanni!"

"What the fuck kinda name is *Giovanni*? Nobody in Trinidad name Giovanni. Giovanni what?"

"The *fuck* you askin me, hoss! *Now let go!*"

"Tell me more bout him. What he do for a living? What illegal shit he involved in?"

"*How I supposed to know! Leggo my nose, you going to break it!*"

"I am the one callin shots here!"

"You want to get fuckin *beat*, boy?" a deep voice from behind called out.

Jai spun around and spotted a gathering of three men with grimacing scowls. Bumbling idiot wannabe gangster Indians, he thought. Probably loaded with puncheon. But they were also probably the ignorant-ass type who would have put attacking their weed dealer up there with attacking their mother, Jai figured. These looked like the kind of ignorant Indians who had rusty cutlasses in their car trunks, and Jai wasn't going to take any chance with them.

Jai turned back to the man. "Live long and prosper, *motherfucker*." With those words, he made one swift final

doorknob-opening twist and broke the man's nose before scuttling past the three wannabe gangsters.

Two chased after him. He dashed towards his car.

He fiddled with his car-keys and jumped in, but not before landing his fist into the other man's nose. The man yelped and grasped his face, stumbling backwards and falling into a drain.

Jai sped off, leaving a rising trail of dust behind him.

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Echo's Curse

Charlie Stewart, the illegitimate son of the deceased demon hunter Ashram Singh, wrestled with Echo's Curse for his whole life. The utter inability to find love. He tried to fall in love with the women who crossed his path in his life so far. Nina down by the fishing pond, Rissa under the sapodilla tree, Yvonne sitting quietly at the library lowering her Spanish textbook from her eyes to steal glimpses every once at a while.

Echo's Curse. The grave condemnation. Denying him the set of keys that unlocked the secret doors in the heart chambers. Denying that strong cosmic sensation that ran in the stars—that ran turbulent like a river in the sky, turbulent enough to convert atheist to believer to atheist to believer. Having the dice snatched

from your hands and all he could do was watch others play the board game, watch others pass Go and collect their two hundred dollars.

He spent his hours looking up at the moon and wondering who the fuck was looking at that same moon with the same yearning and feeling the same hopelessness in asking: *Is anybody really out there? Who is out there feeling the shiver of my absence?*

Lying in his room and listening to Nat King Cole sing that line in *Nature Boy*. The famous line, simple in its structure, powerful in its conviction.

The greatest thing / you'll ever learn / is to love / and be loved / in return

It was a curse to fill out forms with the boxes below *Marital Status* and seeing Single, Married, Divorced, Widowed, and already knowing there could only be one thing he could ever, ever tick in his whole life. Because as silly as it sounded, whenever he heard the National Anthem, he thought about that motherfucker who sat down to wrote the last lines, *Here every creed and race find an equal place*, not once, but twice. And how a *certain* few had always been excluded from that.

Echo's Curse. The inability to display love in public—true love—without getting your ass beaten. The inability to desire the Bollywood movie star with the smoky eyes and exposed bodice. And the Venezuelan Miss Universe in her swimsuit. The inability to love the Carnival queens. And the J'ouvert morning sex-pots.

Echo's Curse took hold of Genieve Stewart's life in a different way. The inability to be loved in return. She would sit and mourn the hours wasted on the application of eye shadow and lipstick. Deo from the auto repair shop who could fix anything but their relationship. Secretive withdrawn Keith with his secret wife and daughters. Gregoire who prided himself in wearing brass knuckles and flashing a pistol around whenever he got angry.

After that last one, she realised the true power of the Echo's Curse.

Men just could not love her.

Not enough, anyway.

She never should've lied to Charlie about his father going away, she always thought. It was a lie, but it wasn't a lie. She didn't know the man would never come back. She watched as her words took hold of her son, inadvertently confining him to the front steps of his house for four years. He sat there with his colouring book, crayons gliding off the lines as he glanced up at odd intervals for a silhouette of a man walking up the road with his shirt halfway out of his trousers. A briefcase in his left hand.

And in the briefcase: the elixir. The cure. Echo's Cure.

But the bastard would never come. Colouring book after colouring book. He never showed. Maybe he lost the briefcase, Charlie finally said to himself, and was too ashamed to come back home.

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The Prophet

Haseena's nose nuzzled against the short greying curls of her husband's chest-hair. Her hijab and robes lied on the floor, folded neatly like retired national flags. A cold wind swept the curtains and sprouted goosebumps along her shoulders. He gave her one last thrust before he went wide-eyed, his muscles tightening before spilling his seed into her. She let out a pacifying coo as he collapsed on her breasts.

She rubbed and patted his back, as if burping a big, bearded baby. They lay still for a moment, before he rolled off her and sat at the side of the bed. He turned around to look at her giant chest. The sweat on it formed a salty sheen on her skin.

"Go wash yourself, *habibti*," he said.

She nodded. She took a moment to listen to a church bell from a couple streets down being activated by the heavy night breezes. Still naked, she headed to the bathroom door just a few steps away from her bed.

She turned the faucet and splashed some water on her chest. Then traced her fingers over several small moles along her underarm before noticing, in the mirror, the old man in his sixties sitting cross-legged on the toilet behind her. The newspaper covered his face.

"Assalamu alaikum," he said, his eyes still on the paper.

"Walaikum as salaam, oh *Nabi*," Haseena replied, still looking at him through the mirror.

"Page 46 of yesterday's edition. International news. Entertainment section," the man spoke. "Tsk, tsk. Hollywood again. Another pair of sodomites being paraded like two birds-of-paradise. They call this progress. It's like a bad dream. Jibrail said the same thing."

He flipped through the pages. "I can smell you from here," he said, finally looking up at her. "It was you who had been calling out to me while your husband made love to you. Holding seances in your head during lovemaking, I would say, is not fair to your husband." He set the newspaper down on his lap, looks at her and said, "I'm here now."

"I need your help."

"What dry lips you have," the old man said. "I had thirteen wives. And I kissed them all on the lips. I kissed them all before

and *after* our love-making. Not kissing your wife is a husband's sign of weakness."

She turned around and said, "This family has been showing great weakness these past dark days."

"Is this why you have summoned me to this place of privacy, woman?" he asked, "Is this why I have leaped the tropopause and across the rising spiderweb of ascending souls to come to this house, to this bathroom, on this commode?"

"I appreciate you coming so far in such little time."

"I'm the man." He winked.

She said, "I need you to watch over my daughter, Soraya."

"Ah, yes. Soraya. I remember her file. Not a good Muslim. Impure mind. She will have a hard time when the angels visit her grave to ask her questions before they can wrest her soul from her body. The last time I came here, you were having the same disobedience problem with her. Have you not taught her properly, woman?"

Haseena sobbed quietly. "We have tried our best, Nabi."

"Have you flogged her?"

"Numerous times, Nabi."

"A century ago, I would have said that maybe it is you who needed the beatings, woman. But I cannot blame you now. The child is no longer your child. The child has been forced to enlist with the soldiers of this straying world. There will be time for court martial when the war is over."

Haseena dropped on her knees. "You must help her!"

He tapped the corner of his mouth. "Where were you, woman? Haseena Rahman née Khan, your file is not immaculate either. I have come to understand our Soraya is *haram zada*. Illegitimate child."

She hung her head low, suddenly aware of her nakedness, arching her back and trying to curl into herself.

"Ah, the plot thickens," he said. "You were naked back then just like you are naked now. Reeking of the same semen and worry. Young and stupid. You prayed to me before you made love. Do you remember? Begged me to come down and stop you."

"I remember." Her eyes grew hot.

The old man continued, "I said before perhaps you needed a beating. Perhaps I should have stopped you with a heavy stoning. Now you beg me to come down and snatch your own child away from the swine's teat. Where is your decency, woman? Did a boulder fall from the sky and crush it? Is it suckling on the pig's teat as well? Where is it? Your daughter inherited your sins."

Her eyes welled up. "She is a good girl. She just needs help."

His eyes raised in a scolding crescendo. "Maybe you are the swine, woman. Maybe you are the pig and she has suckled the rancid, spoilt milk from your teat. Maybe she doesn't respect you because she is beginning to see the snout. Or she is just beginning to smell the mud and shit you once rolled about in. A stench like that, no *ghusl* can completely rid off!"

He licked his teeth. He spoke calmly now, "The girl wears her hijab. She wears it proudly. She keeps herself covered. Your Soraya is a paradox indeed. A very odd case for my files. Perhaps she has not been totally lost. Perhaps I need not move her file to my F Ledger. F for *Fasiq*, that is. The child needs the proper education. The child needs divine intervention. She needs me like I needed Jibrail in Mount Hira. I shall appear to her and both of us shall have a chat."

"Thank you, Nabi, thank you. Can you get her back to the Straight Path?"

"I'm the man," he replied with a smirk before vanishing.

Haseena wiped her eyes. She sniffled softly and climbed into the shower. Then she turned the water on to its coldest.

-15-

Symbiosis

Ashu walked into his room, drenched with sweat. He sat on the edge of his bed and massaged his legs. Shala spoke from behind him, "What you been doing so?" She was without the bloody scabs this time.

"It's a surprise," he told her.

"A surprise? For me?"

"Yes. A surprise for you." He turned around and smiled, still squeezing his calves.

"That's enlightening." She folded her arms. "What is the surprise?"

"No." He stretched his legs. "Not yet."

She sighed. "Typical Ashu."

He rested on the bed. She lay next to him. He reached for her shoulder and told her, "We are both incredibly stupid people. We shoulda know we not going to get anyone else in our lives. Why would we fool ourselves? It's always been me and you. It's like you said. We already married. The certificate is just still pending."

She kept her eyes to the ceiling. She muttered teasingly, "What if I want a divorce?"

"I know you. You cannot be lonely. You go crazy. You get a divorce, no chance you gettin remarried. Which fella is going to want to be with a girl who in a relationship since she was seven? How will he ever not feel inferior? Jealousy would run deep. Us being with anyone else would lead to catastrophe. It goin to get to them. In between the silences, the questions would come and come and come. And we going to be forced to answer them. With sickening detail."

"The amount of letter-burning we would have to do," she said, looking at him. She put her palm over his. "We would burn another hole in the ozone layer with all that smoke."

"They would have to label an entirely new spot in the dump for all our memorabilia."

"We always goin to be unhappy, though," Shala told him. :We always goin to be lying to each other and fighting. You always going to avoid me eventually. I always goin to feel trapped with you."

"Doesn't matter," he said. "What matters is that we will die without each other. What we have is symbiotic. We have to

respect our delicate ecology. Whoever it was you was foolin around with need to understand the ecology. Is a mortal sin to cause an imbalance in it. He shoulda fuckin known better. You shoulda know better."

She remained silent.

He continued, "We always goin to be running parallel to each other. We stuck together. I really want to love you. We both stuck here and we should just make the best of it."

"The best of it," she repeated in a monotone.

He continued, "I want to love the real love. The real, unambivalent love. Not that stupid kinda love where you always worrying if the next person going to be good enough for you in a year to come, or if they still going to fuck you when you turn fifty and starting to bald. It have a kinda love that does surpass that."

"That love is only for the old and them who gone sick and coughing up blood. You only love like that when you dying."

He turned to look at her. His eyes were serious. He began, "Remember when those boys had thrown orange juice all over you and you had orange stains all over your uniform. You was crying whole day because you thought your mother was goin to beat you when you went home. And remember I went to beat them up. Three of them. I mean, I was seven but I went to beat them up. And then I lost badly."

"That was so romantic."

"I want to love like that again."

"Nobody loves that kinda love, Ashu. That kinda love does destroy people. I telling you—that kinda love is for the terminal. You only risk loving like that when you know you going to die."

"Then I am dying."

She breathed deeply. "You're not dying. I am."

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The Campus Rapist

About three months after *the incident*, Jai was sent to a therapist.

Dr. Irene Maraj-Campbell was an attractive woman in her mid-thirties who wore thin-framed glasses, had her hair up in a humourless bun and spoke with a faux-British accent. She looked like one of those Convent girls that went hated by most of her classmates. Probably topped her subjects and spoke fluent French or Spanish, in addition to some unnecessary Euro-centric language like Italian or Finnish some shit that she learned as a hobby, Jai imagined. Woman looked like she made sure to find her ass to every local art showing just to compare them to the shit she saw in the Louvre.

"I get nervous whenever I see an army man," he said. "Like when they're passing in their trucks on the road."

"Why is that, Jai?"

"Because one of them is still out there and they going to kill me when they see me." He paused. "But I'll explain that statement later. Sometimes I wish there were superheroes in this place, Doc. Sometimes I used to hear the search helicopters and I used to wish it was Superman flying overhead. Or Wonder Woman's invisible jet. Or the A-Team? Or maybe the Batcopter? Yes, the Batcopter. And Batman would leave Robin to steer the Batcopter and he would drop the rope ladder and Batman would come in and beat up all the bad guys. And he would go: *POW! WHOOSH! KAPOW!*"

She asked, "How long did you wish for that?"

He said, "Maybe for the first two or three days. I wanted this all to end with someone shouting out, *If it weren't for you meddling kids, and that dog too!* But there's nothing like that here. We have no heroes here."

"What would you expect of heroes, Jai?"

"You might think I'm ready to go off on a nerd-rant here with all of these comic book superheroes. But the heroes I expect don't need to have a power ring or super-strength or some big body suit that shoots out lasers. You don't even need a costume. Just the willingness to do it. Because it's just the thing to do, you know?"

"Tell me more."

"Like the knighthood. When a princess was trapped up in the tower, it was just the knight's thing to go grab a sword, go up to the tower and slay the dragon. You don't even expect to get a blowjob out of it, but you still do it. Because it's the thing to do."

She laughed. "So, chivalry," she said.

"Yes, that is the word. But not just to women. There were common traits among all crime fighters. They had costumes, special powers, they had a code, they had a calling. And they all had their rivals. Their villains."

"Do you have a villain, Jai?"

Jai began telling her a story about his twin sister, Val.

Val hated germs. She disliked the fact that everywhere she went there were trillions of microscopic organisms ready to break through her first lines of immune defenses.

When she was in public, all she could have thought about was that someone who didn't wash their hands after using the toilet could have touched that door handle or that towel dispenser; five different people must have drooled on this airplane cushion; saliva from at least fifty people must be slushing inside this restaurant glass; the back of this taxi probably has the germs of three dozen people who didn't scrub in two days; and God forbid, this cinema seat might be drenched with vaginal secretions from at least ten miniskirt-wearing girls who got fingered during their second dates.

On her person, Val always kept, in descending order of importance: two bottles of Purell, a wad of antibacterial wipes, a wad of napkins, her driver's licence.

Jai then added, "And none of those could have saved her from the rapist in the university campus restroom."

The hooded man stood before her like the Grim Reaper bathed in white fluorescent light, was what Val had said. "Meat,"

she heard him say. She felt the man's hand on her ankle, pulling her off the toilet seat while she was still peeing.

She hit her head on the edge of the toilet bowl.

He grunted as his nails scaled up Val's arm.

She kicked at him with her jeans still puddled around her ankles, urine still leaking down the back of her thigh.

He produced a roll of duct tape and wrapped it around her jaw and mouth.

"Lmmnn mmmm gmmm," she grunted.

"Just enjoy it," he hissed. He grabbed her by her hair and dragged her along the floor into another toilet stall and locked it. He forced her down on her knees and made her hug the toilet bowl.

"NNNN MMMM!" Her throat vibrated hard.

"Her face was inches away from a pot of shit soup," Jai said.

She had no choice but to smell it. With the duct tape over her mouth, mouth-breathing was not an option. She heard the clinking of his belt buckle.

Then the restroom door opened and two girls walked in, quizzing each other for a Mathematics exam. "The three indefinite primitives is point, plane and straight line, right?" Girl One asked.

Girl Two said, "And how you define containment?"

"Three binary relations. One used to link points and straight lines. One used to link points and planes and one have to link straight lines and planes."

The man grabbed Val's hair and whispered, "Make a noise and your face going straight in there."

"Pasch's Axiom?"

"You have to let A, B and C be three points not lying in the same straight line and let your other line lie on this plane and not pass through any of them three points. That correct?"

"Girl, you asking me?" They laughed.

"Ugh!" Girl One exclaimed. "It have pee all over the floor! These people for real?"

Val's face was soggy with tears. She retched. She felt it coming up to her throat but swallowed it back. She turned her head to the side to get her nose away from the shit. She could see the graffiti on the wall.

RACHEL FROM LAW IS A BUSS HO.

DR. HAILEY IS A PEDO BULLERMAN.

She could hear the tinkling from the adjacent stall. Girl Two must've still been standing outside. Girl Two said, "You know the point-line-plane postulates? What is the unique line axiom?"

Girl One spoke from the toilet, "Unique line axiom is when only one line is passing through two distinct points."

"Dimension axiom."

"On a line in a plane, it have at least one point in the plane that is not on the line."

Val's fingernails scraped against the tiles. She bit down hard and gritted her teeth. She could feel the very tip of his penis pressing against her skin, moving as if it were taking small nips

at it, making her twitch. Like it was an electric eel giving off small shocks to her skin. "Mmmnnn," she tried to suppress her groan.

"Mmnn, mmmnnn," she groaned again, her eyes watering, her breathing fast and sporadic. He wheezed softly, stifling a cough. He lowered her face more. Her nose was just two inches away from the water now.

"I going to get rape by this exam tomorrow," Girl Two said.

"You alone?" Girl One said, flushing the toilet. "My ass going to be sore after eleven o' clock."

The vomit re-emerged and she could not spew it from her mouth. She tried to swallow it again.

"MMMM NNNN! HHHMMM!"

Her throat gurgled.

"The fuck?" Girl Two gasped, "You hearing that?"

"The man then shoved Val's face into the toilet bowl," Jai said, "No further description of that necessary."

She pounded her fist against the stall door. She kicked her shoes against the ground. The girls began banging on the door. "Open the door or we callin the security!" they said.

"Fuckin bitch," the man muttered under his breath. He let go Val's hair, busted open the door, hitting a girl in the nose with it, and flew out the door.

"So I had my villain," Jai told the Doc.

Val had been the sixth (reported) victim of a man people simply dubbed as the Campus Rapist, and had been the only one

who escaped. The other five weren't so fortunate. Turns out none of them barely saw his face. One of the girls could have only described him as an overweight man of East Indian descent with a hoodie over his head looking like a Prophet of Doom.

"Who is your favourite crimefighter, Jai?" the Doc asked him, "Which do you admire most?"

"My favourite crimefighter is Robin Hood."

"Why is that? Because he steals from the rich and gives to the poor?"

"No. Because he has a big ass longbow. And if you walk down the street with a big ass longbow on your back, nobody is going to mess with you."

Doc laughed and scribbled in her notepad. Jai said, "He's different from other crimefighters."

"How is he different, Jai?"

"Because he don't fight crime at all! At no point during his heroism he fought crime. The man committed crime! And not against criminals. He committed crime against *the man*. Robin Hood is really short for Robin of the Hood. He's from the Hood. He's a G. He is from the forest. He knows bout the food chain and knows no human can be above another human in it." Jai then added, "My father could be Robin Hood, you know. He has a bow, knows how to shoot it and he is a lawyer who gets rich people's money. But the man not a merry man at all."

Around Carnival time, plastic masks sold like crazy for the children. Jai never had a Robin Hood mask, but he had the Frankenstein Monster. He put it on and pretended to hear

lightning cracking and deranged hollering of, "It's alive! It's aliive!"

He didn't really have a plan. He spent a few nights wandering the campus with the Frankenstein Monster mask hanging around his neck. He taped two textbooks around his abdomen for armour. And kept a roll of duct tape in his pocket and two arrows under his belt. But not the bow.

He strolled around the empty dark pockets behind the Chemistry labs, to the outskirts of the sports center and hid in toilet cubicles in the Engineering buildings, hoping for an opportunity to unsheathe his new persona.

After eight days, the Campus Rapist violated his seventh victim. A first year student, nineteen years old, around 9:30pm, in a Science study room.

Motherfucker!

Jai spent another week roaming the campus. Then he saw that fucker. Outdoors, this time, 10:15pm in the bushes opposite the northern car park. He heard the girl's muffled screams.

Jai in tiptoes, creeping closer and closer.

He could see the Campus Rapist body bobbing up and down and the girl's shoes scuffing against the mud. Jai slid the mask over his face and slipped an arrow out of his pocket. He thumbed the sharp edge before positioning it for the move.

Then he slammed it down into the Campus Rapist's waist.

BULL'S EYE!

The girl screamed out. Jai yelled, "Run! I saving you! Run, bitch, run!"

She squiggled out from under the Campus Rapist, now yelping in pain like a felled beast. The girl scampered away, still screaming. It would not be long before the campus police came, Jai figured. But still enough time to get a few knuckles in some teeth. Jai rolled the duct tape over the rapist's kneecaps first but he wasn't sure how tightly it would hold. He flipped him over and beat his fists against his jaw and nose until he heard the security car approaching.

He sprang up and hit the rapist one swift final kick in the stomach before climbing the chain-link fence and darting away from plain sight.

Aside from his capture, the Campus Rapist was never heard of again.

Pretty-Boy Giovanni was next.

-17-

The Watchdog

When Jack saw Charlie sitting on the old swing near the gravel heaps—back hunched forward, palms on chin, elbows on knees—he waved to him. But Charlie pretended he didn't see him. Jack approached and sat on the adjacent swing.

He asked him, "Is like nine in the night, boy. You have a the reason for being out here this hour?"

Charlie said, "I have my reasons. What bout you? You have your reasons,"

"Boredom," Jack said, shifting his heels and toes up and down as he dangled on the swing.

Charlie mused, "Boredom. The desire for desires." Dogs barked in the distance. "You expecting to find a lot of excitement among these gravel heaps?" They began to swing. Jack went up. Charlie went down.

"You know they does say the cure for boredom is curiosity. And that there is no cure for curiosity."

"What you curious bout, Jack Spaniard?"

"Why you have a crucifix hanging out of your pocket?"

"It's an heirloom," Charlie said with a smirk. "I am the son of the world's greatest demon slayer."

Jack laughed. "What?"

"Taken way before his time. Killed by a soucouyant that haunted the nurse's barracks in Chacachacare. And I must carry on his legacy."

"What your name supposed to be?"

"Ashram Singh... the Second."

Jack burst out laughing again. "You know, I coulda accept the Einstein one, and the El Dorado Conquistador one. But this. This is the worst one."

Charlie pouted. "You prefer I be something else then?"

"Ernesto Che Perreira."

In 1952, Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, better known as Che Guevara, departed from Buenos Aires with his friend, Alberto Granado, and La Poderosa, their Norton 500 piece-of-shit motorcycle, in search of adventure before Guevara completed his medical degree. They travelled across the Andes, along the Chilean coast, across the Atacama Desert and the Peruvian Amazon. Much to his colleague's annoyance, Guevara spent too much of their money on starving, sick people and not enough on *las fantasías sexual*, which was part of the plan—bang a chiquita from each Latin American country.

Guevara was too busy undergoing revelations and logging the events, later to be published and called *The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey*. He didn't get everything in there though. The duo arrived in Venezuela just in time for Alberto's birthday. They didn't even need hookers that day. The duo managed to bed two Indo-Trinidadian tourists there, Saria and Martina. Both parties seeking the same transactions of sex tourism.

While Martina Perreira found her belly swelling three months later back in Trinidad, Guevara was on his way to treat lepers in Peru.

One month before the premature birth of Joseph Perreira, Guevara gave his birthday toast at the leper colony, "We are a single mestizo race, from Mexicoto to the Strait of Magellan."

Joseph first learned to make paper frogs the day Castro and Guevara set out for Cuba for the first assault of the revolution. Joseph had his first kiss at age fifteen. That same year, Che Guevara uttered, "Shoot, coward, you are only going to kill a man," his last words before he was shot and killed in Bolivia, 1967. The news was big and Martina couldn't help but feel a certain sadness when she recognized him. She ended up telling Joseph.

"Your daddy ain't ever coming back," she said in between tearful blinks.

But sadness was the last thing he felt. Joseph became deeply intrigued by Che and even named his son after him: Ernesto Che Perreira.

"Alright then," Charlie said. "Call me Ernesto."

"Ernesto," Jack said. "It hard for you to be living in your grandfather's shadow?"

They alighted from the swings and walked along the trail.

"My grandfather didn't have a shadow," Charlie said. "He *was* the damn shadow, still trailing the tail of America."

They stopped at a mango tree. Jack said, "Now I finally know why Americans applaud themselves so much, eh. They need to keep that bitch Tinkerbelle alive."

They both laughed and picked up stones from the gravel heaps. They tossed them at the mangoes, missing each time. "I wish I coulda live in America, though," Charlie said.

Jack looked at him with furrowed brows. "What kinda talk is that, Ernesto? Your grandfather going to be very shame when he hear that."

They flung two more stones and finally hit a mango. Jack rushed to catch it. "What you talking bout?" Charlie asked. "Everybody love to diss the Yankees down here. Is just sour grapes, I think. Look how much Trinis gone down there and living the good life now."

"Well, who stoppin you from going? Head west, then north straight on til morning. That be the way to Neverland, Wendy." Jack peeled the mango with his hands and sunk his teeth into it.

"Neverland," Charlie scoffed.

"We is just niggers to them, you know. We worse than niggers to them abroad." Jack bit into the mango again. He wiped his vest along the juices running down his chin.

Charlie said, "I was actually sitting here, waitin for Sargeant."

"That old fart? What you meetin him for? Don't tell me you so desperate for a sugar daddy."

Charlie chuckled. "He believe that it have a La Diabliesse living in a house not too far from here. He wanted me to scope it out with him. She have a pet werewolf too from Guyana too, apparently. That is why I have a crucifix in my pocket. The old man ain't show up, though. Surprising since he cared bout it so much."

Jack laughed. "Man have you out here like a fool and he probably snoring away on the couch." He then asked, "You know what house he talkin bout?"

"Yeah."

"Come, let's go check it out. I always wanted to see a real-life La Diabliesse."

Charlie paused. "Right now?"

"Yeah. I mean, we have nothing to be afraid of. What La Diabliesse does do? Ain't they big superpower is seducing men and luring them back to their house and kill them?"

"I think so."

"Me and you have nothing to fraid then."

"She have a pet werewolf, though."

"You fraid a werewolf? Jeez, man. Like I have to go all the way home and load up my glock with silver bullets? I thought Che woulda pass down some of that bravery in his genes."

Charlie finally obliged.

They headed down the path past the two large water tank towers and to the coppice behind the house. Jack stared through the chain-link fence at the heap of car parts and the withering palms in the barren backyard and remarked, "Sargeant drinkin too much bay rum. Where is the big bad—"

RAAHHF!

The chain-link fence shook, suddenly clattering violently, almost knocking Charlie and Jack backwards. The beast, dark as the night itself, scratched and gnawed on the wire mesh. The creature was so dark that all they saw teeth, spit and bloodshot eyes.

"Shit!" Jack exclaimed. "What kinda dog is that? It look like it escape some gate out of hell."

"A pitbull. A mutant pitbull on steroids.

The dog sprayed spittle as it barked and snapped at the fence. Jack grabbed Charlie's arm. "The hell they feedin this dog?"

"A lot of hate. This dog real hate us. Look at them eyes. It have no other desire but to drive its spiky teeth into us and rearrange all our organs."

"Funny you should mention hate, eh," Jack said. "I dunno how true this is, but a man tell me a story once. I used to mow this Indian man lawn in Felicity. His ass had no shame to be tellin me this. He say he trained his dog to hate niggers. Specifically niggers. He used to pay some black piper man to come beat the dog everyday with a cricket bat. Blows upon

blows. That dog used to look at me like it wanted me to call it *massa*."

"Well, I not black," Charlie said.

"Exactly," Jack said. "I think the owner of this dog dragged the biggest bullerman down here. They made sure to dress up in his best weave, tightest pum-pum shorts and boots. And they arm him with a rainbow-coloured whip."

They both laughed. The demon pitbull still firing barks like a cannon. "What we dealing with here," Jack said, "is a homophobic dog. You say they import this damn thing from Guyana, boy? I doubt. Looks like they import this monster straight from the ghettos of Kingston, Jamaica. The La Diabliesse smart. She know she have no power over the homos so she get sheself a good Jamaican pitbull."

Charlie quipped, "The dog making thunder now but does probably be real quiet in church. Like a saint."

"Nah, not when them wajangs reading from Leviticus." Jack looked around. Then he turned to Charlie and whispered, "You want to really piss off this dog?"

"Yes."

Jack held Charlie's hand. The dog growled with a deep, churning rumble. Charlie's heart beat fast. Jack turned to him until they were standing stand face to face, chests almost touching. Their breathing hushed and sporadic.

Like a child at his first day of school. Like a bride at the altar.

They closed their eyes and, for a second, they could swear the cannon stopped firing and all they could hear is breathing. They dragged each other to the ground. Hands on shoulders pressing down like heavy weights, then hands scuttling under jerseys. Pelvises chafing against each other, like shifting tectonic plates before the seismic waves.

Then two spotlights flashed on them.

The last thing they needed.

They opened their eyes and looked up. Two bright shining lights. Like truck headlights. Two grey uniforms. They looked big. Big like giants.

Fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell the blood of faggot scum. Should've never planted those magic beans. Damn Jack and his beanstalk.

While Charlie gazed in frozen dreadful suspension, Jack flailed around, trying to untangle his arms from Charlie's. Like unravelling two octopi's tentacles knotted together.

All this time, the two lights hovering closer and closer.

Jack pushed his palms against Charlie's jaw and kicked his waist away from him before sprinting off and disappearing behind the bushy drapes.

The two uniforms kicked Charlie in the shin before handcuffing him. One lashed his baton against the fence and hit the dog in his nose. It whimpered and scurried behind a pile of car parts. It hid there.

Humiliated. Submitted. Defeated.

-18-

Cash, Check or Credit Card?

Yasmeen's room was severely simple, more simple than Soraya had recalled. The walls were painted a dry red and the only decorations were monochrome Arabic wall scriptures. Two unlit incense sticks sat on her drawer. The shelf was sparse with thick textbooks and Islamic tomes. She did have her door, though, at least, Soraya thought.

Yasmeen sat on her bed and laid out the plans for the night like she was briefing a combat strategy. "My friend, Nadia, is coming to pick us up. Here is how this works. At seven thirty, Nadia comes here and takes us to my boyfriend's apartment."

"What's his name?"

"Siddiq," she replied. "Our clothes are there, so we will change there. We're going to the club under the guise that we're

staying at Nadia's for the night. We're going to go to the club. Then we're actually go to stay at Siddiq's for the night. He has an extra mattress—don't worry. We will change again there and Nadia will pick us up in the morning and bring us back here.”

She then added, “Here is the only ground rule: If you run off with a boy, make sure to get your ass back to the apartment in the morning. That's all. Or we'll be in some deep shit. You understand?”

Yes, Lieutenant Yasmeen! Soraya wants to say, but she just nodded.

Nadia pulled up in front of the house. And the girls got into the car. Soraya in the backseat, Yasmeen in the passenger's. As they drive off, Yasmeen told Soraya, "What do you think our mothers think we would do at a sleepover? Everything girls do at sleepovers is haram to them. Can't be talking about boys. Or experimenting with makeup."

Soraya said, "Didn't think bout it.”

“Probably bake a cake in the name of Allah," Nadia jumped in.

Yasmeen guffawed and then exclaimed, "We going to burn in Hell for the things we does say."

Soraya tried to manage a quiet, uncomfortable smile and then a relaxed laugh. "So you and Siddiq live in the same building?" she asked Nadia.

"Yes, long time. We practically neighbours," she said, "Yasmeen met him through me!"

Yasmeen turned around. "See, Nadia isn't only my best friend. She's my detective. She reports back to me everything that boy is doing."

Soraya didn't say anything else for the rest of the ride.

They pulled up to the side of the road, which ran between the Arima apartment complex and a small lonely park. It was only when they got out of the car that Soraya finally caught a proper glance at Nadia. Before, only seeing the back of her head and her left eye in the rearview mirror. Soraya noticed the pillow she had to sit on in the driver's seat. Very small, very short dougla girl, barely five feet tall, and had big pretty eyes and a tiny mole below the edge of her mouth.

They made their way up a staircase to an empty lounge area, then a hall with doors. They stopped at the fifth one and Yasmeen knocked.

The door opened and before Soraya could even see what Siddiq looked like, Yasmeen leaped on him, wrapped her legs around his waist and kissed him. What a sight, Soraya thought, unwilling to keep her eyes on them. A fitted cotton shirt making out with a black billowing mass of cloth.

Nadia excused herself to her own apartment two doors down to finish prepping. When Yasmeen and Siddiq finished their kiss, he pried Yasmeen off of him, fixed his hair quickly and extended his palm to Soraya. She was caught off-guard at first by his handsomeness. Tall, short hair, medium build framed with lean muscle, big smile and a big jaw wrapped by a neat beard.

"Soraya, right?" he said.

She smiled, genuinely. When she shook his hand, she felt a pang of jealousy. Yasmeen could get a ten-second French kiss, but she would always be relegated to a brief handshake.

His apartment was small. Two closets were lain against the bright peach-coloured walls. White drapes hung over the one window. There was one desk with some dog-eared textbooks, a mug filled with drawing pencils and a laptop softly playing a Red Hot Chili Peppers song. The bed was lain adjacent to the desk. A two-seater couch faced the door. Siddiq said, "You ladies can go fix up. I'll be outside," and closed the door behind him.

Yasmeen immediately began rummaging through the closet. Soraya watched her undress hastily and toss her robes all slapdash across the bed. She then said, turning around, "Come on. Let's get ready. Chop, chop. Get that thing off you."

She helped Soraya undress in a manner that struck her as uncomfortable and sapphic. Soraya kept her eyes constantly to the floor. Thankfully, their shared moment of nakedness was short-lived. Yasmeen tied the veil around Soraya's ears, letting the voile sheathe her face below her nose-bridge. Soraya was taken aback by her reflection.

Extreme Makeover: Islam Edition, she joked to herself.

Yasmeen sat her down on the bed, applying dabs of foundation here and there, and finally traced the dark makeup pencil in smooth ellipses along her eyelids.

The transformation was complete.

"You're going to be the forbidden fruit of Eden," Yasmeen told her.

Initially, Soraya felt uncomfortable in her new skin. Like being draped with an itchy fabric. Like how good medicine that wouldn't take to the body properly sometimes. She attempted to brush it off, however. When Nadia saw her, she gave a silent 'wow' expression.

The girls admired her. Was this the same ugly duckling with new swan feathers? Was this Cinderella in her ball gown and glass slippers?

Siddiq raised his eyebrows when he saw her.

"I gonna pick up James," Nadia said.

"James?" Soraya asked quietly.

"Be back in fifteen to twenty."

"Her boyfriend," Yasmeen whispered to Soraya.

Soraya became flustered all of a sudden but tried her best to hide it. Deviation from the combat strategy. Trekking through uncharted territory now. Before, she had believed the only couple would be Siddiq and Yasmeen. But now, Nadia and James.

And Soraya all by herself. The spare tyre.

They will all be exchanging dirty words into each other's ears and stealing kisses at red lights on the way there, she imagined.

The three headed back to Siddiq's apartment. Yasmeen and Siddiq slumped on the couch, casually sharing a marijuana

joints. Soraya at the desk, tried not to inhale. "So you never gone to a club, Soraya?" Siddiq asked, taking a puff.

Soraya shook her head.

"You going to have a grand time tonight," Yasmeen said, sucking on the spliff. She laughed. Her speech was slow and its total unfamiliarity frightened Soraya more than she was willing to admit herself. "Hell, I shouldn't have to worry about you being nervous. You're already a rebel. Siddiq, you know our girl skipped mosque today? Soraya, tell him what you do to skip going to mosque."

Soraya let out a sigh.

But Siddiq looked interested. He leaned forward and sucked on the spliff, forming a glowing red dot at the tip of it. Soraya told him, feigning pride, "I lie about having my period. Sometimes I lie and say I get it on Friday and by the next Friday, I still have it. So I get to skip it twice on some months."

Siddiq chuckled, but Yasmeen burst out laughing, slapping his thigh, hardly able to contain herself. "Skip it *twice!*" she exclaimed, still cackling, falling on Siddiq's lap. "This girl is *the best!*"

Soraya frowned. Siddiq was no longer chuckling. He propped Yasmeen back on her side of the couch. He took her spliff and rubbed it against the ashtray. Regaining her composure, Yasmeen whispered something into his ear and giggled. An artificial giggle.

Siddiq pondered for a couple seconds then checked his wristwatch. He nodded. Yasmeen turned to Soraya and told her, "You mind going in the lounge and looking out for Nadia?"

"Not at all," Soraya said meekly, as she got up and closed the door behind her. For a minute, she stood by the door and listened to the moans. Her heart beat quickly. She felt as if she were going to hyperventilate, so she moved to the lounge. She felt itchy in her new clothes again. She strolled out of the apartment building and made her way across the street and to the park.

The park was well-lit, with bright lamps all along its grassy perimeter. The walkways crisscrossed at the centre, meeting at a small gazebo with tables shaded by a hemispherical roof. Benches were also laid beside the walkways. Soraya gravitated to the corner of the park to the desolate mini-playground.

She sat on a rocking horse. She had not noticed the old bearded man sitting on the horse next to hers until he started playing his new flute.

They both began rocking their horses. The old man stopped playing his flute. "You look sad, child," he said.

"My clothes feel itchy," Soraya said.

"Then take them off. Change into something else. They're rather unbecoming of a young lady like you."

She shook her head. "The clothes look good."

"The clothes do look very good, but they're not for you." He played a note on his flute. "It's like wearing mismatched colours."

"Maybe I'm allergic to something."

"Allergic? No, no, no. It has nothing to do with allergies. Simply put, these new clothes don't respect you. They don't know you as well as your usual clothes." He stroked his long beard. "Your itchy clothes aren't enough to warrant such a despondent face. Such lonely eyes. No amount of makeup can shadow those eyes."

"I feel lonely."

At the same time, Nadia's car pulled up to the apartment building. Soraya and the old man turned to face the car. The car horn sounded twice. "Is that your ride, child?"

She nodded.

The old man said, "You better get going. But something tells me wherever you are going tonight, you are going to feel much lonelier there than here. I can keep you company here. I'm here for the entire night."

She shook her head. "Not tonight."

The old man shrugged. "I'll be here all night regardless if you change your mind." He lifted the flute to his mouth and began playing a muted wistful song.

The drive to the club had been unnerving. Nadia had driven with James in the passenger seat and Soraya had been stuck with Yasmeen and Siddiq in the backseat, still stinking from the aftermath of sex. Soraya felt cheated. And, for a moment, even furious.

Soraya hadn't spoken a single word in the car.

Instead, she gazed outside at the town like a curious dog. A wrecking crew toiled way into the night in the heart of the capital. The light from the windows and porches of the houses along the hills illuminated the Northern Range.

A green ray of light shot into her face the second she stepped into the club. Soraya was overjoyed at first. Even euphoric. She likened the club to what inside a U.F.O. must look like. To go with the garden theme, there were fake trees running along the walls with apple-shaped lights that glowed and dimmed in intervals. Grass and foliage was painted on the floor. And a giant arrangement of lights on the ceiling formed a shimmering serpent with a large flashing eye. It looked like a giant cosmic garden. Laser beams, flashing buttons and muffled vibrations along the walls as people dance their way into a new world. They had already accepted it. Earth's done. Time for a new planet. Time for a new stratosphere. Better late than never.

But after one hour drifting around the club, Soraya still had no prospects.

She was shivering from that stomach-upsetting nervousness she remember feeling on her first day of school.

The techno blasted so loudly that the bassline muffled the lyrics. Unrecognisable song after Unrecognisable song

"Fuck," she mumbled, her voice immediately drowning out.

She had her first taste of alcohol and nearly spat it out. Just a sip of beer and she could barely swallow it. She sat on one of the big couches along the wall. There, the volume is tolerable.

She tried to adjust her slouching posture. She eyed Yasmeen in the distance, already drunk, jamming her hips against Siddiq's.

A boy sat next to Soraya.

He sipped on a cocktail in a highball glass. "Having a good time?" he asked. He smiled at her. She glanced at him. A fair Indian boy with hair cropped to the scalp. He wore expensive saga-boy jeans and a shirt with a Chinese-style dragon running down the left side. The tail at his shoulder, the head at his hip. A stud on his left earlobe. Handsome.

She just returned his smile.

"You here with anybody?" he asked.

She inched closer to him. She then said hastily, "Cash, check, credit card?"

He stammered, "What?"

"Cash, check or credit card. Hurry. The plane's about to depart."

"Cash, check or credit card? What you is, a prostitute?"

Soraya swallowed the growing lump in her throat. "I'm your travel agent for today."

He laughed. "Sounds like you was trying to solicit me. Why you wearing that cloth over your face?"

Her took a deep breath. "You want me to take it off?"

"Yeah. I want to see your face."

"*That* is exactly why I'm wearing it," she said.

He shifted closer, strangely intrigued. "What is your name?"

"Soraya. Yours?"

"Giovanni."

"Nice name." She repeated it slowly in her head. It conjured up images poignant and Italian, like majestic cathedrals in Milan, gladiators in the Coliseum, nude men sketched by Leonardo da Vinci.

He offered her a taste of his drink. But she waved her hand, refusing it. The beer was bad enough, still lingering on her taste buds.

"Beer is shit," he said, "This is long island iced tea."

She gave in. She tucks tede glass beneath her veil and sipped. Sloshed it around her mouth before swallowing. Then took another sip. He laughed. "I know something you would like," he said. "Wait here." He left her with the drink and approached the bar. He soon returned with a goblet glass. A pineapple slice wedged on the rim. "Piña colada," he said, handing it to her.

She took a cautious sip. Then a mouthful.

"Slowly, slowly," he said, laughing. "This is not soft drink."

But she still finished it in two minutes flat. The itchiness on her skin disappeared. A wave of euphoria soon washed away all the unease and worry. She had purged Islamic tradition from her body. Drowned it and weated it out.

She set the empty glass down and grabbed his arm. "Name your destination."

He asked, "Maybe it is me who should be asking you that. You should know better than to be drunk on the job, girl. I take over for you. Cash, check or credit card?"

"But I have to make sure everything goes right with the flight."

"You have to make sure I get good treatment?"

"Yes."

"I have my own ride, you know."

"Good. I moonlight as a stewardess."

"Once you can cater to the pilot's needs."

"Yes."

"So name your destination, stewardess."

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Heat

"Does anyone else know about what you just told me?" Dr. Maraj-Campbell asked.

"No, Doc. Aside from the clinic people? Just me and you," Jai said. "Doesn't make sense to let anyone else know."

"Why do you say that?"

"A superhero always has to keep everyone a certain distance."

"Is that how you see this?"

"Yes. Most superhero stories would tell you that they keep secret identities to shield their loved ones from being targeted by their arch-nemesis. And there is always that issue where they find Superman goes *bazodee* over Lois Lane. So what does Lex do? He goes right after Lois Lane because Superman will always risk being capped in his ass with a kryptonite bullet for her. They use the superhero's own love to their own advantage."

"What does this have to do with anything?"

"You ever watched that movie *Heat*, with Pacino and Deniro, Doc?"

She adjusted herself on her seat. She smiled, nodded and said, "I have, actually. Classic movie."

"Cafeteria scene. First time these two megastars are in a scene together. Al Pacino's the cop and Deniro's the crook, remember? But they sit down to have a meal together. And they're talking bout their lives and Al Pacino is talking about the cop life is fucking up his marriages. He cannot keep a wife because he is too busy chasing after guys like Deniro his whole life. And then Deniro tells him his code. His code is that he doesn't let himself get attached to anything he not willing to walked out on in twenty seconds flat."

"Thirty seconds flat, Jai," she corrected him, pressing her fingers against her chin in quiet attentiveness.

"That is how I managed to escape. If I cared bout what my father or so-called friends would feel if they killed me, I wouldn't have made it. I had no love to be used against me. So there was nothing to lose."

The three men had made it a ritual to get drunk while watching over Jai.

He could have heard them playing All Fours and scuffling over hanged jacks and miscalculated scores. He hated everytime he smelled the cigarette smoke because they would often use his arms as an ashtray. Sometimes they talked about past heists and

kidnappings and all the bullets they put in all the heads. Sometimes they complained about having nothing to do. No television. Bad radio reception. Being stuck in a shit-hole with no real food. Jai learned to identify them by voices by then.

He dubbed them the Three Stooges. Curly, Larry and Moe. Curly just made jokes.

Larry laughed at them and was always shouting threats of castration to Jai.

And Moe was always preoccupied with one complaint: "Next time we kidnappin a fuckin woman too next time. Just rape she til she dead."

Moe was the worst one. "A man has needs," he would say. Moe liked pretending Jai's mouth was a moist pussy. "Get that pussy wet," he would tell him, then he would put his penis inside. "Doh get chain-up. I ain't no bullerman," Moe would tell him after he spilled his seed down Jai's throat.

Once a day, they took turns punching Jai in the face. They knocked three of his teeth out: a lower incisor and two top canines.

By some miracle, Jai actually managed to loosen his binds one evening.

Moe came up to Jai. He knew what he was coming for. He heard him unzip his pants. Couldn't see, couldn't move, he felt like he was buried alive in a sitting position. He had already died. But there was no afterlife, no nether-realm.

There was only this place.

This shit-hole.

He died and was resurrected in the same instant. Real life didn't exist to him anymore. In real life, kidnap victims get killed, people stand by and do nothing, and evil always prevails.

He just had to time it right now. He was now undead.

He was The Crow.

He was Shiva, God of Destruction.

He was the son of Dracula.

And he grew fangs.

And he bit down the hardest he could.

"*MOTHERCUNT!*" Moe bawled, jerking and falling backwards.

Jai half-expected to bite it right off but that wasn't the case. He acted quickly, bursting out from the ropes in a frenzy.

He lifted the crocus bag from his head.

And for the first time, he saw where he was. Near the mouth of a cave.

He looked at Moe and was in shock to see that he was clad in green army overalls. He spun around and saw Larry and Curly, though he wasn't sure which was which, also attired in army uniforms. Then he noticed the large hunting knife tucked into Moe's belt.

He scrambled to his fallen body and punched him in the stomach. Then he grabbed the knife and plunged it deep into his stomach. He twisted the blade.

"Don't fuckin move!" the one on the left shouted. Larry's voice.

Larry then fired three shots from his pistol. One hit Moe in the shin. One hit the ground. And one grazed Jai's leg. He fell and it was only then that he noticed the pistol in Moe's dying grasp, already drawn from its holster.

Jai took the pistol and fired three shots at Curly's torso. The first missed. The second connected just below his left nipple. And the third right through his belly. He sprinted towards the end of the cave. But he tripped over his own feet.

He tried to punch them out of entropy before getting up again. He held his shin and bolted into the forest outside, tripping several times and rolling down a hill.

He stretched his legs, wiggled his toes and slammed his heels against the ground repeatedly before he got up again.

Slapping bushes and branches aside, he ran and ran.

Whenever he felt his legs giving in, he stopped and hugged a tree trunk to keep his balance. If only I could be a monkey, he thought, I could just swing across the trees. He heard bullets ricocheting in the distance.

He took off again.

Track-and-field training, don't fail me now.

Jai, after a long silence, said to Doc, "My body has been condemned," he told her. "My blood is cursed. And it have no merchant in any black market who could sell me any potion that could make it go away."

Doc was quiet.

Jai slumped. "Fuckin hospital smelled like death that day. Paint flaking off the wall. Doctors sucking their teeth at you when you ask for directions. You could almost see the ghosts of all that died in the wards floating about if you squinted your eyes enough."

He then said, "Those army fuckers got the last laugh. Virgins not supposed to have HIV." He took a deep breath before continuing, "I musta get it when that fucker spilled his polluted break in my mouth after he knock out my teeth. Mixed up with the blood and get inside my body there. Contaminated it."

Doc asked him, "What was the first thing you thought about when you got the news, Jai?"

"A woman with a big bottom."

Doc shook her head. "Is that all?"

He replied, "I can't see the side-view of her on the altar and how fine her ass looks in her white wedding dress. But I see it anyway on the wedding tapes. And during the reception, everyone I know is there. My father is MC'ing and he telling some stale jokes and he the one doing all the laughing. But I don't care. We struck a deal and he said he'd pay for the whole thing if he could MC. Aside from that, the man doesn't laugh enough, so it's good to hear him laugh. Our wedding dance song is something by Celine Dion. I didn't pick the song. She did."

He cleared his throat and continued, "We both want to travel the world for our honeymoon. But it turns out we can only pick one country. Let's be realistic. We both love Japan, so we start there, and we already late for the flight! The flight's long

and we're jet-lagged but it's worth it. We arrive in Tokyo and we eat all the different types of sushi and sashimi. We buy giant frozen tuna at the fish market. We go to a sumo hall and we watch a couple matches. Extremely intense. We stay for the rikishi parade. We go to the Meiji Shrine and dip in the communal water tank before we pray. We dunno shit bout Shinto and Buddhism, but we're here, so why not. We write wishes on little pieces of paper and tie them on the prayer wall and toss some yen in the enormous taiko drum. Cherry-blossom season in Shinjuku National Garden. I want to cry. Dinner at Ebisu, we feed each other little chunks of charcoal grilled chicken and the chew on the crispy skin. We toast with sake, even though we're not sure if that is what they do. We perform karaoke late into the night. And we are real bad! Bad as in bad, not good! But it's still a lot of fun."

He could see Doc's eyes starting to well up. He looked at the ceiling. "After karaoke, we go back to the hotel and I tell her, hey, your ass is the ripest ass I ever seen. But I have HIV. So unless you can invent a cure, you can forget about kinky shit and forget about children and grandchildren and them getting my eyes and your cheeks and your hair. Can't happen. Sorry. And then she slaps me and demands an annulment."

He smiled.

But Doc didn't.

-20-

P.O.W.

The police station was nearly desolate except for the couple of constables leaning against a counter laughing it up over follies of a cricket match. "Who that you have there?" one of them called out to the two officers flanking Charlie, marching him across the room in handcuffs. Charlie kept his eyes fixed on the half-asleep obese Indian officer at a back desk, so fat that his paunch hung from under his shirt.

They replied with a chuckle, "Just pick up this trespasser, fellas. With a touch of public indecency."

"Is jail for your ass, red boy," one of the constables said, laughing.

The two officers took him inside a small room and locked the door behind them. An old ceiling fan jerked as it spun above them. A desk with an unplugged outdated computer, manila folders and leather-bound documents sat in the corner of a room.

A stereo sat lonely at the back peg of the desk. And, aside from the metal filing cabinet standing alongside the desk, the room was empty. The floor was dusty and uneven, coarsened by missing chips of ground stone. On the wall, a clock read half past eleven.

They spun a chair around so that it faced away from the desk, and sat Charlie on it. They removed his handcuffs and tossed them on the desk. They make a noisy *clink* as they hit it. The first officer asked, "Who was ya accomplice, boy?"

Charlie looked at both of them. One was a clean-shaved fair-skinned Negro, the other a dark-skinned Indian with stubble.

"I need to know why I am here," Charlie said, making a meagre attempt to sound tough. "I done nothing wrong."

Clean and Stubble looked at each other and laugh. Clean said, "Look, red boy. Trespassing. Me and my partner here can both attest to that one."

"How was I trespassing? I was behind the fence—"

Stubble interrupted, "Before we do anything else, officer, we might have to do a body cavity search on apprehended suspect. Might be hiding weapons if he is suspected to planning a *breaking and entering*."

Charlie said, "You all pat me down already. I have no weapons. And I didn't go to rob no house."

Clean said, "Maybe you ain't understand what body cavity search mean. It mean we going to use a torchlight to see up your ears, nosehole, down your throat and all the other places where the sun don't shine."

Stubble added, "The term body cavity search means: *take off your clothes.*" He caressed the black baton strapped to his waist.

Tchk... tchk... tchk... The ceiling fan jerked as it whirled.

Charlie paused, but soon obeyed. He took off his shirt and then his pants.

Stubble picked up the clothes and searched his pockets.

Charlie stood before the officers in his briefs.

Clean lit up a cigarette and took a puff. He folded his arms. "You need help taking it off?"

"I told you," Charlie said, "I have no weapon. This is unnecessary."

"Wrong," Clean said. "This is totally, wholly, entirely, absolutely necessary. Like you ain't catch what the term body cavity search mean?"

"I understand what it is."

Clean took another puff. "Then you know what you are doing? You just outright disobeying. Resisting protocol!"

"Nothing in the pants pockets, except for some loose change," Stubble said, discarding the pants. He asked Charlie, "Where your ID, boy?"

"Never applied for ID."

Clean raised his palm to silence Stubble and said, "Don't worry yourself. All that could be take care of later. We searching for weapons now. And this boy drawers still not by his ankles. Jail ain't nice, you know, youth."

Charlie sucked in a deep breath, as if he was about to submerge himself in the high tides. With one move, he pulled his briefs down to his ankles. Then placed his palms over his crotch.

Stubble said, "Move your hand. Why you shame?"

Clean grumbled, frustrated now, "You shame now and you wasn't shame back in the bush! This boy is something else. Where this country headin with this new generation? In the fuckin latrine! Stand at attention, boy!"

Charlie flinched. His muscles tensed. They refused to budge. His body protested. Shifting his palms across his thighs to his hips seemed like the hardest thing in the world to do. He closed his eyes and trembled. As he stood with his palms at his side, he imagined hearing the first lines of the National Anthem:

Forged from the love of liberty...

Then he stood at attention.

Stubble said, "What you think, officer?"

Clean said, puffing some smoke from the side of his mouth and resisting a chuckle, "Red boy. You really want to play you bad and feel you could participate in a breaking and entering with a weapon small so?"

Charlie kept his eyes closed. He hunched over. He had to grab his hips tightly to keep his hands from sliding back to his groin. He had to stomach it. This moment.

When he had signed up for the mission, he had known this could be a possible outcome. Being captured by enemy forces. Being held hostage behind enemy lines in a musty room that smelled of blood, typhus and smoke.

Tchk... tchk... tchk... The ceiling fan swirls the cigarette smoke above.

"How bout your accomplice, boy?" Stubble asked, "He flee like an agouti. He just about as accountable as you. So tell me, which hole this agouti gone to hide?"

"I don't know."

Clean asked, "What is the name of this agouti?"

"I don't know."

Clean laughed. "Officer, like he ain't know anything about this agouti. Like he get amnesia. I think we have to refresh his memory a little bit."

Blood rushed to Charlie's head and sweat slowly began to speckle at his brow. To refresh one's memory, he always knew, was lingo for two things: to give someone money to remember something, or to start dishing out a good cut-ass until a confession escaped.

And these officers weren't giving him a dime.

But Charlie soon found out that these officers had an entirely different method in mind. Stubble left the room and returned a long minute later with an old edition of *Men's Fitness*. He then sat Charlie back down on the steel chair. The cold steel sent a sharp jolt to his bare buttocks.

Clean flipped through the magazine quickly and nodded. He said, thumbing through the pages slowly now, "I have decided to carry out an experimental process of interrogation."

Stubble picked up the radio from the ground and set it on the desk. He switched it on and adjusts the station until the chorus of Phil Collins' *In the Air Tonight* tuned in.

Well I've been waiting for this moment / all my life / oh Lord / I can feel it / coming in the air tonight / oh Lord

Clean continued, "The human body is a funny, funny thing, I tell you. The mouth could lie. Eyes could lie. But body language tells you more than the mouth ever could. Due to lack of visual knowledge of your accomplice and prior observations of you and your accomplice's, ahem, relationship, I want to see if we could identify specific physical characteristics of our accomplice through this method."

He held up a page to Charlie's face. A glistening lean-muscled short-haired Caucasian model posed in red swimming trunks against a white backdrop. Clean pulled the page away after ten seconds then stared down at Charlie's limp penis.

"No?"

He thumbed through the pages again and held up another page. This time, a smiling bareback mulatto with a bigger frame. He wore a yellow bandana and muscles bulged from his arm. GETTING MUSCLED UP was printed over his chiseled abs. Clean peeked at Charlie's crotch again.

"Again? No? Relax a little, boy. Let the blood flow.."

But I know the reason / why you keep your silence up / oh no / you don't fool me

He thumbed through the magazine again and his eyebrows raised. "A-ha!" He displayed it before Charlie. This one not laid

out on one page, but as a spread. A young Latino man in a G-string lying on his side on a white couch tracing his fingers down his chest. His body bordered by KNOW YOUR PLEASURE ZONES in big red text.

"Fuck you," Charlie hissed. He then bit his lower lip.

Stubble raised his eyebrows, smiling a little. Clean squinted. "What you say?"

"You not getting a word out of me, soldier. Respect that mine is a classified mission. Your efforts will prove futile to infiltrate our forces. Allied troops are on their way."

"What you talking bout?" Clean said, suddenly confused. But that onfusion quickly brewed into anger. "What shit you talkin, red boy?"

"*Red* is right."

"What?"

"He trying to chain up we head," Stubble said, taking a few steps closer.

"That is something I don't appreciate," Clean said. He then turns around and asked Stubble, "This cockroach had no ID?"

Stubble shook his head.

Clean asked Charlie, "Tell me your name, red boy."

"My name is Ernesto Che Perreira."

"That *not* your name."

"Ernesto Che Perreira, son of Joseph James Perreira, and grandson of Ernesto Che Guevara. And when Castro finds out about this, *the ground is going to shake!*"

Clean balled his hand into a fist and hooked Charlie in the jaw so hard he almost fell sideways. Charlie breathed in hard and wheezed. His eyes burned. Clean bellowed, "Don't play stupid with me, fucker!"

"I can take any torture," Charlie grunted. "My name is Ernesto Che Perreira, son of Joseph James Perreira, grandson of Ernesto Che Guevara. There is nothing you can do to me. My grandfather suffered your kind in Bolivia."

Clean punched him square in the face. Charlie wheezed again. He tongued a loosened premolar, shaking it against his gum. Stubble raised the radio volume. "What is your fuckin name!" Clean shouted in his face.

I can feel it / coming in the air tonight / oh Lord

"Ernesto Che Perreira," Charlie said, trying to laugh away the pain. "You will never win. We will not let you win. Even if you kill me, someone is going to pick up where I left off. Until victory always."

"This cunt getting me vex now," Stubble grumbled.

"I am long past vex," Clean spoke with clenched teeth. "Hold him down." Stubble stood behind the chair, grabbed Charlie's wrists and yanks them back. At the same time, Clean drew his pistol from its holster. He cocked the hammer, kept his finger on the trigger guard and prodded the barrel against Charlie's lips and into his mouth. "What is your name?" Clean muttered slowly.

I can feel it / coming in the air tonight / oh Lord

"Ohnehto Shey Pewweiwa," Charlie mumbled.

Stubble gave a nervous look of concern. Charlie gave him a small smile, even with a gun in his mouth.

Clean gritted his teeth and snarled. He took the gun out of his mouth and struck his temple with the grip. He turned to Stubble and muttered, "This bullerman looking for a bullet in he head."

Charlie let out, "Then shoot, coward. You are only going to kill a man."

Clean hits him with the grip again and stormed out the room. Stubble gave Charlie a moment to put on his briefs before taking him to a holding cell.

They left him there.

Charlie was thankful to be the only occupant. A cold stone bench sat lonely against the wall. Dried feces lined the corner of the cell and the emetic stench of Pinesol mixing with old urine permeated the humid air. Stubble closed the cell gate.

As it clanked, Charlie cried out, "*¡Viva la Revolución!*"

Stubble walked away quietly, closing another door behind him..

Charlie's mouth tasted like blood. He tongued his wobbly teeth again. His jaw pained him and his temple hurt from being lashed by the gun grip.

Stubble came back and flicked a switch on the wall. The fluorescent light went out and, when the door closed again, the room became engulfed with darkness. So dark that it didn't matter whether Charlie opened or closed his eyes.

Solitary confinement, he thinks.

But he was more angry than scared. He used the time to reflect. Not on whether he could find a decent attorney skilled in the suing arts. But on Jack scampering away like a panicked deer. What a motherfucker!

He lay on the bench. The stone against his skin felt like a giant block of ice. But, by some miracle, he managed to fall asleep.

He awakened when the fluorescent lights flooded the room once more. Keys rattled nearby. He rubbed his eyes and saw two blurry figures enter the room.

"Einstein!" a man called out. Sargeant's voice from the other side of the bars. "How your tail end up in here, lad? I was out searching high and low for you. You lose your clothes? They lock you up for parading around the neighbourhood in your brief shorts? You shoulda know better than to do that."

The other figure was the obese Indian desk officer who had been half-asleep earlier. He fiddled with the keys for about a minute before he managed to open the cell. Sargeant stepped inside and groaned, "You have to go home and wash properly before you get ringworm, Einstein."

Sargeant said to the officer, "I specifically called earlier to give the warning. Look out for the hoof woman. You police is something else. Not the hoof woman you all lookin to lock up, but the grandson of Albert Einstein. The man who invented things like electricity."

The officer didn't reply.

Sargeant asked Charlie, " How your face bruise up so? And where your clothes, in truth? The La Diabliesse get to you, ent? You ain't take off your clothes and turn them inside-out quick enough, boy! Them La Diabliesse ain't joking around!"

Sargeant reached in his pocket and pulled out a wad of hundred dollar bills. He counted five and handed them to the officer and said, "You could share that up with your boys. Tell them keep a eye out for the one-hoof woman. No need to file a report for what happen tonight here with Einstein." He slipped him another hundred. "Look. Here. Buy a bucket of KFC for the family."

-21-

A Moment

Soraya strutted past Yasmeen at the bar counter. Yasmeen called out to her. She raised her eyebrows, dumbfounded to find Soraya's hand attached to a boy's. A good-looking boy's. She waved at them and beckoned for them to come over. "You must be crazy!" she exclaimed. "You can't leave without introducing me to your friend, girl!"

"Giovanni. My cousin, Yasmeen. Yasmeen, Giovanni."

"Silly Soraya! I knew him first," Yasmeen said, giggling.

She threw her arms around Giovanni and snickered. Siddiq shot an annoyed glance from the bar stools and took a quick swig of his beer. Yasmeen turned to Soraya, who stood quietly fuming as well. She said, "We're like two peas in a pod, Giovanni and I."

"I pity the pod," Siddiq groaned, emerging from behind.

"Shut it, you," Yasmeen snapped at Siddiq. She then turned to Giovanni. "How dare you go AWOL. from the scene? And then you come back and I see you with my cousin? You naughty

boy! Love the dragon shirt, by the way." She playfully punched his shoulder.

This whole time, Giovanni had said nothing.

"You are so drunk," Siddiq said, trying not to scowl.

"Shut it, you," she snapped again. She then said to Soraya and Giovanni, "What are your plans? Where are you two running off to?" She can't resist laughing while speaking, "To fuck? I need to know if you two are going to fuck. Are you going to fuck her, Gigolo Giovanni? You going to fuck him, Soraya? Just be back in the morning. Have a good fuck, you two." She laughed loudly.

"That's enough," Siddiq said and he pulled her back to the bar stools.

Soraya, all of a sudden, felt like crying. Her head pulsed. The elation has been drained from her eyes. An anti-climax, like a child oversleeping through Christmas and discovering her gifts has been claimed by another. Someone higher up Santa's *good* list. Someone like Yasmeen. Couldn't fucking decide what she is or what she wants. Devout Muslim or devious mustang. Grabbing her boyfriend's crotch one minute and rubbing up on Giovanni's torso the other.

Soraya scowled at her. The combination of Bloody Marys, Mudslides and marijuana had mutated her entire personality and given her a new sense of humour where everything was a fucking joke.

Giovanni took Soraya's hand and told her, "Let's get outta here."

She looked at him with his hand extended. She was light-headed from the alcohol but still had to make a conscious effort *not* to deconstruct him. Not yet. The surface was too appealing to be dug up and spoilt.

He was handsome, his breath smelled like sweet pineapple and vodka, and his hand was extended to *her*, like leading her down the steps into a medieval ballroom dance. She could give him the benefit of the doubt, she thought She could give it to Claude Laurent, thousands of miles away.

Why not this one?

They began driving without a destination. He expected her to remove her veil but she didn't. She looked at him and he could see the shadow of her smile behind it. She said to him, "I never sat in a Lexus before."

He chuckled. She wanted to slap her forehead. *God, I probably soundin so silly, she thinks, I want him to grab me and kiss me. I want him to be my first kiss.*

But he just leaned back on the driver's seat, buckled up, quietly concentrating on the road. She spoke again, "Everybody loves Yasmeen in my family. All the parents want their child to be Yasmeen."

He said nothing.

She looked over at him. She continued, "Yasmeen is pretty and she has a scholarship and a vocabulary so big you need a dictionary if you want to talk to her sometimes. And she lies and

takes off her hijab and goes to clubs and drinks and smokes weed and breaks every religious rule and still gets whatever she want.”

"Must be hard to live that kinda life," he remarked.

She slumped against the passenger seat and watched the streetlights whisk by along the highway. She wished she had some scotch tape. Then she could wrap it right around her mouth to keep her from saying anything else stupid. She had heard about alcohol serving a dual role as truth serum, but fuck.

This not what anybody wants to hear. He not goin to want me anymore if I keep doing this.

But it was as if she was trapped inside her own body, unable to control it. The subconscious has metamorphosed and stuffed the cognizant down a man-hole.

"It's not really fair," she said. "For someone to be like that. I want to be loved too."

Grrr, stop talking, Soraya!

They stopped a red light. "It's okay," he muttered, for lack of anything else to say amidst such emotional discomfort. He brushed his palm up and down her back. She feared that he would be patronizing now. But, in the same vein, wished he was some a sort of emotional vampire. And that the scent of all this blood enticed him.

So she kept on bleeding.

She wanted him to jump her. At the same time, two horrible thoughts crossed her worried mind. One much more horrible than the other. The first was of Yasmeen stripping for

him, saying *I love you, I love you, I love you*, as articles of clothing went fluttering across the room.

The second was him and Yasmeen talking, and the conversation going like:

"I need you to do me a favour. We like two peas in a pod after all, right, party buddy?"

"What?"

"I have a cousin. Pitiful virgin. Never even kissed a boy. Not bad-looking, though, and I'm going to make sure she looks even more not bad-looking Friday night. What say you show her a good time?"

"What is in it for me?"

"Don't you understand the word favour? Don't you men love virgins?"

"What do I do?"

"Approach her. Buy her a piña colada. Talk to her. Laugh at her jokes. Show her a good time, Gigolo Giovanni!"

The light turned green.

She calmed herself down. No, that couldn't be how it went down, she thought. Their knowing each other had nothing to do with any of this, she tried to convince herself. She asked him, "You know Yasmeen long now?"

He shot a glance at her. "Is it important?"

She hesitated. "No," she murmured.

She thought, *Please don't turn the car around.*

"I don't want to talk about Yasmeen," he said.

Please don't leave me here in the highway.

She gave him an apologetic smile.

They stopped at a red light again. She leaned against his arm, hugging his tricep for a second.

Oh, God, he's letting me touch him. She felt his fingers on her jaw, then her chin, pressing upwards slightly. She raised her head.

Then he lifted her veil and kissed her.

It was over before she even realised what happened.

For a moment, she thought she imagined it. For a moment, she never would've believed it happened if not for the pineapple and spearmint flavour of his breath lingering in her mouth. She did not want to exhale it.

Oh, God. He kissed me.

Oh, God. My first kiss.

She wanted him to do it again but did not want to ask. When the light turned green again, she pouted. As they drove, she stays alert for more traffic lights.

Oh, God. Someone kissed me. On the lips! And it was better than I thought! Oh God, what a night! There will be anniversaries held every year on this day!

He said to her, "This week was a hard week for me. I want to carry you to a place I like to relax. You know the Temple in the Sea?"

"Yeah. We're going there?"

"Yeah. It's about twenty minutes away but it's worth it. You ever went?"

"No."

"Good. Because if you have to see it, you have to see it at high tide. I need to relax my head a lil. I think you need to do some relaxing yourself."

They kept driving. The delirium that had taken hold of her grew more and more acute as they passed green light after green light after green light. She tried to will the amber and the red into them to no avail. She wanted to explode. She wanted to put her head out the car window and scream, *He kissed me! I am in love!*

They remained in a comfortable silence as they drove through a sleepy village and then turned on a dark bumpy road that split two big empty patches of land. No streetlights for almost a half-mile. The headlights reflected off a few prayer flags in the distance. Pink, yellow and blue flapping in the night wind. Bright lamps illuminated the lot.

He parked the car at a corner of the lot and left it running. Three other cars were parked there, one at each of the other corners. At the center of the lot is a plinth and statue of a small Indian man with his hands clasped together.

"Want to take a walk?" he asked.

Soraya nodded. He switches the engine off. He said, "Maybe the wind will blow that veil away." Which made her laugh harder than she meant to.

As soon as she stepped out of the car, a harsh chilly breeze hit her. He slipped his arm around her torso. The colony of

sleeping dogs barely lifted their ears at them. They walked to an edge, where the land ended and the marsh began.

She imagined egrets wading across this area when the tide went down. Past the marsh was the Waterloo Bay, sounding a muted rumble from the water's ebb, sloshing its salt into the wind. Scattered heaps of garbage, old tyres, soft drink bottles and paper plates lined the marsh. A small boat, anchored to a bamboo pole, bobbed silently in the bay.

A stone jetty-like walkway formed a bridge across the bog to the podium that elevated the small temple. They walked along it. The wind fluttered the leaves from the trees in the distance, making a soothing swishing sound.

Soraya kicked an old cracked, charred clay pot by mistake. A deya burnt out months since the last Divali. They circled the temple once and peered through the burglar proof at the statues inside.

He lifted her veil and kisses her there. She went dizzy. Again, he expected her to untie the veil from her head. But she didn't. They sat with their backs to the temple. She said to him, "Do you know how long a moment is supposed to last?"

"A moment?"

"Yes. In seconds."

"Can't really tell. It have nothing saying anything bout that."

"Ninety seconds," she said, "According to some old English metric scale."

He raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yes," she said, nodding with pride.

"Ah." He remained quiet for a while. She brushed her fingers delicately over his. Then he asked, "Want to go back to the car? Getting cold here."

Her heart beat fast. This was it, she thought.

She nodded and beamed at him.

They hugged each other as they walked back to the car. They both hopped into the backseat this time. She went in first and pulled him inside excitedly. He kissed her neck and then stopped to close the car door. He slipped his hand under her top and squeezed her breast a little too firmly. She gasped.

"Sorry," she said.

"For what?"

"They're so small. Other girls have bigger."

He said nothing. He took his hand out of her top. And, for a second, it looked like he wants to call the whole thing off. *No, no, no*, she repeats in her head. But then he rested his head against her chest.

"Sorry," he said. "I have a confession."

FUCK!

"What?" The syllable barely escaped her mouth. She smiled anxiously.

"I had a hard week," he said. She felt his suddenly laboured breaths against her chest. "I just got out of something. And I had come out tonight hoping to meet someone and sleep with them and forget about that other person."

"That—That is all?" Soraya stammered, her heart still pounding fast.

He looked at her and winced his eyes. "That don't bother you?"

She held back a smile, but not the sigh of relief. "No, no! Not at all!" she said, laughing. She ran her palm down the nape of his neck.

Oh God, he feels so warm and good against me.

But she tried to restrain herself. She had to respect the conversation, so she asked, "What happened?"

"She was in love with someone else. Actually, I dunno if she was in love with either of us. Don't matter now, right? The days of forgetting have begun."

Then she let it out. She didn't even realise what she was saying. "I'll be good for you, Giovanni," she said. "Any day, week, month, year. I'm not Yasmeen. I'm so much better. I'll be better than any of them other stupid girls you ever been with. Them simple, stupid girls."

She looked down and browsed the worry in his face as she said this. "Thanks," was all he said. "That is nice." His tone was totally devoid of flattery. He might as well have said, *Bless your empty little head.*

She breathed hard. Her chest heaved. She said, "God, you think what I saying is bullshit. It's not."

"You dunno anything bout me, Soraya."

"That's okay," she said, smiling. "You make me so happy so far. What a night. I'm havin so much fun."

He kissed her chest. "I'm havin fun too."

"Horror-movie fun," she said, laughing.

Then someone taps on the car window. She could only make out the Cheshire cat smile on the man. He tapped the window again. Giovanni groaned and turns around.

"Nice Lexus," the smiling man said. "I wish I had one."

-22-

Two Cyclists

Ashu turned the hot water on.

He scrubbed the stench of the sweat off his skin while Shala sat on the toilet on the other side of the shower curtain.

"You better come back quick," Ashu told her. "You going to miss your bicycle race on Saturday."

"I probably woulda win this time too," Shala said. "I train til my feet bleed, I tell you! And all them hours just lost now! It have nothing worse than lost time. Lost hours."

"I dunno why we stopped cycling together."

"Maybe because you always wanted to stay in the same boring route."

"You used to want to go down quite D'Abadie and Arima and all the way east! You want me to ride over rickety old bridges and rocky trails to mash up my bicycle."

"And I used to get in so much trouble when I come home." She laughed. "Some days, though, it woulda be nice to have somebody to share being in trouble with."

Ashu began rubbing shampoo into his hair. He said, "Sometimes I wish I coulda be there with you. I honestly sometimes wished that. But then they woulda stop both of we from riding, instead of havin the agreement that you could ride if responsible, accountable, mature Ashu go come along to *supervise* you."

She giggled. He washed his hair. She said, her tone suddenly somber, "Why didn't you come to supervise me at the big race last year, Ashu?"

He said, "I never apologized for that. I'm sorry."

"I was really mad that day, boy."

"I know."

"Everyone was there at the finish line, you know? Mommy, daddy, friends, Ali. Everyone. Everyone but *you*. All the other cyclists had their boyfriends and girlfriends there, ready to hug them and give them water bottles. But that was too much to ask. I couldn't get that. Instead, I get Ashutosh Shah."

Ashu didn't say anything.

She continued, "I came second. That not worth anything to you?"

He said nothing still. He turned the shower off and stepped out, patting his hair with the towel.

He told her, "I really wish you could be there for the race on Saturday."

"Wouldn't make sense. How I going to ride, Ashu?"

He wrapped the towel around his waist. He leaned over to her and kissed her cheek and told her, "Still. I wish you could be there."

-23-

Showdown at the Temple in the Sea

Jai sat atop one of the pyre pedestals, sucking on a mint and listening to the white flags, lining the muddy banks of Waterloo Bay, flap in the cold night wind. The smell of ignited coal and propane still lingering in the air. From there, he could observe the parking lot and the walkway to the Temple in the Sea.

Phantom Shala trembled and huddled close to him. She grabbed his arm and rubbed her chin against the crook of his shoulder. "What they doing?" she asked.

"Pacing around the walkway. I am ready."

"No," she said, her voice shaky from the cold. "Not the right time yet. Not yet."

Jai was oddly calm. Nerves of steel, he thought to himself.

Waiting outside Club Eden, though, tested him. He had jitters. While Giovanni had been probably partying his ass off inside, jamming the crotch of his saga-boy jeans against a row of honeys, Jai could not risk following him inside and losing sight of him. For Jai, trying to tag someone in a club was like trying to keep his eye on a tennis ball while Anna Kournikova and Maria Sharapova's skirts kept hiking up their thighs.

So he decided to stay out of the club. Aside from watching a girl vomiting her guts out near the tyres of Hilux, he spent most of his time loitering around the car park, pacing up and down the rows of cars while maintaining his gaze at the Lexus IS 250.

He revised the stratagem—the scheme of attack—to pass the time. The plan was to hide under the car and, from there, drag Giovanni to the ground by the ankle. Then he would hook his head between the car seat and probably slam the car door against his head. Not too hard. Not to crack his skull or anything, but hard enough to dizzy and debilitate him more than the worst hangover. Enough to steal his keys and drive off with the Lexus with his ass writhing in the backseat.

Maybe Giovanni would facilitate a less violent version of this plan by loading himself up with enough Appletinis and Jägerbombs before exiting the club, Jai hoped.

They would drive to a secluded spot from there. Maybe to a spot a few minutes away from the yachts in Chaguaramas, where he could duct tape his hands and feet together and threaten to push his ass off a jetty into the water below if he refused to 'fess up about what he knows about Shala.

But that plan got squashed when Giovanni came out around midnight with company.

The company of a short girl dressed in a burgundy bubble dress and a veil covering half her face. Jai scolded himself for not anticipating an event where there would be collateral damage. He also weighed out the possibility that this girl might be Giovanni's next victim.

He decided to improvise. He had his arrows, his duct tape and his Frankenstein Monster mask. Another plan would materialise, he thought. He followed their car to the Temple in the Sea. When they parked at the lot, he parked a couple yards away at the adjacent crematorium.

Jai and Shala walked away from the crematorium and to the parking lot. They sat on the concrete ground near the Lexus' back wheels.

"Feel confident?" Shala asked.

"Yes. This is going to be too easy."

Jai looked up at the sky. Not many stars could be seen from fume-choked Port-of-Spain and Barataria, Jai recalled. But here, in the rural, they were speckled in ribbon-shaped streaks. The last time he had seen as many stars had been his first night in the forest after the escape.

He had been running until his legs burned. He ran until he wasn't even sure he was being chased by the last kidnapper anymore. When night came, he stopped running. He couldn't see

shit. He lied on the ground, face up, and that was when he first noticed the stars.

Two images crossed his mind when he did. The first was a giant orchestra of stars playing their symphony that went unheard anywhere outside of their amphitheatre. The second was a vast boneyard, populated with skulls with gold coins planted in their eye sockets, surrounded by the devil in the form of the sickle-curved quarter moon. Either way, each sight slowly destroyed him. He could not keep his eyes away, even with his stomach grumbling, the ants and mosquitoes eating him alive. And the aftertaste of unwashed bloody dick still in his mouth.

Maybe it was that shrinking feeling so many people claimed to feel after seeing a full-blown starry sky. But it didn't exactly seem like that.

"It made you feel insignificant?" Doc had asked him.

"At first," he said. "My only thought was the universe is too fuckin big. And then I imagined that it wasn't me lookin up at them but they were lookin down at me, eating popcorn and rooting for me."

He didn't sleep that night. But he didn't suffer either.

Lying in the dirt with mud in his hair and batting tiny flies away from his ears was a blessing compared to the deal with the rope, the crocus bag and the semen on his chin. Jai had never felt more lost, though. He could be way up in the Northern Range or way down Guayaguayare or, for all he could tell, he could be going in circles in Cleaver Woods Recreational Park.

But he didn't let it bother him too much. Being here was still better than being *back there*.

What he *was* concerned with was that in this forest lurked a deranged soldier with camouflage fatigues, a loaded gun and two dead partners. He remembered war movies where there was always that one crazy trigger-happy maniac in the army who only signed up just to satisfy his blood-thirst. And if it wasn't going to be military execution that was going to kill Jai, it was going to be starvation and possible dysentery

In the morning, he couldn't take the hunger anymore.

He wasn't taking his chances eating any leaves or weird berries that could possibly poison and paralyze his ass. He lifted a log and watched the termites, ladybirds and damselflies scuffling with each other. He pinched them and ate them. He just didn't think about it. And then he ate some more.

Shala gave him a sharp nudge and whispered, "Jai. Look. They coming back to the car now. Get ready."

He heard the two bodies flop down into the backseat and a preview of stifled moans before being muted by the car door being slammed shut. Shala looked at him.

"Ready," he said.

"Give me a kiss, hero." And he kissed her and sucked on her tongue before she vanished.

He suddenly found himself alone with just the mission at hand. No distractions now.

He got up and meandered slowly to the car door. He peeked through the window and saw Giovanni lying on top of the veiled girl, his head propped against her small chest. Both of them still fully dressed.

Jai smiled widely.

He had to knock on the window twice to get their attention. He took pleasure in Giovanni's disoriented, baffled facial expression.

"Nice Lexus," Jai said. "I wish I had one."

Giovanni struggled to turn around to lock the car door, even trying twice to hit the knob with his heel. But failing each time.

The girl screamed and scrambled up against the other door.

Jai flung the car door open and grabbed Giovanni by his ankle. He pulled and grunted and landed backward on his ass with Giovanni's left shoe in his hand. His eyes shot up to Giovanni tumbling out of the backseat. He hurried to open the driver's door. The girl was still cowering in the backseat, her knees raised to her forehead.

Jai's soles slid against the dirt as he lunged towards Giovanni and tackled him to the ground. He then grabbed him by his collar and dragged him across the parking lot, his jeans grazing against the coarse concrete. Nobody from the other cars bothered to come out.

At the same time Jai reached into his pocket for the duct tape, Giovanni latched his two legs around Jai's ankle and tripped him. As he made an effort to break away, Jai drew an

arrow from his pocket and jabbed it just above Giovanni's stomach.

Giovanni fell and squirmed in pain. He had bitten his tongue until it bled. Jai quickly wrapped the duct tape around his wrists and ankles and dragged him to the temple walkway. He prodded his body with his foot. The water below was shallow, but was still surely able to pull off the job to drown a motherfucker. Jai still preferred near the yacht yard at Chaguaramas.

"Tell me where she is," Jai said, "or forever hold your peace." He nudged him with his foot again.

"Fuck!" Giovanni exclaimed. "You want the car, just take the fuckin car and go! The keys right in the ignition!"

Jai staved his ribs hard. "The girl!"

"What girl!" Giovanni bellowed, his eyes growing hot, breathing hard and fast now.

Jai kicked his side again. He shouted, "THE GIRL! WHERE IS SHE?"

"WHAT GIRL!" Giovanni retorted.

Jai rummaged through his pockets and pulled out his wallet. His first reasoning for opening his wallet was to take a look at his ID. His second reasoning was to rob him of his petty cash. His third reasoning was for any evidence that could be admissible against him: a receipt, a cinema ticket, maybe.

But he wasn't expecting the fucker of a revelation he got.

Shala's picture, the size of a passport photograph, carefully positioned and displayed near the left pocket behind a sheet of

plastic. Smiling this time. Not like the stern head-shot used for the newspaper article.

All the blood drained from Jai's face. "Tell me you don't know what I talkin about," he said. Calm now. Serene.

"I don't know," Giovanni said. "I don't know where Shala is. I had nothing to do with that."

"You really don't know?"

"No." Giovanni's voice went hoarse.

Jai took a deep breath. He looked up at the sky. All the stars in the sky burning bright with anticipation. "People like you don't deserve to live," Jai said.

He pulled his last arrow from his backpocket and aimed.

With one brutal arc, it was done.

Bull's eye.

Through the eye and into the brain.

The mouth still frozen open in shock.

Jai watched the body go through its final muscle twitches and before kicking it into the water. He watches the water go red with the blood.

He popped a mint in his mouth, donned his Frankenstein mask and walked back to the parking lot. One of the cars had driven off by now. The other three, including the Lexus, sat still. As Jai approached the Lexus, the engine let out a fantastic roar.

He froze. The headlights blinded him. He covered his eyes with his arm.

The engine roared again.

And then a loud shriek burst forth as the Lexus flew across the lot.

"Shit."

Jai's last word, barely making its way through his lips, before the bumper connected with his kneecaps and pulled him under the car.

The car skidded as the brakes screeched. The back tyre crushes Jai's right arm. He breathed hard, coughing up blood. He was stuck facing the apparati of the car's underneath.

A bleeding mechanic.

A snapped bone protruded through his leg just above his kneecap. His ribs were broken. Broken, hopefully, instead of shattered.

Badman doh dead just so.

The car door swung open and he heard wedge heels clacking against the concrete.

No pattern to them. Sporadic. Dizzied. Panicked.

He tried to speak but no sound came out. He instead coughed up more blood anytime he tried to say something. The heels paced around. He heard crying. But it became fainter and fainter.

The blood settled in his throat. He tried to hawk it up but soon found that he couldn't get any air down to his lungs anymore. No use breathing now, he thought. Just let the blood fill the lungs.

Back, after the escape, staggering through the forest, he had come across a stream. He followed the flow of the water. The water had to end up somewhere, he thought. Sweat and grime coated his skin, thorns stuck his legs and a mean rash began spreading across his right arm but he couldn't stop. At one point, he knocked over a wasp nest and paid for it with eleven stingers in his body, seven of those on his face and neck. He splashed his face with the water and kept going, even when bush and more bush was ahead of him.

When he first saw the sandy pool and the clearing and the coconut palms and the heavy sunlight, he almost peed himself.

His eyes opened wide.

His strength came back and he tripped over his own feet a few times in his own stubborn haste as he lumbered across the thick grass. When he got to the sand, he laughed. He laughed as he loped to the coast and collapsed, letting the warm waves wash over his body.

And he finally slept.

A fisherman and his two children discovered him three hours later.

Authorities were quickly notified and he was carried to Mount Hope General Hospital before being relocated to a private clinic. When he had the strength, he returned his father's hugs and his sister's hugs.

In his statement, he mentioned the two murdered kidnappers and the other still on the loose out there. He left out the part about them wearing army uniforms. He didn't take credit

for any of it, though. "He just swoop in and came guns a-blazing. It happened so fast. I didn't even get to see his face. He told me he was a superhero, undid my ropes and told me to run," he claimed.

He enjoyed a short-lived minor celebrity and the newspaper headline the next day read,

**MYSTERY HERO SAVES BOY
FROM KIDNAPPERS.**

"In the end, would you say you feel like a superhero?" Doc asked him, closing his file.

"I think so," he said, "and well, I have a hell of an origin story now."

The Ride Back

Soraya couldn't keep her eyes off the twitching legs.

The sight reminded her of when Dorothy Gale's house fell on the Wicked Witch of the East. She dared not peek under the car. She shut the car door and wiped her eyes. Her face was still hot with tears and fright. Her eyeliner smeared. She peered at the two other cars, still parked quietly amongst the chaos.

Then she began walking away as fast as she could.

Walk, bitch, just walk.

Walk before the black vultures smell the fresh killings and begin circling the temple forming a big dark halo of death in the grey night sky. She undid her veil and lets the wind whisk it away. Her entire body felt like jelly. With each brisk step, a little chunk of herself fell off and bounced off the undulating asphalt.

She tripped, falling to her knees and wiping snot from her nose. But she got up again and kept walking.

She saw some streetlights in the distance. She passed sleepy houses and a gathering of drunk men blasting chutney

music from a pick-up who wolf-whistled to her as she wobbled by.

"Dahlin'! Dahlin'! Where you off to? The party right here, dahlin'!"

She hung her head low and kept walking until came to a main road. There, she sat on the sidewalk and looked at the cars zooming by. About two every minute. No buses and no taxis this hour of the night.

So she did something every adult told their child not to do.
She stuck out her hand.

The seventh car pulled over to the sidewalk. A beat-up white Datsun Sunny. An old Indian man, about fifty, with bushy eyebrows leaned over the passenger seat and said with a wincing smile, "What you doin out this hour, Miss? Where you headed?"

The man looked friendly enough, Soraya thought. And sober enough. He wore a red-and-black striped jersey tucked hastily into his pants. His greying hair curled and crimped beneath a black cap. He has a large bulbous nose, thick-framed glasses over his deeply set eyes not yet surrounded by wrinkles, and a forehead yet to be populated by furrows. His face was clean-shaven except for a patch of shallow stubble congregating near his left sideburn.

"Arima," she said.

"I was headed east, anyway," he said. "Come. This is not no place for young women to be wandering bout in the middle of the night." He opened the car door.

She got in and they drove off. The radio was off and the road was clear. The car smelled faintly of cigarette smoke and Chinese fast food. An old rosary and a tiny black plastic spider bobbed over the rearview mirror.

She nibbled on her knuckles.

The man said that his name was Raymond. She told him that her name was Yasmeen. She had formulated an entire fake backstory. That she is nineteen, close to twenty, writing A' Levels. Had a bad relationship fight culminating into her boyfriend telling her to get out of the car and find her way home herself. But Raymond didn't ask anything else.

"I have a daughter who look just like you," he said.

On the highway, he spoke at length about his efforts to try to keep young. His entire diet program and daily routine. He revealed his age to be fifty-two.

"You look healthy for fifty-two," Soraya said quietly.

He smiled. He told her that the secret was in plenty morning walks, plenty sun, plenty fibre, plenty tea and plenty stewed fish.

"Just keep the blood pumpin!" he told her, letting out a small laugh.

She yawned.

"You tired?" he asked her.

"Just want to be home in bed," she replied.

He patted her knee and told her that she'll be there soon and that she can sleep in the car by the time. She closed her eyes but did not fall asleep. Couldn't sleep. So she does not see the

car missing the turn to the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway and instead veering off to El Socorro.

The car rolled to a stop and he pulled up the handbrake.

Soraya opened her eyes and saw that they were parked facing a thicket.

He turned to her.

They each didn't say anything. He unzipped his pants and pulled out his penis, already fully erect, mounted on a tuft of grey pubic hair. He took his cap off and set it on the dashboard, revealing a bald spot on his crown. Crickets chirped outside. She imagines the hunk of cartilage speaking to her. *Cash, check or credit card?*

"I ain't take it out for air, Yasmeen," Raymond said to her.

She breathed deeply. "I can't."

"You planning to walk from El Socorro to Arima?"

"Mister..." she began. Then paused. Her mind returned to the parking lot. Cowering in the backseat, hoping the worst would be that Giovanni would have his car stolen. And maybe he would dial the police to come pick them up to the station and file a grand theft auto report. Somewhere in between that, hopefully, he could see past the night as a *anomaly* and exchange numbers with her. Even just for the sake of *correlating evidence* with the police. And she would go home and he would call her at night and, twenty years from then, they would talk about it like it was some great joyride. An adventure in their youths.

But she instead, she saw his body hit the water. And constantly looked around to see if any of the cars would budge. Would anyone come out? What was wrong with these people?

Schadenfreude was a term Claude used in his letters when he wanted to write about the more violent side of his ardour. "I will taste and lick the sweet schadenfreude off the handcuffs on your delicate wrists and off the tips of whips cracked on your supple backside," he had written. The first time he had used it, he put a footnote, saying the word was German and meant pleasure derived from the pain of others.

When she looked it up in the dictionary herself, she realised that he was using it incorrectly. It did not mean pleasure from the kind of pain Claude wrote about. Not physical fail. It meant pleasure from another's misfortune. The pleasure in watching someone collapse unto themselves, destroy themselves.

Maybe Raymond the old man was feeling this electrifying *schadenfreude* right now. Maybe he was a good man, she thinks. She eyed his erect penis, trying to imagine it as some arbitrary blob of cartilage. With its base enveloped by his pants and unable to see where it actually affixed to his crotch, she imagined it to be an organism independent of the human body. An epiphyte.

"Mister, don't," she pleaded softly.

He caressed her thigh. And as much as she hated it, she felt wet. His hands slithered up her top, over her belly and then to her breasts. She didn't fight it. He grabbed her breast and thumbed her nipple softly. Then he leaned over and kissed her

neck, reaching down to touch the soaked patch on the crotch of her panties.

"But look you like it, girl!" he said, chuckling. "Why you complaining?" He grabbed her wrist and guided her hand over his shaft. He directed her hand up and down, up and down.

Then he let go and she began doing it for herself. "I just want to go home," she said, her voice breaking, looking at him, still doing it.

He laid his car seat back and let out a hoarse groan. "Girst things first. Get your pretty lips down there."

Pretty lips? She felt bad for taking it as a compliment.

His palm pressed hard against the back of her head like he was operating a jammed lever. But she stopped resisting. She took him in her mouth.

To her surprise, he ejaculated in less than a minute. "Oh, yes," he crooned in hushed satisfaction before giving her a napkin to wipe her lips.

She pinched some of his semen between her fingertips, watching, with a listless daze, as the goo coagulated. He zips up his pants and they get back on the highway. She gave him directions to the apartment complex and he dropped her off and speeds off without a word.

No goodbye, no take care, nothing.

Then she realised Yasmeen and company hadn't returned yet. After all of that, she realised that she still had to wait outside for them. Soft flute music sounded from the park across the road.

She followed it to find the old man still in the rocking horse, playing his ney. He smiled at her.

"How was your night?" he asked.

She sat on the rocking horse next to his. She said nothing. She just rocked.

He said, "You look tired. Close your eyes. I'll play you a lullaby."

So he put the ney to his lips and began playing. Soraya closed her eyes and slumped forward against the horse's plastic mane, finally asleep.

Accusations

Charlie got back home past three in the morning.

And Genieve had already fallen asleep on the living room couch with the television still on, the television displaying a card with the scheduled programmes for the day, accompanied with soft steelpan music playing in the background. He didn't bother to turn it off, out of worry of waking her up.

He made his way to the bathroom and splashed water on his face. It burned. He looked at his face in the mirror. The skin around his right eye was slightly darker than the rest of his face and he figured that, by morning, it would be even darker. His lips had been swollen purple. A small cut dashed his left cheek. A small gash lined perpendicular to his right eyebrow. When he washed the dried blood from his face, the damages didn't look as bad as he had imagined. But nothing that could be easily hidden either.

He didn't know how he would explain his bruises to Genieve.

He went to bed and pulled the blanket over his entire body. He imagined himself mummified, or a dead body strapped to a gurney.

He woke up around two in the afternoon. As he lay in bed, he wondered if he could just stay in his room for a week. After a week, the bruises wouldn't be so prominent and he wouldn't have to answer any questions. Genieve would never believe, nor pretend to believe any lies about this.

But he hadn't eaten in a day. His stomach grumbled. His first plan for the day was to go to the kitchen, get lunch and hurry back to his room before Genieve could spot him. He checked his face in the bedroom mirror first. The discoloration around his eye had worsened over the night.

He headed to the kitchen. He already caught a whiff of the callaloo, crab and plantains sitting over the stove. While quickly pouring a ladle of callaloo on his plate, he heard Genieve from behind him. "You had me worried like hell."

"Sorry," he said, scooping a cooked crab out of the pot. He heard her opening the fridge and sifting through bowls inside.

"You are a big boy now," she said. "You have to start thinkin bout getting a job. Or you ain't done livin life in London yet?"

He held the plate with his left hand and walked past her. He pretended to scratch his temple, shielding the black eye from her in the process.

"Wait," she said. "Move your hand."

"I gonna go eat," he said hastily.

"Move your hand." She deepened her voice. Her tone strict. She took the plate from his hand and set it down on the counter. "Or I will move it for you, so help me God."

He shifted his hand away, revealing the black eye. "Oh, my Lord," she said and she immediately sprinted to the medicine cabinet. "Get your tail on the living room couch," she commanded.

He obeyed. Two minutes after, she followed, bringing a roll of gauze, an ice pack and some rubbing ointment. He pressed the ice pack over his eye while she dabbed a moist cloth over the cuts.

When she was done applying the gauze, she sat next to him, curling her eyebrows with worry. She didn't give him the luxury of having to ask. She just sat and waited for him to talk. "I'll come home earlier next tie," he said.

"Next time? You know, heaven forbid, there ain't gon be no *next time* unless you tell me what this is about!"

He imagined the embarrassment of her making a big issue of it in church and storming up and down the streets asking all the neighbourhood G's which low-life jumped him, and why. And somewhere in there, she would report it to the police and Constables Clean and Stubble would be laughing their asses off.

So he told her straight. "I got arrested," he said, "and the police laid down a few blows on me."

She covered her mouth with her palm and her eyes went teary almost instantly. She rubbed the back of his head. "No," she said, her voice breaking, clicking her tongue. "No, no, no. What you do, Charlie? You do something bad?"

"You think if it was something so bad I would be here now?"

"Charlie, Charlie, Charlie," she kept saying, looking out the window to her left. "You had to be doin something for the police to lock you up and give you a beating like this."

He said nothing. She closed her eyes and quietly mouthed a prayer. When she opened her eyes, she wiped them and looked at him. "I don't want you to be like them other boys," she told him. "I will ask God to help you. You think I want my only son to end up in jail? You need to cut off the bad company—they corner boys who does be smoking weed whole day."

"I'm not friends with any of them people."

She ignored him. "These people have no God in them. While they out robbing people, their mother in church with me, crying on the pews, praying to the Lord, saying, Jesus, please save these children. Please deliver them from their slackness. I never thought I woulda have to join them one day."

Charlie pouted. "I didn't do anything to get lock up."

She shushed him. "I tried to get a man in this family, you know. Father in heaven know that. You used to think it was just for me but it was for you too. All boys need a father figure. I am sorry I never coulda give that to you, Charlie." She leaned over and buried her face in her palms.

He rubbed her back. "It's okay." He just wanted her to stop talking.

She lifted her face from her palms. Then stared at the ground. "You know, when you was small, you always used to ask where daddy was. One day I just tell you daddy on important business abroad. You felt so good the day I tell you that, you know that? You use to wait for him almost *everyday*." She wiped her eyes again.

Charlie shuffled on the couch. "You know, is alright. Some fathers does just bail. Is a fact of life, and I understand that. I am hungry. I want to eat."

"Children's fathers supposed to be models of God." She looked at the ceiling. "When you was small, I shoul'da just tell you he get hit by a train. I dunno where your father is, Charlie. Hopefully dead or in jail. I don't want to know. I can barely remember that bastard's face."

"What you talkin bout?"

She brushed her hair back and let out a nervous laugh. "You know how they say abortion is murder? Is a sin? But then they turn around their words when it come to rape. I'm not one of *them* people to turn their words around. Rape or no rape—you have a baby inside you—is the same life you going to take."

Charlie paused. He breathed deeply, but said nothing. He couldn't find the right words. Genieve didn't expect him to.

"As I say," she said, "I barely see he face. He coulda be anybody. I dunno if they ever catch him. I musta been like your age when it happen."

Charlie stayed quiet.

"But I got you from it," she said, trying to uplift her tone. "A beautiful baby boy. I thought that you was the Lord's compensation for my pain. When I see you, I don't think bout that. I don't think bout it. But it was bad of me to think you wouldn't either."

Charlie shifted uncomfortably. He focused on the oscillating fan, watching it blow the curtain. "The arrest was a case of mistaken identity. So you don't have to worry bout me being in jail," he said. He set the ice pack down on the cushion and left his food on the counter before storming out the house.

He walked across the street to the savannah, where a group of boys tussled their feet around a football. Shirts versus skins. Jack was amongst them, playing skins. Charlie sat by the drain and watched them play. Jack scored a goal and cavorted around with his arms stretched outwards.

He didn't notice Charlie until the game was over.

Or maybe he had been pretending not to notice.

Charlie noted the reluctance in Jack's gait, but was thankful to find him standing before him.

"You ain't looking too good," Jack said.

"I ain't feeling too good either." He can barely restrain using his sour tone.

They began walking towards two water tanks in the distance. An abandoned car sat on the grass, with stone blocks replacing its wheels and almost all of the interior furnishing ripped out. Jack hopped on the bonnet and produced a pack of

cigarettes from his pocket. He lit one up. He offered Charlie a pull, but he refused.

After a prolonged silence, Charlie said, "I hate this place."

"Charlie," Jack sighed.

"We not in the Dark Ages anymore."

Charlie scowled. "I hate this country, Jack. I hate Trinidad and Tobago. For the longest time, I used to hope somehow I not totally tied to this place. You ever just feel like you was born in the wrong place? Somebody getting kill everyday, and the police look to pick up somebody for *public indecency*. We culture is a joke. The same fuckin theme every year! *Mash up de place, mash up de place*. That is we culture. We eh know how to do nothing else but *mash up de place!* We don't care bout anything."

Jack rubbed his shoulder. "Calm down"

"This not a fuckin joke! Boy, let it rot. The squatter homes, the fishing holes, the ghetto, the plantation houses and murtis. Let the flies and locusts come. Let the frogs rain. Let it burn—"

"Stop being so melodramatic," Jack interrupted. He took a long drag on the cigarette. "I know this is about me bussing out and leaving your tail high and dry. You wanted me to grow a sense of solidarity, Charlie? And do what? You wanted me to come down to the station and have them lock my ass up too? And maybe they woulda get the rest of the station to come watch we in the cell like we was a motherfuckin circus act. And then they would want us to do a few of our special *tricks* for them. You must be on some serious drugs. No way, Jose."

"Right," Charlie said angrily, nodding vigorously. "Instead of havin some solidarity, go clap in church with your fuckin Pentecostals. We both lie to ourselves, Jack. And we both know it. Sometimes I have to wonder which we find scarier: spiders or the truth. A spider could kill your ass in a matter of minutes, Jack. But the truth spreads the dying plenty longer."

"Charlie, calm down."

Charlie checked his watch. He muttered, "And I going to cut this talk right here because I going to be late."

"Late for what?"

"Confession."

Charlie had said nothing as he settled in the backseat of Bobby's taxi.

"The usual?" Bobby asked.

Charlie nodded. As they began driving, Bobby looked at Charlie in the rearview. "What happen to you, Einstein? You get in a fight or something?"

"I'm not Einstein."

"Which one is this? The Arawak?"

"No." Charlie shifted in his seat. "This is Charles Stewart."

"Which one is Charles again? The hunter?"

"Charles is the real one."

Bobby cocked his eyebrows, his eyes shooting up to the rearview mirror. He then raised his hand over the back of his seat, bending his elbow and reaching his palm behind him. "Hurry, I driving with one hand here."

Charlie shook his hand.

Bobby shook back vigorously. "Nice to finally meet you, Charles."

After Bobby dropped him off, Charlie paced the church car park. Kathleen's BMW entered the car park. She beamed as she recognised Charlie. She wound her window down and exclaimed a sprightly hello as she reverse-parked. She got out of her car and she slung her purse around her arm. She wore her usual flower-patterned top and sandals.

"David!" she said, "How are—oh my God, David, *what* happened to your *face*?" She folded her arms.

"Just in the wrong place at the wrong tie," he said, "They didn't get much, though."

"You really do need to stop using those ATMs in Chaguanas, hon!" Kathleen said.

He followed Kathleen to the meeting room, where most of the parents had already congregated in their circle.

Pastor Anderson jiggled his feet. "Kathleen and David!" he said. "Have a seat!"

Charlie pinned his 'David' nametag to his shirt.

"Ouch, David," Gloria said, wincing. "What happened to your eye?"

"Bad luck," Kathleen said, taking a seat.

Gloria shook her head. "Unbelievable," she grumbled, sucking her teeth.

"See, *that* is the wrong attitude there," Naomi said, setting folding her leg. "You saw the two boys that they found dead in

Waterloo? By the Temple in the Sea. A religious place, for God's sake! What heartlessness! The problem isn't lack of luck in this country. The problem is lack of *love*."

"Here we go again," Pastor Anderson mumbled, pushing his palm against his face.

"Lack of love for your fellow man," Naomi said, "Lack of love for yourself! If you don't love yourself, how are you going to treat others right? There are too many devils here and not enough angels."

"She have a point," Gloria said, nodding.

"I have plenty material for my next sermon now," Pastor Anderson said, chuckling, "Mostly everyone is here. I think we can start the session."

"Hamid's missing," Kathleen noted.

"Good," Gloria said. "He should stay so."

"Who's going first?" Pastor Anderson asked.

Charlie raised his hand.

"David!" Anderson said, smiling. "The floor is yours."

Charlie stood up and faked a smile. "I just want to start off commenting on what Naomi said. This country lacks love. I'm sure we all love our children. I love my Sadie." He felt sick, the more he spoke. "But this is a rotten, rotten place to bring your children into."

Kathleen, positioned with her elbow on her knee and her chin on her knuckles, cocked her eyebrows. Pastor Anderson leaned forward. "What makes this place so rotten, David?"

He pointed at the bruises on his face. "There are no angels here. But there are no devils here either."

"Satan gets into some people, David," Sandra said.

Charlie glanced at her. "Because it can't ever be a normal man, right? It can't be a man of *this* world."

Sandra sat back, silent and slightly offended.

"Some rather insightful words, David," Pastor Anderson noted.

"I have a picture of Sadie," Charlie said suddenly.

Kathleen shuffled excitedly in her chair. Charlie produced the small photograph of his baby cousin Petra from his pocket and handed it to her. "Oh, how *adorable!*" she exclaimed

At the same time, Mr. Hamid entered the room. He bypassed greeting everyone and headed straight for the snack table. He said, grinning, "Lemonade. Very good." He took two of the chocolate chip cookies from the tray and then joined the circle.

Gloria grimaced.

"Good evening, Mr. Hamid," Pastor Anderson greeted him.

"Pastor Anderson," Mr. Hamid said, still chewing, "Sorry to be late. Who child we talkin bout?"

"David brought a picture of Sadie!" Kathleen said, still giddy.

"Lemme see," Hamid said, raising his chin. He got up and took the picture from her hand. He held it under the light. He looked at Charlie. Then looked at the picture again. He said,

crumbs falling out his mouth, "She musta take after the mother. I seein nothing in here that could be yours."

Charlie said, "What you trying to say, Hamid?" as he ground his teeth.

Mr. Hamid finished his cookie. "No, no, no," he said, laughing, "I didn't mean nothing by that. Don't get mix-up." He got up and took three more cookies from the tray and stuffed two into his pocket.

Charlie balled his hands into fists. "Those cookies for you?" he snapped, "or you taking them home for all the children you don't like to talk bout?"

Pastor Anderson raised his eyebrows.

"Calm yourself," Mr. Hamid said.

Charlie said, "I think it's about time Hamid here says something about the children we all think he doesn't have."

Everyone turned to Charlie. Some with uncomfortable looks. Some with mouths ajar. "David," Pastor Anderson sighed.

"Finally!" Gloria exclaimed.

Mr. Hamid returned the photograph to David. He finished his lemonade and sets the cup down on the ground. He stood up and fiddled in his pocket for his wallet. He sifted through it and slipped out three photographs and passed them around the group.

"The young one is Hafsah. Ten. The bigger one is Jamila. Fourteen. Form Four." Two of the photographs had the girls standing side by side individually, smiling in their hijabs. The third had Mr. Hamid between them.

"They're very nice, Hamid," Kathleen said softly.

Pastor Anderson nodded as he browsed the photographs. Gloria remained quiet after that.

Hamid said, "Their mother family had a history of suicide. She mother kill sheself. Drink a bottle of weed-killer like it was Coca-Cola. And she grandmother kill herself. I never bother to find out how. I dunno why when I marry her I didn't think she woulda go down the same path. I thought I coulda save her from that. Break the cycle. Doctor diagnose her with having strong mood disorders. Coulda be bipolar. But I don't really want to get into talkin bout that right now. We had a lil greenhouse outside. A year ago, Jamila found her mother hanging there."

Kathleen let out the lone gasp in the room. Everybody else eyed the carpet.

Hamid continued, "What else you want me to say? My children usually behave good. Nothing to talk bout. I sure some bad times are yet to come. I'll be here to talk bout them when they do. And you could make sure and clap when that time comes, Gloria."

He puts the three photos back into his wallet and sat down. Charlie gnashed his teeth again.

He looked up at the anguished Jesus looking down at him. Then at everyone else.

Kathleen absent-mindedly thumbed the locket on her necklace.

Pastor Anderson jiggled his foot, his shoe halfway off. A humbled Gloria still curving her lips in sullen scorn.

Without saying a word, Charlie got up from his chair so fast that he almost threw it backward. Then he quietly walked out of the room, much to everyone's bewilderment.

The Uphill Struggle

Saturday came and Ashu awakened promptly at three thirty in the morning. By the time he had gotten to Port of Spain, it was a quarter past four. The race had been scheduled to start at half past five.

Ashu mulled around the exterior of the Queen's Park Savannah with the rest of the competitors, all races and genders gathered from all over the country. Many of them did stretching exercises. Wives fastened helmets around their husband's chins. A few sleepy boyfriends patted sunscreen on their girlfriends' arms. Maybe seventy or eighty riders in all.

Ashu stood by himself, next to his brand new 26-inch wheel Schwinn Ridge AL Mountain Bike. He busied himself by attaching reflector tape to the back. A limp home-made pennant flag hung in the back with the words, **REMEMBER VISHALA P.**, in bold letters.

He remembered the phone call from two nights before.

"Ashu, oh my God," the girl on the other line said, "I just sitting here thinking bout the whole thing and it would be wrong for me to not tell you that it have a chance the police might check you out."

He finally recognised this voice as Nalini, one of Shala's classmates from university. One that he always had next to no interest in talking to. "Slow down," he told her. "What you talking bout?"

"You have the papers?"

"Which one?"

"Any one. It's on all the front pages."

Ashu had been staying away from the newspapers for the past week or so. He grabbed the Express from the kitchen table and read the headline:

DOUBLE MURDER AT TEMPLE IN THE SEA

Two pictures of the crime scenes were printed. The first was the picture of two police officers standing over a pair of legs sticking out from under a car. The caption read:

The first victim, identified as former kidnap victim, Jaikaran Bhanji, was found crushed beneath an automobile.

The second one pictured an officer peering down from the temple walkway. The caption of that one read:

The second victim, identified as Giovanni Elias, was found floating near the banks in the low tide with an arrow piercing his eye socket.

"Gruesome," he said. "But what's your point?"

"The one who get the arrow in his eye," Nalini told him, "Giovanni. You didn't do it, right?"

Ashu cocked his eyebrows. "Why I would do that?"

She spoke, a solemn crawl in her voice, "They found Shala's picture in his wallet."

"Why would he have that?" Ashu swallowed a lump in his throat.

"You really didn't know?"

Ashu paused. "I knew."

He looked at the in-set of Giovanni Elias' face. He certainly looked more handsome than he had imagined. "How long?" Ashu asked.

"None of we know who the other guy was."

"Huh."

"Just keep on the lookout."

"Thanks for calling."

When Ashu hung up, he sat at the table and looked at the newspaper again. Phantom Shala hovered over him. She placed her palms on his shoulders. He said, "The truth always comes out, don't it?"

"Do you forgive me?" she asked, hugging his neck.

"We have other things to worry bout."

She nodded. "Okay."

He got up and took her hand and said, "Remember I say I had a surprise for you? Come see." He led her to the garage and flicked the light on. It stood at the centre of the room. Rust-resistant powder-coated aluminum MTB frame. SR Suntour suspension fork. Linear front and rear brakes. 1.95 inch-thick-tyres on 26-inch alloy wheels. 21-speed!

"That BMX you had was a piece of shit, anyway," he said.

She traced her fingertips along the grips and the tubes. "It's so fucking sexy," she said, her eyes widening. "But Ashu, this is a bike for a man."

"Perfect for you then," he said, smiling.

"This yours, dude?" a man asked him, as he examined the Schwinn.

Ashu said, "Yes."

"It's nice, man," the man said. "Hope you know how to work it."

The man continued to inspect the Schwinn and soon noticed the pennant flag. "Vishala P," the man uttered, "It's a shame about her. I hope she makes it through that ordeal alright. I know the guys here really admired her."

"Who is she to you?" the man then asked.

"My girlfriend," Ashu proclaimed.

"Really?"

"If I coulda, I woulda make that flag as big as a political rally banner for everyone to see and read. And I'm here to win this race and win that first prize to help pay for her ransom."

"Who is that say they winning first prize?" a voice called out. A young black man in black shades trotted up to them. He wore a yellow jersey with a zipper at the chest, terry cloth gloves on his hands and a soaked bandana around his neck.

"Vishala Persaud's boyfriend," the other man said.

"This fella?" the black man asked, standing akimbo and looking at Ashu. They shake hands. "First timer?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Marcus Cornwall," he introduces himself. "Champion of Hot Trails Bike-A-Ton, three years in a row. I tell you, brother, I had to work hard for it. But your woman used to give me real thunder." He removed his shades. "She gon be okay, though, man, don't worry yourself. She is a fighter. Anyone who ever see she blazing the trails in this race wouldn't second-guess that. I wish you luck in this race, brother. I ain't want to say anything to discourage you. But the first time on this track. Man, not easy. Not easy at all. Some of the hills here going to put real pressure on your testicles."

"Thanks for the advice," Ashu said, nodding. "We'll see who adjusting their balls first at the finish line."

Marcus put his shades back on and chuckled. "Make your woman proud, man."

Ashu reviewed the route map one last time before joining the assembly of cyclists at the starting point. When the whistle

blew, cheers sounded from the gathered crowd, "Go, go, go!" followed by a flurry of spinning spokes on the road.

As Ashu rode, the tiny flag wagged behind the bicycle. He already found himself lagging behind. Not last, but close to it. As he pedalled along the road, memories came back to him. He knew he had to concentrate but he partially lost himself in them.

Three.

They pestered each other for the whole day in pre-school. He pulled her hair and she punched his shoulders while they watched Sesame Street. They made each other cry and at the end of each day, they always had to tell each other they were sorry.

On the really bad days, they teacher made them hug.

And when he peed himself and the children were teasing him, "Ashu wee-wee! Ashu wee-wee!" she peed herself too.

He picked up the pace. Daylight broke and he already felt the stinging hot morning sun. The roads were empty save for the rare automobile and the few stray dogs. He leaned forward and began to pedal faster, letting himself sink into another memory.

Seventeen.

Shala in a cherry-coloured halter dress tailored for her slender body and Ashu in a cheap tuxedo with a rose boutonnière pinned to his lapel. They were sitting at a table in Crowne Point Plaza Hotel near the window while everyone slow-danced to a Mariah Carey song.

"God, this music is horrible," Shala said, getting up and walking out the room.

Ashu followed her to find her leaning against the balcony, staring down at the pool. She looked at him. "Want to take a walk?" They took the elevator to the ground floor and walked along the pavement together. They walked past the power plant and leaned against a streetlamp.

"So lame up there," Ashu said.

"Graduation's overrated," she said.

Then she felt a hand on her ass. She flipped around and slapped the hand off of her. She looked at the man the hand was attached to. A slovenly looking Indian mess, laughing away with his small dougla friend. The mess said, "How much for the night, darlin'?"

"Next time you do that," she said, pointing, "You not getting your hand back."

"Pussy have claws," the dougla said, laughing.

Shala looked at Ashu, who just looked on and said and did nothing. She sighed. "Goddamnit, Ashu," she said in an exasperated groan, grabbing his wrist and walking back to the hotel with him.

Ashu was certain he was dead last one hour into the race. The pain re-settled in his feet and he felt like a bag of bricks were tied to his ankles. He stopped for a while and rested his feet as he looks down the winding before him.

He took out his bottle and poured the water over his head. He stretched his legs, adjusted his helmet and started again.

Thirteen.

He was helping her prepare deyas for Divali in her living room. She was placing the wicks in them and he was pouring the oil. Then they took turns striking old matches to ignite the wicks. As he carried the tray of burning clay deyas, the light marked a fulsome bronze sheen on his neck and clean-shaven face. "Ashu," she said. "I love you."

He finally made it down the hillside road. As he stopped again for two minutes, another cyclist rode past. He was slightly relieved to know he hadn't been last that whole time. Maybe even more cyclists are were behind on this god-forsaken route, he thought.

Twenty.

They were biting and running their nails along each other's sides and backs, raking up flesh and skin. He had her pinned her down and she was biting his collarbone, almost drawing blood from it.

After days of avoiding each other, she welcomed his hot breath in her face and his hungry drool leaking down over her lips. She lapped it up lovingly. He ruffled her hair. She twisted her body under his and jabbed at his sternum. He slapped her

face and flipped her on her front, pressing her breasts down on the mattress hard, flattening them like pancakes.

She bawled as his palms swooped down on her left buttock, leaving her flesh stinging. "No!" she screamed, "Stop!"

But he didn't.

He fingered her until she came. When he was done, he lied next to her. She smiled, her eyes still trying to level themselves. "Oh God, I still feelin it," she said, her eyes wincing, her hips bucking spontaneously.

He nearly tipped over on his bicycle. He gripped the handlebars until his palms hurt. The soreness spread to his whole body now. At intervals, he wondered if the pedals were revolving by themselves and it was his feet that had to keep up. He noticed at least twenty cyclists behind him. The blood rushed up to his head and, at moments, he felt like he was going blind.

Then he tumbled off his bicycle, retching up his breakfast.

Nine.

Ashu pushed Shala around in an old wheelbarrow, cackling as he chased her neighbour's chickens around in the street. Puddles lined the road after a night of bucketing rain and he splashed over them with the barrow's wheel. She laughed with utter glee.

Two racers cycled past him. He wheezed. He rose to his feet and picked up the Schwinn. He steadied it, keeping his feet

planted on the ground as he mounted it. He began to slowly pedal.

He pushed the wheelbarrow down the neighbourhood down an old dirt track until they came to a hill. She lifted her head and saw the peace lily plant sitting lonely at the top, its flower stalks swaying wistfully with the wind.

"Ashu?" she had asked.

"What?"

She turned around and looked at him. "I'll marry you if you roll me up that hill so I could pick that flower," she said.

"And if I don't?"

"I'll probably marry you, anyway." She smiled.

"Hold on tight," he said. He raises his shoulders and pushed the barrow as hard as he could. The path up the hill was creased and craggy with mud. He huffed and took his time, dragging the wheel as it got stuck in the pleats of muck.

She looked back and saw his face turning red.

His wheels scraped against some loose gravel and he almost lost his balance. He squeezed the grips and evened the bicycle as if to rein it like a whinnying racehorse. He held his breath and pedalled.

The wheelbarrow jammed against a rock. Little Shala nearly fell and hit her head. Ashu wheezed as his small body tried to turn the barrow and navigate it around the rock.

Ashu fought his own body. His eyes throbbed as they went bloodshot. He gritted his teeth. Sweat dripped down his neck. There was barely a dry spot on his jersey. Almost there, he kept telling himself, Almost fucking there. He roared and grunted.

Almost there, little Ashu was telling himself as the hill sloped steeper near the top. He gave it one last push and the barrow rolled on top of the hill. He caught his breath as she hopped out of the barrow and picked the peace lily flower. Dirt marred the frills of her dress.

She pecked him on the cheek.

She plucked a petal and stuffed it in his pocket. She then plucked a petal for herself. She grabbed the handles of the barrow and gestured for him to get in.

"My turn to push!" she said.

Soon, he was over the hill. He could see the people gathered for several yards before the finish line. The welcoming committee. He could hear distant applause as cyclists pedalled past them. And now it was his turn. He pedalled slowly as he rode past the crowd flanking him, cheering and clapping for him.

And finally, he crosses the finish line.

His legs wobbled when he set his feet on the ground.

"Sixty-sixth," a woman muttered to him.

He looked back at the finish line and saw cyclists still spilling through.

The rest of them were being pampered by their loved ones, lifting Gatorade bottles to their lips and wiping their chins with napkins like babies. A vision struck him. Of Shala looking around for him, wishing he was there to pamper her.

Yes, they got their loved ones. And she got Ashutosh Shah.

"First place." Marcus slapped Ashu's back. He carried the golden trophy under his arm like a parcel of groceries. Marcus then caught a glimpse of Ashu's pennant flag. He spoke, his voice less jovial, "First-timers barely make it through. Your woman would be proud."

"Marcus!" a woman suddenly exclaimed, coming up to him with a pen and notepad. "Any words about the race?"

"I feel grateful. Very grateful. I thank God Almighty and the Academy for this brilliant trophy." He laughed. "No, no, babes. Don't put that in the papers. I feel good. Energized but tired. Going to sleep for a year when I go home."

The woman motioned towards a man with a camera. "Photo for the papers?" she asked.

"I ain't looking my best, but why not?" Marcus said. He put on his shades and posed next to his bicycle.

Then all of a sudden, he held up his palm. He snapped his fingers at Ashu and signalled for him to come. Ashu could barely get up.

"Who is this?" the woman asked.

"You know, I don't even know the boy name!" Marcus exclaimed.

"Ashutosh Shah is my name."

"This," Marcus said, rubbing Ashu's shoulder, "is my nemesis' boyfriend. Vishala Persaud, the kidnap victim. First time doing this race. Make it through the whole thing. Look how much he is now. And he do it all for his woman. Now *that* is a proper story for the papers, madame reporter woman!"

"Is that true?" she asked Ashu.

He nodded.

"Would you like to be quoted in the article?"

"I don't know."

"Come on. Say something."

She uncapped her pen, ready to write. He paused, trying to formulate a speech. But all he ended up saying was, "This race was too damn long."

Prank Caller

Sargeant whistled at Charlie as soon as he stepped out of the taxi. The little boys on the field across the road kicked up a storm during their football game. A few dark clouds with unspent rain hung from the dimming twilight. The streetlights had not been turned on yet. "Einstein!" Sargeant called out, whistling again, "C' mere!"

Charlie went over. This time, Sargeant was in the company of a little black girl with braids and beads in her hair. Two deep dimples formed as she smiled. "Look, here's our new addition to the party, Einstein," Sargeant said, grinning at the girl. "She small, but small good. Small mean she can go in spaces big people like we cannot."

"No La Diabliesse in this neighbourhood!" the little girl proclaimed, stomping her foot down.

Sargeant said, "She have the passion for the mission. So, we meet up tonight at around ten at the back of the La Diabliesse

house. While me and you rile up and distract the Lagahoo, the La Diabliesse will come outside and want to know what goin on. During this time, our lil lady here could sneak into the house and see what really going down. So we could have a proper report to call the police for that blasted demon."

Charlie shook his head. "Consider me a retired mercenary now, Sargeant. You could consider my career in demon-hunting officially over."

The streetlights all came on and the mothers' voices sounded from nearby houses along the street, calling their children for dinner. The little got up. "My mommy callin me for dinner," she said.

"No!" Sargeant exclaimed. "What bout the mission? I thought you wanted to get rid of the La Diabliesse?"

"Sorry. My mommy gon beat me if I leave the house after dark." She scampered off to her house.

Sargeant flung his boonie hat down to the ground. Then immediately picked it back up and put it back on his head. He said to Charlie, "Run along and do yuh experiments, Einstein. This frying pan not for soft-boil people like you."

"It have no La Diabliesse in that house," Charlie said as he walked away. "La Diabliesse is a folk story. It don't exist in real."

"Yeah. And the screams coming from the house—those not real either, eh?" Sargeant sucked his teeth as he watched Charlie disappear around a corner. He sat with his shoulders slumped and said to himself, "That Einstein feel he know everything. I know what I did see in Sangre Grande. Woman was a damn La

Diabliesse. And that woman in that house is one. I didn't even have to see the hoof. I coulda smell it on she."

At the same time, Josette and Jack came jogging along the road, past him. "Youths!" Sargeant called out, flagging them down with his hat.

Josette stopped and jogged towards him. Jack soon followed reluctantly. "What – you – want – Sargeant?" Josette said, puffing out the words as she jogged on the spot. Jack just stood still.

"Jackie boy," Sargeant said, "And you, girl. I need both your help. I forming a – how you youth does say – a *squad* to go investigate a house not too far from here."

"The demon house?" Jack asked.

"Demon?" Josette asked.

"La Diabliesse," Sargeant whispered hoarsely.

Josette stopped jogging. She looked at Jack with cocked eyebrows and an amused smile. Sargeant asked her, "What is your name, young lady?"

"You know me, old man. Is Josette."

"Josette!" His mouth opened wide. "That is you? I know I see this girl come joggin everyday but I never figure she to be Josette. What happen to you, young lady? I ain't recognize you at all, at all! It must be that big ugly jersey! What you doin in that ugly disguise? Who you hiding from?"

She knew she should be offended but laughed it off. "I just trying to don a new style. Go easy on me, sir."

"I like the old style more—the short shorts and the tight jersey," he said. "But it have good in this new style. Every squad member should have they own specialty. And look you already find yours. Mistress of disguise. Which would be a very valuable asset in helpin this investigation."

She asked him, "What is your specialty?"

His arm quivered as he flexed it. "I am the muscle. You want to help put away this La Diablesse for good? And give an old man some peace of mind."

She shrugged. "I have nothing better to do. What you say, Jack?"

Jack shook his head. "Leave me out of that nonsense."

Sargeant flicked his wrist at him, then said to Josette, "Ten o' clock tonight, young lady. Bring all your disguises. I gon sit here and form a proper strategy til then. We gon get that demon woman with your help."

"Ten o' clock?" She twisted her face. "I don't know bout that, you know. But we could go right now if you wanted."

Jack sucked his teeth hard. "Josette, you ain't serious? Look, I gon finish the jog myself." He trotted away.

"Let him go," Sargeant told her. "Follow me."

He led her to the back of the house. He crouched behind the bush pressing against the chain-link fence, waiting and looking out for God-knows-what. A single keskidee perched from a drooping branch nearby. It sang, *Kee-kee-dee! Kee-kee-dee!* Then it fluttered away.

Josette slapped a mosquito on her neck. She looked at a ladybird crawling along Sargeant's eyebrows. "How often you come here?" she asked him.

"Every night," he said, still peering attentively at the window at the back of the house.

"Maybe you should get some help, Sargeant," she said, slapping another mosquito off her leg.

"Well, you here to help me out."

"No. I mean, real professional—" and a thud sounded from inside the house, followed by a small rumble. Then a guttural shriek. A louder rumble, like how furniture would shake during an earthquake. Then some muffled grunts. Josette's heart beat fast. "What was that? That is normal?" she asked.

"Demonic growls of the La Diabliesse," Sargeant said.

"That is no La Diabliesse." She tried to calm herself. Then another shriek sounded from inside the house. She jerked back, snagging her jersey against a barb on the fence.

Sargeant grabbed her wrist. "Keep yourself together!" he grumbled at her.

"Something not right," she said, shaking her head. "We shouldn't stay here."

She got up and her sneakers skidded against some loose wet foliage. She balanced herself and hastily hobbled out of the thicket and around the house. She looked at the house from the front. Small and destitute, with an overgrown lawn. She made a mental note of the address on the mailbox and didn't stop

walking until she got home. As soon as she got to her room, she grabbed her cell phone and dialed the police.

"Edinburgh Police Station," the man on the line said, so lazily that she barely heard him with all the chatter and laughter in the background.

She paced around the room. "I want to report some commotion inside a house on Sapodilla Trace. House number 53."

"Oh, father Lord," the man said, sucking his teeth. "Listen, girl. We pester that old lady til kingdom come. We ain't going back there to bother she."

"I hear noises from inside the house!"

"This station alone is backed up with a voluntary manslaughter, *nine* reports of robbery at gun-point, five cases of drug possession, two rapes, eleven domestic violence reports. If I have to shuffle them reports by priority, where you think two reports of a La Diabliesse going to be in that pile?"

"I ain't call to report no La Diabliesse. Plus, you police not working on any of those things right now, so—"

The man cut her off, "We have no time to waste with this nonsense," and hung up.

She scoffed, sat on the edge of her bed and dialed another number. "Hello, good night," the woman on the other line said.

"Good night. Is Charlie there?"

"Who's calling?"

"Josette."

She heard the woman mumble something as she pulled her mouth away from the receiver. Charlie came on the line. Josette told him, "We in modern times, boy. When you goin to get a cell phone?"

"What you want, Josette?"

"I know you friend up with Sargeant lately. You ever went with him to check out that house?"

"Yeah. But I was just humouring the man."

"I think something up in that house. He ask me to come with him and—"

"I done with that house. I tell him that too."

"No, no, no. Listen, I hear noises coming from inside."

"No, you listen. I don't care what it have in that house. Could be La Diabliesse. Could be an obeah woman. Could even be the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. You wouldn't catch me wasting my time goin back there again."

She sighed. "This could be a serious matter, boy. If you not going to help me, who will?"

"Ain't your man in the police service?"

Josette put her hand at her hip. "I ain't want to drag Sonny into this."

"Then tough luck."

She hung up on him and lied in a fetal position in bed. She fiddled with her cell phone. She scrolled down her contact list, trying to resist calling Sonny. She clicked a playlist of Ziggy Marley songs and set the phone by her side.

She should have called Sonny first, she thought. Sonny might've listened. But she hadn't gotten involved with newcomer to the force Constable Jason "Sonny" Chance because she wanted to have any kind of link with the police service. She didn't want him to think that. But she didn't want to leave the option out entirely.

And perhaps some screaming and clamouring was quite normal. She recalled in the very room she lay in, when she and her mother would fling hairbrushes at each other and screech the nastiest of cuss words. And her father yelled from outside about how he couldn't hear the football commentary. From her bed, even with the bedroom windows closed, she could have even told when the neighbour would let his leather belt go on his son's back.

Josette had been with many guys but she realised, after nineteen years, she had never had a *man*. She had had boys. Even boys who crossed into their thirties. Instead of love letters and heart-shaped mementos, she had hasty memories of boys quickly buckling their pants and carrying on with their lives. There was really no boy's name she could write on her jeans and panties that she would fear being bleached out in the washing machine.

She had grown accustomed to the werewolf lovers who reverted to amnesia-struck losers in the daytime. Men who would view her as nothing more than anonymous. She had become so familiarised with the dark sticky backroom crevices that she felt like those deep sea fish whose organs exploded when they were brought to the surface. That had been the only

reason her heart had wanted to explode when Sonny offered to hold her for the entire night after their hook-up.

He had lied on top of her. A wind shifted the blown light bulb dangling from its drop cord. They kissed and made love gently a second time. Even with his inexperience, he made her pores raise. In the middle of it, the thought struck her that she was being *made love* to. Her name was actually being moaned. She cooed his name in return.

Not Sonny, but Jason.

She let it roll off her tongue in a warm breath.

The next few days passed and she grew more and more nervous about Sonny finding out about her licentious past. He was going to find out sooner or later, she thought, so she sat him down one night and told him everything.

Well, not everything.

Just the *everything* he needed to know.

He didn't need to know about the American tourist, the time she got fingered by a total stranger at the back of a maxi-taxi and the married couple she almost broke up.

"I get checked every couple months or so," she said, "I'm clean."

He tried not to let it bother him but she could tell he distanced himself a little from her since that conversation. As much as she tried to tell him that those dog days were over, there was a part of him that still seemed remote during their

lovmaking. Distracted. Like he could see the phantoms of every man she had been with in the room.

She constantly had to reassure him. Though she had first found his timidity adorable, like the way he wouldn't completely take off his pants at first, or how he went tight-lipped after he could say a word like "fuck", she was getting impatient.

And even after two months, no talk between Sonny and Josette of forming a real official relationship had ever transpired. She suspected if he hadn't known about her string of past flings, he wouldn't have been so hesitant. But Sonny wasn't desperate, she figures. He was a handsome man. Maybe a little shorter than most girls preferred and his eyebrows were maybe a little too thick, but no doubt, he was fine. And he wasn't someone she could fuck to make him like her. She figured she needs to just give him time.

That's what boyfriends and girlfriends do, right? She figured.

They gave each other time and benefit of the doubt.

The next afternoon, she called Sonny and invited herself over to his place. Before she headed there, she went to the backyard and picked a paper bag full of passion-fruit from the neighbour's vine growing on her fence. She blended them into a bottle of juice. Sonny's favourite.

His father had been sleeping in front of the TV, as always.

Sonny lived with his father and she swore the old man had never uttered more than two words to her. The week before, she

bought him a cap and he gave her a grunt. But it was a grunt of appreciation, she figured.

Sonny had told her he barely even got that from his father. The house itself had always been drab and untidy. More than once, Josette had offered to clean it up for both of them. Sonny's room, however, was well-organized. The bed was always made and the sheets were always tucked neatly at the corners. His uniforms were always ironed.

She peeked in his room. He was sitting up in bed, bareback, watching some Lady Saw music video on TV. "Passion-fruit juice in the fridge," she told him, entering the room. He barely moved his eyes from the TV. She then added, "Home-made."

He turned to her, then got up to switch the TV off. He then closed the door behind her and locked it. Without saying anything, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. She ran her palms along his shoulder blades. She breathed out a hushed moan against his collar. Seeping into the silence was an old Supercat song playing from the street outside.

"When is your shift?" she asked, interrupting the kiss.

"Night shift," he said. "Eight to four."

"Plenty time then."

They tried to make love quietly, so as to not wake his father, but she couldn't help but let out a few loud whimpers coming down to the end of it. They fell asleep after. When she woke up two hours later, she groaned before she could open her

eyes and reach her hand out to him. But his side of the bed was empty.

She opened her eyes to darkness. The streetlamp outside his window appeared as a fuzzy ball of light lingering behind his curtain. The sun had already set. Fear began to slowly creep into her weary limbs and she was reminded of those deep sea depths where the boys quickly buckled their belts and disappeared.

Then the door opened and the light came on. Sonny walked in with a towel wrapped around his waist. "Sonny," she whispered.

He jumped, startled, and spun around. "Woke up already?" he said, chuckling.

"What is the time?"

"Nearly seven. You sleep plenty. You sleep good?"

"Wish I get to spend more time with you today," she said, covering her breasts with the blanket. With the towel still around him, he slipped his briefs on.

As she watched him change, her heart pounded fast. She wasn't sure why. "Sonny," she said, "You like the juice?"

"Lashing," he said, smiling, buttoning his shirt. "My father say the same." He looked at her and laughed. "This is my father we talkin bout, eh!"

She smiled faintly. "You are a good man," she told him, without even thinking. "You are probably the only good man I ever been with, Sonny. I just want you to know that."

He slung the towel around his shoulder and leaned in for a kiss. She looked at him in the eye and added, "I want to be your girlfriend."

He said nothing. He tucked his shirt in and buckled his belt.

Then she said, "I never had no real boyfriend."

"That isn't true."

"I had boys. But no boyfriend!" Her face got hot.

But she promptly shut up. She knew she needed to stop and that such insecurity was quite unbecoming of her. Not only unbecoming but totally uncharacteristic. She thought about how she wanted to be his girlfriend so she could feel like he was not just using her body, when she let all those men use her body before for free.

She brushed her palm over her forehead.

He sat on the edge of the bed and put his palm on her ankle.

She exhaled. She said suddenly, "It have a house about a quarter-mile from here on Sapodilla Trace. I was there the other day and I swear I hear screams comin from inside the house..." She stopped when she saw him shaking his head. "Why you shakin your head?"

He replied, "That house is like the big joke-of-the-week in the station. I never figure you to believe in La Diabliesse and them t'ing—"

"I don't."

"You was the girl who call the other day to report that same stupidity?"

"I didn't report no *La Diabliesse*, Jason. That police man twist my words up!"

"You know is that madman Sargeant who start up that rumour, right? Is Sargeant gone and telling everybody that it have a demon living in that house."

"I never say it had a demon living in that house! I say I hear noises coming from inside! Like screaming and rattling. Look. You feel I am some stupid lil girl who does believe in stupidity like *La Diabliesse*. You feel I am some weak, damaged girl. I ain't lie when I say you is the only good man I ever was with, Jason, but sometimes I feel like I have to beat it outta you for you to show it!"

A single tear fell from her eye and she sucked her teeth and threw the cover off of her. She put on her bra and her top. As she searched the ground for her panties, Sonny said to her, "I just don't like that you involved in that craziness with Sargeant."

She found her panties under his bed. As she put on her jeans, she replied, "If you ain't gon help, I gon check it out myself."

"Josette." His voice exasperated. "Don't. Please"

"Sonny." She sighed, suddenly calmed down, and looks at him, bareback with just his police pants on. "I'm going to do the right thing." She closed the door behind her.

She didn't go home, instead taking a long walk to the old swings near the gravel heaps. And then to Sapodilla Trace, just as Sargeant had shown her. She crossed the thicket and saw Sargeant already there, hidden in the bushes. He turned around and smiled at her. "Tryin to sneak up on me? These ears old but they work the same as fifty years ago, eh, young lady."

She crouched with him. A mosquito bit into her arm but she let it have its fill. She asked him, "You does just come and stoop down here in the bush like you takin a shit?"

"Miss lady," he said. "I *thinking*."

A subdued yelp sounded from inside followed by a clatter, followed by *kee-kee-dee!* above her. Josette averted her eyes to the keskidee from the drooping mango tree branch. *Kee-kee-dee!* The branch drooped right above the fence. She spoke, "While you thinkin, I goin to see what really goin on."

She went to the mango tree and poised herself to scale it.

"No, no, no," Sargeant warned. "She goin to release the *Lagahoo* just now. She does let it out in the night. Stay here. It not safe!"

She looked at him, her palms still pressed on the bark. "What you talkin bout?"

"Lagahoo! Imported straight from Guyana. Is a man who does turn into a wolf. They does keep him lock up somewhere at the side of the house! And when the night come, he does turn into a wolf and they does let him out!"

"Sargeant," she said, sucking her teeth, "Shut up and look out for me." She climbed the tree and the keskidee flew away.

She inched along the drooping branch until she was over the fence. She positioned herself and took a breath. Then dropped to the ground.

"Josette!" Sargeant hissed.

Josette shushed him. She tiptoed towards the window at the back of the house. She squatted under it and palmed the alcoves at the sides of it. She slowly lifted her head to peek inside. The dark curtains were blocking her view but an oscillating fan inside swerved them aside every once in a while.

The first time they shifted, she saw a bed and a figure standing over it.

The second time: two feet on the bed.

The third time: a dark-skinned lady in her mid-sixties with nappy greying hair wandering the room.

The fourth: cloths strapping the feet to two bedposts.

"Josette!" Sargeant hissed. "The Lagahoo! I think they letting it go!"

Distant growls sounded from around the corner of the house, followed by the sound of jangling chains. "Get out! It goin to eat you!" Sargeant called out hoarsely.

Josette raced to the fence and leapt onto it, clinging to it like a lizard. She scrambled up the fence, breaking two nails in the process.

"Hurry!" Sargeant hissed.

She took a deep breath and hoisted herself up. The chain still clattered. The snarls got louder. She cut her palm and a loose wire sliced her leg as she fell over into the bush with Sargeant.

The large dog bound against the fence. Josette took off through the coppice and ran all the way home, blood dripping down feet.

When she got home, she took a bath., washing off Sonny's dried sweat off and the trickles of blood from her leg. Then she paced madly in her room. Finally, she sat and cradled her head between her knees.

She looked at the clock. Nine o' clock. Not too late to be calling people's houses. She dialed Charlie's number. His mother answered.

"Talk to Charlie please?" she said.

"Young lady," his mother said. "What you want with Charlie this hour?"

"I know, I know, I know. But it urgent."

A pause on the other line. Then his mother obliged. When Charlie came on the line, Josette blurted out, "I was right! I see feet! It have somebody in there!"

"Hold up, hold up. What you talkin bout? The house? I didn't tell you I want nothing to do with that shit?"

She took a second to catch her breath. "Charlie," she said, trying to calm down, sitting down now. "I climb the fence. I look through the window and I see they have somebody in that house, strap down to a bed."

Charlie was silent.

She added, "I climb the fence and cut my leg. I nearly get eaten by a fuckin monster dog."

"Is just feet you see?"

"Human feet, boy!"

"Why you callin me to get me involved? You trespassing on people property and what you want me to do? Trespass with you and have to deal with the police when we get catch? I tell you before—I don't want to deal with no police!"

She tried to suppress the quickly growing annoyance in her voice. "If a few days from now, we turn on the news and we see that they find a dead body in Sapodilla Trace and we know bout it from before, how we going to forgive ourselves?"

Charlie paused for a long while. "You sure you see something?"

"I see an old woman in a room with two fuckin feet strapped to two motherfuckin bedpost. If you not goin to believe me, Charlie, who would? Not even my link in the police station believe me. He didn't even want to check out the damn place. I had to do it meself."

"Your link in the police station? Ain't you say you have a boyfriend in there?"

"He's not my boyfriend."

Charlie paused for a while. "When is his shift?"

"Now. Eight to four. You have an idea?"

"He love you, Josette?"

"What?"

"The boy love you?"

She paused. "I think so. I think he don't like to admit it sometimes. You have an idea, boy? Tell me what goin through your head."

A momentary silence. Then he asked, "Okay. What is he name?"

"Sonny."

"No. Full name."

"Jason Kwesi Chance. Constable."

After hanging up, Charlie lied in bed and conjured up Damian. When Damian was not being a garbage collector, he was being forced to do his deranged serial killer mother's bidding. Damian never conformed to his mother's warped, perverse beliefs, but deep-rooted fears of her turned him into her slave. He felt like he had no will of his own. When he was little, she would quickly snip the thin air with a pair of scissors. Metal scraping against metal. Snip snip snipsnipsnip. And she would threaten to cut off his penis if he disobeyed.

She would strip her victims naked and make Damian flog them with her the cat-o'-nine-tails. With each lash, his mother would clasp her hands together and bawl, "Hallelujah, Jesus! Gloria in excelsis Deo!" Then she would go back to the kitchen to tend to the pelau and stew chicken.

Or was it stew chicken? Damian would then cut up the rest of the body and help her cook and eat it. They would save the innards, scraps and bones for their fearsome dog. The bloody sheets and clothes would go in the garbage, where Damian can keep an eye close on them as he clung to the back of the garbage truck.

And with her latest victim, now Damian thought his mother had gone too far.

It was a grand lie. Too grand to ignore, Charlie thought.

Genieve wasn't happy when Charlie told her that Josette was coming over to spend the night. "Just don't let me hear any ungodly things going on under my roof!" she scolded.

Charlie dialed Jack's number. "Charlie?" Jack answers.

"Where are you?"

"Home. Charlie, why you—"

"I need a favour."

He paused. "What favour?"

"I need you to call the police for me tonight. Not now. I will tell you when."

"And say what? You crazy? You want to deal up with police again?"

"I'll tell you what to say when the time ready." Charlie paused. "We cool, right?"

"Yeah, we cool."

"I have to go now. Josette reach."

"Josette by you? But what the fu—"

Charlie hung up.

His door opened and Josette peeked inside. Genieve stood a distance behind her, standing akimbo and hitting Charlie with an angry glare.

"You know how long I ain't see this room," Josette said as she walked inside and closed the door. Usually she couldn't help

herself from digging through his chest of drawers, flipping through his books and re-organizing his wardrobe without his permission, but she had no time for that now. She sat on the bed with him and, noticing the bruises on his face, asked him, "What happen to your face?"

"No time for that. Want to hear the plan?"

"What scheme you cook up?"

"You have your phone?"

"Yes."

"It's on Silent?"

"It's off."

"No, no," Charlie said. "Turn them back on and put them on Silent."

She did.

Charlie nodded and picked up his cordless. He dialed Jack's number again.

"What is this bout Josette by you?" Jack asked.

"You ready to do me that favour?"

"How come I ain't get any invite to the slumber party?"

"Well, you could participate in the party game. I need you to call the police station and report a disturbance at No. 53, Sapodilla Trace. Say you heard two bangs and screaming, then nothing."

"What trouble you goin to get me in? You not in enough trouble already? And you want to make a prank call to the police? This is a revenge thing?"

"No. Not at all. The intentions are fully benevolent."

"So just call them and report the disturbance? Nothing else?"

"You can leave a fake name. Improvise."

"Okay."

"Call me back when you do it."

Josette waited until he hung up to speak, "*That* is the big scheme, genius? Call Jack to prank the police?"

Charlie shook his head. "Wait for it."

Jack called back after two minutes. "I call them," he said. "The man suck he teeth and tell me find a hobby."

"Don't worry," Charlie said. "I know what I doing," and hung up.

He then sat silent for a minute, much to Josette's bewilderment. He reached into his pocket and produced a handful of coins. He counted the loose change on his bed, then told her, "Going to use the phone booth down the road. Remember, do *not* answer *any* calls! And stay in this room!"

Charlie left the room. Fifteen minutes passed, then he came back. He rejoined her in the room and asked her to lay her cell phone on the bed. He kept focused on them. He asked her, "No missed calls? You didn't answer any calls, right?"

"What you went and do?" she asked.

"I introduce them to Damian," he said, still eyeing the cell phone.

"Who is Damian?" She twisted her mouth.

But he didn't say anything.

They stared at the phone for three minutes.

Nothing happened.

Five minutes.

Nothing.

After Eight minutes, the cell phone rang, the name Sonny flashing next to a ringing telephone icon. "Don't answer it," Charlie said, grabbing her hand.

"Why?"

"Because you supposed to be dead as a doorknob."

The call went to voicemail. Sonny tried calling again. And then two more times. Charlie smiled.

"He have your home number?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah."

"Where you tell your mother you going?"

"As usual, didn't say a thing."

"Good." Three minutes later, they get three more missed calls from 'Home'.

"Charlie, I hate being left in the dark so," she said.

"You not alone in the dark," he said. "Hopefully this boy in love you with bad."

"You've reached Josette. Please leave your name and number and I will get back to you as soon as possible." The god-forsaken voicemail again! Sonny grunted. He told her not to go near that house tonight!

He kept his frustration subdued as he was surrounded by a few other constables.

"It have to be a prank, boy," one told him.

"It only have an old lady living there," another said. "I dunno nothing bout no Damian. I don't even think she have anybody else living there with she."

"Look," Sonny said. "She not answering her phones." He declined to include the fact that she had said she was going to check out the disturbance at Sapodilla Trace herself.

Another asked, "The relationship okay, boy? You think she want to give you a run-around and make you worry?"

Sonny had not known her to be spiteful like that. He said, "We have to go check that house."

"I dunno bout that, Sonny boy."

Sonny said, clenching his fists, "We ain't have to go search the damn house and leave no stone unturned. I just want to have a look. I just want to see this old lady myself and talk to she myself. This is a serious matter now and if nobody too coward to come with me, I going myself!"

Sonny and Constable Bernard parked their squad car at the side of the road at Sapodilla Trace. Sonny had been peering out the car window, looking at the impoverished edifices lining the streets like chipped teeth.

"This is a bad part of the neighbourhood you bring me to here," Bernard said. When hooligans saw Bernard coming, they knew to pelt their spliffs in the drain. And the station was always well-aware of Bernard taking tough guys into the interrogation room and beating them until they whimpered like dogs.

He said, "I handcuff a faggot the other day. Right here self. Back of that same house."

Sonny got out of the car. A streetlamp flickered above him. He walked over a hopscotch chalk drawing on the street. Bernard rolled the car forward a little before getting out also. They stood in front of the gate, looking at the overgrown weeds in the frontyard. "They could be hidin bodies there for all you know," Bernard said, laughing. "What you think?"

Sonny didn't respond. He went to open the gate but Bernard quickly pulled his hand away. He shook his head. "They have one badass dog here, boy. Bite your balls clean off, brother."

He then went back to the car and sounded the siren to get the owner's attention.

A minute later, an old light-skinned Negro woman with short grey-streaked nappy-looking hair emerged from the door. She hobbled with a walking stick. "Tie the dog!" Bernard called out.

"You comin inside, officer?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"Yes, ma'am!" Sonny replied.

"It kinda late to be comin in people house!" Her voice suddenly grew aggressive.

"I didn't ask, ma'am!"

"You don't need a warrant for that?" she said.

"Yes," Bernard said. "But you aware of a term call exigent circumstances, ma'am? Exigent circumstances relieves us of

having a warrant. We have a case of exigent circumstances here. We will explain when we get inside. We only taking five minutes of your time."

"Better be just five minutes! Police feel they could come disturb an old lady in the middle of the night!"

Bernard assured, "Five minutes, ma'am! So go tie that dog! I don't want to feed him my baton!" She went back inside. They heard her shouting as she closed the door, "Me name is Mrs. Dumas, not ma'am!"

About five minutes later, she came back out and motioned for them to come in.

As soon as they did, she led them to the kitchen. Grime stuck to their shoes as they browsed through the rooms. The bone-coloured paint had begun to flake off the walls in the house, looking like whittled eggshells. The walls were blank except for some spider-shaped fissures where nails probably hung pictures of Jesus.

The house was small. Sonny didn't take long to deduce there must have been only a kitchen, one bathroom and two bedrooms. Two empty bottles of beer lied side by side. Some of the spilled lager on the vinyl floor in motionless encroachment of the nearby dustbin.

Old lady know how to party, Sonny thought.

A rat scurried across the floor and squeezed into a hole.

She pulled up two chairs at the kitchen table. Both she and Bernard sat down while Sonny leaned against the wall. "You fellas want anythin to drink?" she asked.

"We good," Bernard said.

Mrs. Dumas got up and grabbed a mug of fruit punch from the fridge and poured two glasses for them anyway. But they didn't drink them. "We get a call," Bernard said, "concerning this house."

"Them people playing pranks again?" She sucked her teeth.

Bernard folded his arms. "It could be a prank. But this one would be an unusually twisted prank. Still a prank, eh. But one we have to take seriously considering the allegations."

"What allegations?" She crinkled her brow.

Officer Sonny looked at the beer cans again. "You living here alone, Mrs. Dumas?" he asked.

"My son sleeping."

Bernard and Sonny exchanged glances. "How many sons you have?" Bernard asked.

"Two," she said. "The next one don't live round here."

Sonny asked, "You mind if we talk to your son?"

Then suddenly, *Crack!*

They turned their eyes to a mouse trap near the fridge, locking a rat under the metal clamp, still flailing even with its backbone snapped in two now. Mrs. Dumas rose from her seat and picked up the mouse trap, the rat dangling from it to it like a beaten piñata. As she dumped it in the dustbin, she said, "The boy sleeping. He have work tomorrow. And I think your five minutes long gone."

Bernard gave her a grin. He grabbed the glass of fruit punch in front of him and took a slow sip. "You not interested in the allegations, ma'am?"

"It sounding like foolishness to me."

Bernard got up from his chair and took another very small sip. "We just going to have a look around before we go, Mrs. Dumas."

Sonny followed Bernard, with Mrs. Dumas trailing behind.. "Mister!" she kept saying, "Time for you to go! I feelin tired and want to go and sleep!"

Bernard laughed. As he peeked inside the bathroom, he said to her, "But you don't *look* tired at all, Mrs. Dumas. Two minutes and we're gone. Or we could drag this on much longer than that."

Then he whispered to Sonny, "Keep a close eye on this old bitch."

"You could come back in the morning!" she said, still hobbling behind him.

Bernard laughed. "But Mrs. Dumas, I ain't want to come back here in the morning. I ain't want to come back here at all."

Sonny observed the tickly restlessness in the way she blinked her eyes. Bernard peeped into an empty bedroom. He flicked the lights on, causing a colony of cockroaches to scuttle under the bed, the dresser, in holes in the wall.

Sonny barricaded the door with his body as Bernard walked into the room and checked out the closet.

"It have nothing in my closet! Police feel they could come in my house without a warrant and look through everything!" Mrs. Dumas growled.

Just big jerseys and old nightgowns hanging above two pairs of flat-laced shoes and a heap of lint. Bernard crouched to peek under the bed.

"Stay out from under my bed!"

A pair of beady rat eyes stared back at him. The ceiling was missing a few tiles and pale beams of moonlight shot through chinks in the galvanised roof. He exited the room and went to the door opposite it.

He twisted the doorknob. Locked.

"That is my son room! I tell you he have work in the morning! Don't bother him!"

Bernard noted, "Mrs. Dumas, you goin to wake your son on your own with that big mouth. I going to be in and out, thirty seconds. We don't have to wake your son. I sure you have keys lying around."

She shook her head.

"You have no keys?" Sonny asked.

"No!"

Bernard adjusted his belt and stood up straight. He kept his eyes on the old woman. He muttered, "Constable Chance, what you think?"

A subdued yelp came from behind the door. Followed by a muffled thumping. Bernard's eyes widened. He turned to the door, then Mrs. Dumas. Sonny asked suddenly, "What was that?"

"Mister. That is Maxwell in the back."

"Maxwell? The dog?"

The thumping sounded again, followed by muted blubbering.

"That is no dog," Bernard asserted. He signalled for Sonny to keep his eye on the lady and pounded his fist against the door. "Open up!"

No response.

"Oh Lord! Stop makin so much noise!" Mrs. Dumas exclaimed, her voice going grainy.

"Open up!" Bernard kept pounding the door. "Open up or I goin to have to break it open, son!"

No response.

Bernard poised his tricep like a battering ram and propelled his body towards the door. Mrs. Dumas shrieked, "Don't break my fuckin door! Motherfuckin police come to mash up my house!"

"Constable Chance! Please control that woman!" he yelled out, thrusting against the door again. But Sonny was quiet. Afraid. He could barely lift a finger. The sound of splitting wood interposed their bellowing. He saw that Bernard's neck was bleeding.

Mrs. Dumas dropped her walking stick and lunged at Bernard.

"Please control that woman, Constable Chance!"

Sonny took a deep breath, letting the musty air fill his lungs. He grabbed Mrs. Dumas. She kicked against his torso,

flopping like a fish. A slippery piranha. She locked his arms over her shoulders and sank her teeth into his wrist, drawing blood. He howled in pain and she flew out from his clutch and scratched Bernard's face with her nails.

"Constable Chance!" he groaned loudly.

Sonny whipped out his baton and landed a blow on her back.

Bernard flew back against the wall with blood still leaking from the side of his neck. He whimpered, still fully conscious, pressing his palm against his collarbone.

Sonny looked up at the door and noticed two tiny bullet holes on the door. Little splinters on the ground beside it.

Mrs. Dumas cowered on the floor. He lashed his baton against her hand and broke her right hand.

Sonny then reached into Bernard's pocket and grabs his pair of handcuffs and slapped them on Mrs. Dumas' wrists. Bernard struggled to get up, wincing in pain. With one last kick, the door unhinged.

Sonny noticed the foot strapped to a bedpost through the narrow slip. Bernard removed his hand from the wound to draw his pistol.

At the same time, another bullet burst through the wooden door, hitting the wall behind them. Sonny dropped to the ground and dragged his body with his elbow away from the door.

He lied chest-forward on the floor and pulled out his phone to call for backup. "Shooting at 53 Sapodilla Trace. Two perps.

Possibly three. Officer down. Officer down." He drew his gun and told Bernard, "I goin in."

Bernard wheezed, "Wait for backup."

"It have somebody else in there. I goin in now." Sonny crouched and kicked the door aside. He pushed through the room, already pointing his gun. The dog began to bark and snarl outside.

Sonny took a deep breath.

He points the gun at the oscillating fan.

Then at the naked girl squirming on the old bed with the spring mattress, her limbs fastened to each corner of it with coiled rope. Her bloodshot eyes widened. She tried to scream through the oil-soaked rag stuffed halfway down her throat. Bruises and welts ran up her thighs and her sides.

She jerked her head at the curtains.

Sonny pointed his gun at it. The fan fluttered them to reveal an open window behind them.

Sonny then heard a fracas in the backyard. Grunting and yelling. He dashed to the window and saw two men scuffling.

He recognised Sargeant by the boonie hat and the suit. He didn't recognise the other.

Damian, he deduced.

Sargeant was holding onto the Damian's leg.

Sonny bound through the window. The dog growled from behind its cage at the side of the house. Sonny gripped his baton and sprinted towards the men, kicking up a track of dust behind him.

He raised his hand in the air and brought the baton down so fast on the other man that it cut the air.

The man fell to the ground, squealing.

Sonny rummaged through his pockets and produced his handcuffs. His hands were trembling so much that he almost dropped them. Sargeant latched onto the man like a barnacle to a rock. Sonny snatched the man's wrists and lashed them with the handcuffs before seizing his hands with them.

Sargeant huffed. His suit was covered in mud. The dog was still barking furiously. Sargeant looked up at Sonny. He asked him, "You get the La Diabliesse too?"

Charlie and Josette peered out the window when they saw red and blue lights swirling as two squad cars zipped by. Charlie raised his eyebrows. He rushed out the door.

Josette followed him.

They dashed across to Sapodilla Trace to find a small gathering of people huddled around three squad cars, all being bathed in the revolving red and blue lights. An ambulance soon arrived and two paramedics rushed into the house with a stretcher. And they wheeled out a police officer.

When Charlie recognised the face, he crouched behind a fat woman. Officer Clean, strapped to the gurney, with a tourniquet around his neck.

The second gurney wheeled out a young Indian woman. A sheet stretched from her toes to her collar. She peered up at the

sky and cried. The paramedics grunted and hauled both gurneys into the back of the ambulance before speeding off.

Charlie sauntered around with his hands in his pockets. He observed two people sitting in the backseat of a squad car. An old lady and a young black man. They bent their heads forward, pressing their foreheads against the back of the car seats.

Sargeant spotted Charlie but was too busy talking to two police officers to call out to him.

When he was done, he approached Charlie. Before Charlie could say anything, Sargeant spoke, "Nobody does want to believe the wise man of the village. Imagine what that blasted La Diabliesse woulda do to that poor girl if it wasn't for me!"

He related the whole story to Charlie.

His own version of the whole story, anyway.

Josette watched the police mull around the street, trying to tell spectators to go back to sleep. They had already spread the yellow tape across the gate.

Josette noticed Sonny among them—his face pale and downtrodden despite the victory. "Good job, Constable Chance!" she called out to him.

And he looked at her, petrified for a moment, as if he were seeing a ghost. The red and blue lights flickered in her face. She blew him a kiss. He knew if this was not a jumbie before his eyes, she had a lot of explaining to do.

Many stories had to be told.

The story of the La Diabliesse and the Lagahoo of Sapodilla Trace.

The story of Damian.

And the continuing story of Josette and Sonny.

Hopefully over two glasses of passion-fruit juice on a quiet morning with pregnant rain-clouds blocking out the sunrise, she thought.

Visiting Hours

Ashu had gotten the news from his parents, early Tuesday morning.

But not the details.

But details didn't matter for now. Because she was alive.

He didn't bathe. He didn't change his clothes. He only bothered to put on shoes. Still in a T-shirt and short pants, he cranked his car engine and sped to Port-of-Spain General Hospital, where she was being warded. He wanted to stick his head out the window like a dog in a car ride and scream to the whole city, "SHE IS ALIVE!"

He followed the nurse's directions and hurried down the halls to her room. He fiddled with his fingers and cracked his knuckles nervously. He was terrified to see her battered half to death, deep gashes along her face and some kind of apparatus hooked up to her nostrils, pumping cold air into her lungs, with her family shedding tears outside.

But when he walked into her room, Shala was alone.

Nobody else had arrived yet. She was conscious. Her hospital gown draped neatly over her body. No blood stains on it. She smelled of hydrogen peroxide. A few grazes on her right cheek, a few butterfly bandages along her arm and a stretch of gauze covering a fresh scab running down her left leg.

An IV connected to her left palm. She hadn't noticed him come in until the nurse notified her. She looked at him and smiled. As weak as it was, he hoped it wasn't forced. Her drowsy eyes still managed to express surprise.

He stood above her and they said nothing to each other. He tried to avoid reading the clipboard attached to her bed. She averted her eyes to the top corner of the room, where a cage hung with a TV switched to BBC.

"Where you get the bicycle?" she asked, watching him again.

He pulled up a chair beside the bed. "What bicycle?"

"The one in the newspaper. When the nurse find out my name, she went and dig up for that article just to show me," she said. "I was surprised."

"Surprised?" He smiled.

"But then I figured it was just like you to show up at the one race I couldn't participate in." She struggled to laugh. "So, where you gone and get a sexy bike like that?"

"I bought it for you. After I see what happened to the BMX."

"Ashu." She shook her head and chuckled, some colour returning to her face. "You didn't have to buy me a bicycle, boy."

"26 alloy wheels. Rear breaks, linear front. Suntour cranks. Rust-resistant aluminum MTB frame." He leans forward and whispered playfully, "21-speed."

She blinked slowly. She puts her palm against her chest and giggles. "Be still, my heart." She paused. "It goin to be a while til I can ride it, though. But I could let you borrow it in the meantime."

He leaned forward and thumbed her pelvic bone. She shuddered and her body wrenched, bending in into itself. His palm shot back to his kneecap. She cooed as a sharp pain radiated just above her belly, below her breasts. She bit her lip, trying to hide the pain. Trying her best not to whimper.

Her eyes welled up.

She told him, "They had a black plastic bag over my head. And I just lie there, you know? In the dark. Unable to move. But sometimes I used to feel like I floating on a dark sea. A quiet black sea on a planet that had no moon." She turned to Ashu. "Sometimes I feel like this hot hand was pushing me down. And another hand pullin me back up A long, gentle hand." She reaches for his palm. She thumbed it and kissed it. "This hand."

He wiped his eyes and leaned over to kiss her.

She looked at the ceiling after and said nothing. Minutes of silence passed but they relished it.

Then Shala's mother bawled in elation at the door, running up to her, followed by her father and Ali. Shala's face lit up. Ali

said nothing to her. Perhaps she was not yet convinced it wasn't a dream. She had been rushed out of bed and hadn't quite shaken off the remnants of some half-remembered dream.

It was not long until the police and the press arrived.

Ali had never seen so many smiling faces in a room before. She felt self-conscious. It was like a party being held next door to the house of a dying man with cancer.

Ashu and Shala posed for a newspaper photograph.

His arms swaddled her as he pressed his lips against her forehead. Her eyes closed as she gazed slightly downward, barely hiding the shadow of a smile. Ali had not seen anything like that for years from them and she suspected it to be something false, simulated for the eyes that wanted to see it.

Ali kept observing them. Their affection seemed exaggerated as they talked to the press, something fake and inflated like the pose. But perhaps she was being too critical, she thought. Perhaps she did not want to accept this new behaviour from them for some guarded reasoning.

But as Shala carried on with the press, she spoke not about the details of the situation but of how she coped with it. The long, gentle hand reaching into the dark open waters to pull her up to the surface. Rising and sinking for days. Embracing each other's phantoms. It was as if she has taken the entire news crew with her under that bed, relating the private childhood love parables that could beguile the nation as they had beguiled Ali.

Ali looked at the next day's newspaper. A photo of both of them was on the front page, holding each other, Ashu's lips

planted on Shala's forehead. She studied it for a long time. It was real, she then believed. It was no act, she would say.

It was, for the least, a moment of glorious vulnerability that lurked behind years of callousness.

She believed that when the shutter clicked, it took the snapshot of the rebirth of a majestic relationship. And that their serene embrace, that soundless kiss lingering on her sister's forehead, that shadow of a smile on her face was her realizing they were more in love with each other than they had allowed themselves to see.

Her sister was truly alive.

Ali pictured Shala and Ashu, once again, laughing and talking as they adjusted each other's helmets in the garage, wheeling their bicycles onto the road together, and taking off over the hill.

-29-

Confession

Charlie made his way into the church and then to the meeting.

The parents all sat in a circle at the center of the room. Charlie was an hour late for a ninety-minute session. When he entered the room, he brought with him discomfited silence.

Pastor Anderson stopped jiggling his foot. Mr. Hamid, now with 'Nazim' written on his nametag, stopped nibbling on his chocolate chip cookie.

Charlie grabbed a nametag from the table. He pondered for a couple seconds before scribbling 'Charlie' on it. He sat among them, disappointed that no one had noticed the nametag that afternoon.

Charlie spoke, "I'm not staying. But I only have one thing to say before I leave."

Pastor Anderson looked at everyone else in the room. Then said, "You have the floor, David."

Charlie stood up. He walked into the middle of the circle. He tapped his index finger against his nametag. "Not David. Charlie. Charles Stewart."

Their mouths slowly hung open like the Jesus' on the cross.

"Hello," he said, forcing a smile, "My name is Charles Stewart."

"Hello, Charlie." Mr. Hamid replied.

Charlie continued, "David is a figment of my imagination." He swallowed the lump in his throat. "And so is Sadie. The girl in the photograph was my little cousin, Petra."

Kathleen gasped. She bit her metallic blue fingernails. Pastor Anderson exhaled deeply.

Charlie closed his eyes and continues, "My mother's name is Genieve Stewart. I never knew my father, but he's not a good man from what I heard."

He shuffled around the circle, his eyes still shut tight, and continued, "I like old music. One of my favourite groups is *Peter, Paul and Mary*. I like reading. I go to the library every week or so and borrow books. I try to read one book per month. I usually surpass that. With that being said, I have not performed as well as I could in academia. I'm too lazy. I need to go back to school."

He took a deep breath. He was trembling. "I have no children. No wife. I am not a twenty-six year old who looks

young for his age. I am an eighteen year old who looks old for his age. David is not the first person I have pretended to be. But I wasn't sitting here, laughing at you all while I was pretending. And I did not mean to insult anyone's intelligence and if I have, for that, I am deeply sorry."

He opened his eyes to see jaws dropped all around him. Mr. Hamid was sipping his lemonade. Charlie said, "And I want to say something I have never said out loud before to you all. Because we are all here to all tell the truth, right?" He blurted it out quickly. "I am a homosexual. My name is Charles Stewart and I am a homosexual."

Nobody said anything. They were still exchanging surprised looks. Charlie added, "It feels so good to tell the truth."

Pastor Anderson was the first to speak. "Let us hear it for Charlie, group." He clapped. A few others joined in. Gloria kept her arms folded, pouting.

Kathleen leaned forward and touched his knee. She brushed a lock of hair from her face. She said, "Your baby cousin is very pretty, Charlie."

He smiled at her.

She winked at him and then said, "You'll be fine."

Gloria sucks her teeth.

Mr. Hamid laughed, still applauding. "Where the boy Academy Award? You need to join a acting studio, Charlie. I only still clapping because of how good you fool we."

Gloria said, "Is good you speak the truth, Charlie. I, for one, felt insulted by your antics, but I can find it in me to forgive

you. This is a house of Christ and thus, a house of forgiveness, after all. But I have to disagree with your life choice. I cannot accept that. There are institutions that deal with that kinda t'ing. I think you should check one out."

"Gloria!" Kathleen hissed, "It is not a choice! They are born that way! There is scientific evidence!"

Gloria shook her head and crossed her legs. "Scientific evidence makes it right?"

Kathleen threw her arms up. "Pastor!"

Pastor Anderson leaned back and put his palms up to the two women. "What you two talking bout now is a much debated controversial issue and this isn't the forum for it."

Charlie smiled. He let out a small laugh. He bowed to the circle and walked to the door. "Charlie," Pastor Anderson said, before he left, "You're not a single parent. But you're a product of a single parent family. You could still come by sometimes when you have time and give the people here some insight from that point of view."

Charlie nodded. "We'll see," he said, leaving, shutting the door behind him.

The pastor turned to Mr. Hamid and asked him, "What you make of what just happen?"

Mr. Hamid laughed as he finished his lemonade. "I think these meetings actually got some spice."

Pastor Anderson jiggled his foot. He shook his head and chuckled to himself. Then he uttered, "Amen."

-30-

Haidh

Soraya kneeled on the mosque carpet alongside Haseena.

They recited Arabic, both bowing. Soraya closed her eyes, feeling her burqa and pantaloons swirl across her skin as she completes her rak'as. She raised her hands, bowed and kneeled again.

Yasmeen eyed her from the other end of the carpet. But Soraya did her best to ignore her. She reminisces about what had happened.

Yasmeen and Nadia were laughing as they came back to the apartment to see Soraya asleep on the rocking horse. They had come home near sun-up, still wobbling from the alcohol. Soraya lied down on the couch in Siddiq's apartment, trying to sleep. But as tired as she was, she couldn't. She would look over

to Yasmeen and Siddiq in bed every five minutes to see if they were having sex. But they weren't. They were drunk to.

When she got home, she slept. She dreamed the bad dream again.

The following day, she had gotten a call from Yasmeen. She had read a newspaper about a double homicide at the Temple in the Sea in Waterloo. One of the victims being Giovanni, her fellow *pea in the pod*. Recalling the image of Soraya asleep on the rocking horse in the early murky morning, she asked Soraya what had happened.

Soraya said nothing.

Yasmeen began to pester her with phone calls for the next few days and Soraya eventually lied and said she did not know anything.

Yasmeen said to her, "Imagine the trouble we would both be in if they pinpoint you in that! We would be exiled from our families!"

Soraya hung up.

Kneeling on the mosque carpet, performing another rak'a, Soraya prayed that she could repress the memories of Club Eden. Of Raymond. But leave the one of her and Giovanni before his demise. Her first kiss in the car. Let that one linger like a beautiful blooming flower suspended in mid-air, waiting for some mystical bee to rub its feet against the pollen. Let that one be a recurring sweet thought of arcane origins.

Sweet déjà vu.

In the middle of asking for this, her crotch went moist and her uterus throbbed. The blood settled in her panties and leaked down her thighs. She had been expecting it, but not now. She hadn't even worn a pad. She took a deep breath, accepting the discomfort. She raised her hands up and rose to a sitting position.

"Allahu akbar," she uttered.

When she got home, dried trickles of blood had stained her legs. Luckily, the burqa hid it all. Shannon from next door called out to her. She pressed her palms against the fence and Soraya went over to her. "What is it?" she asked.

Shannon smirked. "Something come for you."

"What?" Soraya said, confused.

Shannon produced a letter envelope from her pocket and slipped it through the fence. Soraya didn't want to look at it. "I don't want it," she said.

"Take it, girl!" Shannon said, shaking the letter at her. "At least give him the courtesy of reading it! If you really don't want it, just give it back to me. I will rip it up and throw it away for you."

Soraya looked at the envelope. The unusual thickness of this one. The Carcassonne fortress stamp. Soraya quickly hiked up her burqa and stuffed it into her pantaloons pocket. "When?" Soraya asked.

"Earlier today."

As soon as Soraya went inside, she locked herself in the bathroom. She took the letter out and set it in the medicine

cabinet above the sink. She took off her clothes and stepped into the shower. There, she scrubbed the blood from her skin and tried to vigorously scour the blood from the pantaloons and the burqa with a soapy rag.

When she finished washing up, she took the envelope and set it on the floor. When she ripped the envelope open, a purple-flowered sprig falls out. She also noticed two small incense sticks in the envelope. She twirled them between her fingers as she unfolds the letter. The letter read:

Dear Soraya,

I have not received a reply from you. I hope you are all right. As for me, I hope I will be. I have three confessions. When I first saw your pen pal profile on that website, I had never heard of Trinidad and Tobago before. That was what made me want to talk to you. I did not think you would replied to me.

So, the first confession is that I was two days away from getting surgery for brain cancer when I first wrote to you about a year ago. The surgery had a 50% prognosis. I had to remain in hospice care for a number of weeks. In the end, the surgery was successful and my cancer tumour was gone. I would be lying if I said your letters did not give me something to look forward to.

I want to get to my second confession. This has some technical information in it. I want to get that out of the way. I have another surgery in a week. The chemotherapy from last year shrinked my tumour from 2cm to about 0.5cm on all three

axes and killed the active cancer. However, doctors think I may have a teratoma. A teratoma is a type of tumour that is unaffected by chemotherapy. Teratomas can be benign. However, they most often just reactivate the cancer later down the road. Surgery is needed to remove it. The surgery is expected to last 3 to 6 hours and I have a 80% chance of going through the surgery with no complications. That remaining 20% might not mean death. It might just mean post-op pneumonia. But I am still afraid.

I remember having a large blood clot in my neck that the doctors said could have killed me. Hopefully, that will be the only close call I will be having. But just in case anything does go terribly wrong, I hope you have read and understood this letter.

My third confession is that I care for you too much now and I cannot stand the thought of you writing to me and not knowing the chances of you never getting a reply, even if it is 20%.

I have enclosed a recent photograph of myself, a sprig of rosemary and two rosemary incense sticks. I bought them at a stall located in front of a little pizzeria called Abelard's Pizzeria in my town owned by a big man named Abelard. He loves his business and his regular customers. I always think it is better to support a local place than a chain because, as an amateur chef, I can tell you that if you love who you cook for, you make better food. I have been reading about Trinidad and Tobago's foods. I would like to try them one day.

The stall also had lavender, gardenia, tea rose and jasmine. I will tell you why I chose rosemary. Rosemary translates into Dew of the Sea. The Greek God Poseidon's semen floated in the sea and draped around Aphrodite when she was born. This was how rosemary came to be a love charm. In the Middle Ages, brides wore rosemary headpieces and grooms wore sprigs of rosemary. The fragrance of rosemary is also said to keep away nightmares and witches. I planted a branch of rosemary in my yard at home. I have enclosed a photograph of it. If it grows, it is a sign of goodness and love. Young couples would also tap each other with rosemary sprigs. This is because it is thought to make people fall in love.

I hope to receive a reply from you before I go into surgery. I hope you are well and I hope the candour in this letter gets what I have to say across to you. Je t'aime.

Avec amour,
Claude."

Soraya peeked into the envelope.

She hadn't even noticed the photographs. The first was a picture of a rosemary branch rooted into the grass. At the back of the photo read:

Le voyage commence.

Then she read the back of the second photograph before watching the picture at the front.

For Soraya.

Il n'y a qu'un bonheur dans la vie, c'est d'aimer et d'être aimé .

She flipped it over. He was wearing a red jacket. His bronze-coloured hair was matted over his forehead. He had feminine features. Eyes like a cat's, long eyelashes, no facial hair, bright pink skin. That European kind of handsome.

She folded the letter in two. She tried to fight the tears but they still came. She tucked her face between her palms and sobbed in silence.

She picked up the rosemary sprig and taps her forehead her shoulder with it. She sat on the bathroom floor and planned out the rest of her night.

She would eventually get herself together and go to her bookshelf. She would open the P volume of her Encyclopedia Britannica and put the contents of the envelope in there. She would spend the rest of the evening in solitude, fighting to retreat to the bathroom every passing hour to re-read Claude's letter and trace her finger over his face.

When the late night hours approach, she would lock herself in the bathroom with a pen, a piece of paper, a hardcover notebook to press on, a match and one of his incense sticks. She would strike the match and breathe in the rosemary scent. It would incite delirium. She would have French air in her lungs.

The air that billowed around a little stall located in front of Abelard's Pizzeria.

She would breathe in Claude.

Then she would begin the letter: "Mon cher Claude...", while keeping her ears alert for any footsteps outside.