

OUT OF THE STORM
STORIES

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

by

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February 2010

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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For those who came

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to first thank my family, in particular my mother who taught me, above all else, to always do better.

I am greatly indebted to my professors at Cornell University, especially Helena María Viramontes and J. Robert Lennon, who both read and commented on numerous drafts of these stories, and to Tod Goldberg and my other instructors at UCLA Extension.

I would not have been able to write any of these stories without support from the Paden Institute and Retreat for Writer's of Color, the creative writing program and graduate school at Cornell, David Pickett, and the library at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine.

I would never have made it to Cornell University in the first place without help from the Simpson family, the Sykes family, Charlie Touhey and Alice Green, and Bob Berglass.

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“Shut up your door, my lord; ‘tis a wild night:
My Regan counsels well: come out o’ the storm.”

William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*

CHAPTER 1

The Beach on a December Day

The only person I'd heard say Ronny would die, as far as I remember, was Dante Webb, and that was just Dante being Dante. He must've seen me coming down the block because when I got to my house he was already leaning up against the gate, waiting. Dante was always standing outside the building next door, his building. And I figured that he, perhaps hungry for unfamiliar territories, had simply strayed some, though not so far as to risk losing his way back home. But after I was past him, standing firmly in my front yard, he turned and said something to me. Surprised, I asked him to repeat himself. He'd heard my boyfriend was dying. Was it true? His question was delivered with an overly concerned look, and the corners of his mouth were pinched, suggesting a faint smirk, which all went to show he was full of shit.

Some girls liked Dante, found something cute about his reckless attitude, no matter how forced. I wasn't one of those girls. Ordinarily, I would've shown him my Brooklyn side, and loudly too so that his friends could hear. But there were some old men within earshot, West Indian grandfather types who believed cursing was a crime akin to stealing. I didn't have a boyfriend, and that was what I told him.

Dante didn't need to know the details, but to say that me and Ronny Baptiste had even a friendship at that point would've been an overstatement. My father was friendly with Ronny's grandfather and so I'd come to know Ronny. We might have a little conversation if our paths crossed. That was all. Dante had probably seen us talking, but those short conversations

between us were of little importance. I was in my second year at Catherine McAuley High School, and morning by morning, as I rode the bus to 37th Street, the center of my universe shifted another few feet from the old world on Westminster Road to my new life in East Flatbush.

As far as whether Ronny was dying, I couldn't say yes, couldn't say no. My father, of course, didn't want to talk about it. I'd overheard my parents discussing Ronny's second hospital stay, and the following day I'd asked him. He was installing a new bathroom vanity and I, the only child, was once more playing the role of his assistant. "Where's the cancer?" I asked, like it might simply be lost in the toolbox, somewhere below the measuring tape. He said nothing at first, and thinking he hadn't heard, I repeated myself. Finally, he came out from under the vanity and rose to his feet and cleaned his hands on the front of his flannel shirt. I asked for a third time. He handed me a screwdriver. I handed him a wrench. He said, "I don't know." Yet, his eyes then came to rest momentarily on an invisible spot just below the crotch of my jeans, where my stuff would've hung if I was, say, Ronny. And this said more than words.

Brooklyn Hospital bordered Fort Greene Park. It wasn't there on the subway map or the Brooklyn bus map. Nonetheless, I knew it wasn't far out of the way, only a short drive from Westminster Road, and I couldn't imagine a good reason for not going to visit a sick neighbor. But my father came from an island seemingly overran with straight-backed parents and close-mouthed children. His mother, who, to me, was no more than a face in a black and white portrait, had believed that children, if they must be seen, should at least be silent. While my father had no laws against talking, he

never let go of the belief that parents did not answer to their children. And if asked by me to explain himself, he would often put an end to the conversation by saying, “You don’t need to know,” just as his mother had. So when my father said no to visiting Ronny at the hospital, I kept my why notes to myself and didn’t ask my mother, who likely would’ve just gone back to my father.

But if I’d been allowed to go and visit Ronny at the hospital, we may not have ended up visiting him in his apartment. One Sunday afternoon, coming from church, my father and me ran into Ronny’s grandfather sweeping the sidewalk in front of his building. Five days a week, my father went straight to Carver Bank and straight home, saying little more than hello and goodbye to the neighborhood people he came across. If someone pressed him for conversation he might add “Off to do the bank’s work” or “Bank work done,” depending on whether it was morning or evening. On his two days off, though, he would stop and talk at length with people he knew. The conversation between my father and Ronny’s grandfather, Mr. Baptiste, inevitably shifted to Ronny.

“How’s Ronny?” my father asked.

“Yes, yes, you haven’t see him as yet,” Mr. Baptiste said, and he reached down for a piece of plastic wrapping that his broom couldn’t catch. “He’s well, I suppose. Recovering.”

I’d been raised to understand politeness. I was to say good day or goodnight when I entered someone’s home. I was to use the proper prefix: adults in the family were Uncle So-and-so and Aunt So-and-so and less familiar adults were Mister and Misses So-and-so. People with manners, I was taught, were never so blunt as to embarrass someone. This meant that

you also had to listen for what mannered people were not saying: If someone such as Mr. Baptiste mentioned that you hadn't seen his grandson, he was politely expressing his disappointment. My father, then, could do nothing but ask to visit with Ronny.

For an eternity, I sat on one of the Baptiste's couches and listened to my father and Mr. Baptiste speak of people and places that I could tell existed back in the Caribbean, though there was no way to know if they were talking about a political leader or an old neighbor, a neighborhood or a restaurant. Every so often, they would disagree and their voices would raise, filling the living room; then, perhaps when he realized the other would not be moved any further, one of them would make a joke and both men would crow laughter.

There were three ice cubes in my glass, and before they had any time to melt, my thoughts had drifted onto my best friend Natalie Cruz and how she might be spending her Sunday just on the other side of the Brooklyn-Queens border.

The ice cubes were almost halfway gone when Ronny's grandmother came from the kitchen and set a tray of food down on the ottoman. "Ronny not come out as yet?" she asked the room. Then, motioning for my father and Ronny's grandfather to hush, said, "Hello, excuse me. Could you boys please behave for one moment? I have a question for the lady here." The men quieted themselves and she addressed me. "Lamoy, you eat cranberry? I didn't know."

"Yes," I said, though I was pretty sure I didn't.

While Mrs. Baptiste and me were speaking, Mr. Baptiste said something to make my father snort laughter. I didn't hear what Mr. Baptiste said, but I remember my father trying to bite his lip and raising a hand over his mouth, all while sheepishly looking up at Mrs. Baptiste.

"You two can't keep quiet atall," Mrs. Baptiste said, a hand on her hip and a finger wagging at them. "I was yuh muddas, it would be a beating for yuh both." The men laughed together at that. She looked at me and said, "Oh gosh, look how sweet she looking in her Sunday clothes. Lamoy, sweetie, I'm sorry to be leaving you with these ruffians, but I won't be a minute."

Mrs. Baptiste disappeared down the hallway and soon returned with Ronny following close behind, nearly stepping on her heels as if joined to her by too short a length of string. She took a seat on the room's other couch and Ronny sat down beside her. Then, remembering something, Mrs. Baptiste returned to her feet, first rocking back to gather the momentum she needed. She moved the food tray onto the empty cushion between me and my father and pulled the ottoman across the carpet so that Ronny could put his feet up on it.

"For the swelling," she explained, patting his feet. She spoke matter-of-factly, like I was supposed to know all about Ronny and his swelling. But I didn't know, and when I tried to acknowledge what she'd said the words got lost somewhere along their way and all I gave her was an open-mouthed nod. "Tell me about school," she said. "What kind of marks you making?"

I told her about my A's in History, English, and Math. I didn't ask Ronny anything because I didn't know if he was back in school.

Mrs. Baptiste asked me who the cute boys were, and if there were any good-looking young teachers. “Don tell my mister,” she said, looking at Mr. Baptiste and then winking at me, “but I’m not much into old men.”

Before I could explain that my school was only girls, my father said, “How are things, Ronny?”

Ronny took his Yankees hat off and rested it on his knee. The hospital had left him without a hair on his head, but seeing him bald, the way I’d seen cancer people on TV, was strangely comforting. “I’m good, Mr. Fleary. How are you?” he said, not giving the question any real thought. His parents had sent him up from Grenada a few years back, and no matter how he worked to sound like the rest of us, like a Brooklyn child, Grenada had left its footprint, and his accent often sounded confused.

“Fine, fine. Lamoy and I were just on our way to the park when we came upon your grandfather slaving away with his broom,” my father said.

There was more though: the dark half-moons lying under his eyes, the way his shirt hung as if held up by little more than a plastic hangar. His pug nose. Not so much the nose but how the nose looked too big for his face, like its backdrop had withered, receded. Also, a patch of darker skin on his head above his left ear. A black stain on brown skin, a bruise, a lesion. I realized that though I’d seen Ronny hundreds of times, I’d never really looked at him, never paid attention. So I couldn’t tell whether, like the swelling and the baldness, he’d brought these things back with him from the hospital.

“When Ronny came here to live with us,” Mr. Baptiste said, “I proceeded to bruise my knees thanking God. Never again, I thought, would I have to tend to that old piece of pavement out front. But now I find that

mister broom and I are becoming ring and finger friends yet again. Just talking about it makes my back ache.”

“His back ache,” she said, pretending to be disgusted. The dark patch on Ronny’s head, I realized, was a birthmark that had been hidden by hair. “Lamoy, what did I tell you about having an old man for a husband?”

“Well, I’m sure your neighbors are thankful,” my father said. Ronny met my eyes, caught me staring. I looked down at the food tray on the cushion beside me.

“It is my luckiest day if I get so much as a hello from the woman who lives over here,” Mr. Baptiste said, pointing to the apartment on the other side of the living room wall. “Thank you is just not in some people’s dictionary.” There was a lone plate on the tray, and cheese and crackers and grapes and cranberries and sliced apples were all crammed onto it. I kept my eyes on the food for longer than necessary and finally took a few grapes that hadn’t been touching any of the surrounding foods.

“The front of the building is the landlord’s responsibility. But that big-eye man don care about the conditions we live in as long as our rent monies are paid.”

“And the city doesn’t issue a ticket?” my father asked knowingly. I could detect the makings of a smile on my father’s and Mrs. Baptiste’s faces: It was not their first time having this conversation.

Mr. Baptiste sucked his teeth and shook his head. “It’s the kind of thing that makes you wonder what you left home for.”

I continued avoiding Ronny. My ice cubes had long ago melted and I took fresh ones from a container on the tray. Ronny was quiet but when he did insert himself into the adults’ conversation I would look elsewhere, take

in a photograph on the wall or one of Mrs. Baptiste's flower arrangements. But I couldn't keep from listening, and as I waited out a second eternity, Ronny's accent came to sound more and more like the other accents in the room.

Out on Westminster Road, I asked my father if Ronny was all better. "I would think so," he said. We were heading straight to the park because the afternoon was already half over and we'd had food at the Baptiste's. "They didn't say anything about him having to go back to the hospital," he added, sensing my doubts. Then he stepped back in time: As we crossed the street he took my hand in his.

Rain was waiting for us on the other side of Caton Avenue and we turned back towards home. But the rain overtook us anyways and I ran ahead while my father continued at his slow pace, happy and unbothered, like it was me getting wet and not him. Despite me getting rained on, the bad weather didn't bother me too much. Skipping the park meant the possibility of a phone conversation with Natalie Cruz. Plus the Baptiste's grapes hadn't filled me and I could picture my mother's stewed chicken falling from the bone and into my mouth.

The park was part of a Sunday ritual, something I'd looked forward to before McAuley came into my life. My mother feared God, but her fear only carried her to church on Christmas and Easter. Her Sundays were about sleeping in and relaxing around the house. "If God needed a nap and a bath on the seventh day, so do I," she would say. But my father went to the ten o'clock service at Holy Innocents Church every week and never asked if I wanted to stay home and sleep in. He always wore the same black suit.

Other suits hung in his closet. They were worn to weddings and funerals and holiday services, but never to ordinary church services. That one suit, with its color fading towards gray and its pants bottoms munched, was church to me.

After church, we would make the short walk back to Westminster Road. Sunday meant that the only storefronts that didn't have their security gates pulled down belonged to hair salons, churches, and corner stores. Because all the restaurants and takeout spots were closed, we quickly stopped home to pick up some of my mother's cooking and then took our paper plates wrapped in tin foil out across Caton Avenue.

Though me and my father talked about our afternoons in the park, we never in fact went past the Parade Grounds that sat across the street from the true park. From having travelled up and down its bordering streets I knew that the true park, Prospect Park, was huge, exceeding what the eye could take in all at once. I would've believed that it was full of surprises and mysteries. Yet, I can't remember ever wanting to venture into it. I can't remember any curiosity. Once upon a time, the Parade Grounds and church had marked the limits of my everyday existence.

My father would find a bench that faced the soccer field and kept the baseball diamond at our backs. I myself didn't play soccer, but I'd learned the game over years of Sundays with my father. So while I couldn't kick a ball more than a few yards, I knew something about spacing, making runs, and winning the ball.

But when the players were no good, or the play deteriorated, my father lost interest and often started telling me about the life he'd had before I came along. He was not uninteresting. More than once his talk attracted

the attention of a stranger on a neighboring bench, and seeing this, my father would turn and acknowledge the stranger, invite him to listen. And if the stranger was from the Caribbean, he might soon interrupt my father to add that he too had caught crabs on the beach or used sticks to knock mangos from their branches. Later, I would try to recall my father's exact words, the exaggerations, the halfway lies that even he couldn't keep straight. But little of what he said could hold a teenage mind. I'd already heard the stories a hundred times and knew how the endings went. Not to mention the fact that his stories were less concerned with delivering big moments than they were with describing his previous existence, an existence that involved trees and fruits and vegetables that didn't even grow in New York.

Day by day, the epicenter of my universe was moving another step closer to my US History class, where I had a seat beside Natalie, who was to be my best friend until the end of time. On one of the walls, between a poster of Sacagawea and a timeline of the Revolutionary War, there was a picture of my teacher Mrs. Anderson and her family at the Great Wall of China. By the second week of school I'd stopped paying attention to the many posters that decorated the classroom. But I knew nothing about Mrs. Anderson's life outside of school and enjoyed looking at that picture and imagining a life for her husband and two kids.

On Monday, I was looking at Mrs. Anderson's family when I noticed the globe sitting on a file cabinet below the photograph. Facing me on the globe was Australia. It was Australia, a continent, but it was also a birthmark, the birthmark on Ronny's head. The globe might have been new, but perhaps it had been there all along and I had just not noticed it. The

period ended. Natalie was home sick. I went over to the globe. The world was made of glossy plastic, and I reached out to touch Australia and see if it was as smooth as it looked. Then I yanked it from the velcro that held it to the earth's core.

I came home to one of my mother's grilled cheese sandwiches and a Capri Sun. I did my homework and spent the rest of the day reading from the "A" book of the World Book Encyclopedia. My parents had given me the encyclopedia set at the beginning of the school year. An early Christmas present, they'd called it. But Christmas was coming and the books were still in their box in a corner of my room. I read the encyclopedia on my bed at first, but I eventually moved to living room, and after that the kitchen.

I finished the "A" book on Friday, having skipped the entries that didn't interest me. That evening, I decided I would continue onto "B" and then "C" and I loaded the encyclopedia set onto a bookshelf. On Saturday, I asked if I could go see Ronny. I'd wanted to speak to my mother alone because she was more likely to say yes. But my father had already returned from his half-day at the bank and I found my parents sitting together on the living room couch.

My father, who'd been reading, set his magazine down on his lap. "His parents are home?" he asked.

"Grandparents," my mother corrected, changing the channel on the TV.

"Yes," I said, not truly knowing.

"How long will you be gone for?"

My father had his arm draped over my mother's shoulder, and she slipped out from under his arm and lightly slapped his chest. "Come, Harvey. Let the girl go have a little fun." My mother liked to tease my father about his conservative ways. My father's response was that he was in fact quite liberal, having had an interracial marriage before such things were acceptable. "An interracial marriage? You have a next woman or what?" my mother said the first time he made this joke. "No," my father said. "I am married to you, a woman of the Jamaican race. And any other West Indian could tell you what kind of thing that does be." My mother now started to tickle my father. "Now go, Lamoy. Before this man think up a next set of questions for you," she said.

Mr. Baptiste let me in. He was friendly, though he at first looked surprised to see me, like he'd forgotten my face. He was about to take Ronny shopping for a winter jacket, he said, but I could accompany Ronny in his place.

Ronny led the way. He took me the long route, going down toward the park before going back up to Church Avenue. But I didn't mind because it meant not having to pass by Dante Webb and the rest of them. At Bobby's Department Store, Ronny decided on one of those black bubble goose jackets everyone had and wore it out of the store even though it was sweatshirt weather.

We then walked down Church Avenue, killing time. Ronny was wearing his hat low over his face, and a shadow masked the bit of face that wasn't already eclipsed by the brim. I kept the conversation alive by talking about the things for sale in store windows. His grandfather had given him fifty dollars for the jacket and Ronny used the change to buy us both

Kennedy's for lunch. After we ate, Ronny said he wanted to head home. "I'm just tryna relax for a minute," he said. I wondered if he was tired, which I figured was part of having cancer, but I didn't ask because I didn't want to be rude.

Ronny had been the quiet type for his entire life on Westminster Road. The hospital had nothing to do with it. Back when Ronny had been a new face in the neighborhood, people like Dante had made fun of him for his accent, even though some of their parents had similar accents. I also believed, perhaps unconsciously, that his quietness came from living in a foreign place, among an alien people and their alien ways, and I still like to think that he would've been a different person if he'd been living comfortably in Grenada.

Regardless, over a string of Saturdays I began to see another side of Ronny. Amid the crowds and stores of Church Avenue, he talked to me, told me about school before he'd left to go to the hospital. He'd gone to a public school in Manhattan, and going to a public school, I learned, was nothing like going to an all-girls Catholic school. His school was a home for chaos, a place where students threw chairs out of third-story windows. One of his classmates had died while surfing on top of a subway car. In the morning, I might pass Sister Ruth or Sister Mary on the way to my first class; the kids at Ronny's school passed through metal detectors.

Ronny and his friends, it seemed, had been the only ones who had their shit together. Like Natalie, his two closest friends lived elsewhere, and so after school Ronny and his friends used to roam the streets surrounding the school until it was time for them to board their separate trains. One

afternoon, he told me, they'd come across a beach on the East River. To everything he'd said, no matter how surprising, I'd acted like he was telling me for the third time. But I wasn't able to hide my interest in the beach.

"A beach?" I asked.

"Yeah, a beach. You know, with sand and shit."

He talked about it like he'd uncovered a lost city, discovered something fit for the walls of a museum or pages of a book. And it was hard to imagine a beach in Manhattan. The beaches I knew of laid to the east, along a drooping fingertip of Queens and in a corner of Brooklyn I'd never been to. They could be discerned on subway maps: they hadn't been given a color, like the light green given to the splotches of parkland, but you could know them by the names of subway stops – Brighton Beach, Rockaway Park Beach 116 Street, Beach 90 Street, Beach 67 Street, Beach 44 Street. Manhattan, though, was in an entirely different direction. I'd been there, seen skyscrapers and wide sidewalks and strange faces, and I'd not come across a grain of sand.

He bought me things. More than just Kennedy Fried Chicken. He bought me pizza, Golden Krust, Chinese takeout. He bought me a hoodie, gold earrings, a Toni Braxton tape. Then, as we waited one afternoon to cross East 21st Street, with the Flatbush Reformed Church cemetery at our backs, he gave me my first kiss. Natalie said that the kiss made him my boyfriend, and Ronny never said anything to prove otherwise.

Going to the beach was Ronny's idea of course.

“My daddy ain’t gonna let me go to no beach,” I said. “You know that.” We were sitting at the top of Ronny’s stairwell, the only private place we had.

“That’s what I’m sayin. He don’t have to know,” Ronny said. It was his first week back at school and his backpack laid at his feet. He’d told me about makeup work and seeing his friends. But he hadn’t said much else. He hadn’t said whether he was doing Phys Ed or if he was too tired to follow along in class. “Listen,” he said, “it’s like an hour there and an hour back. Or maybe it’s only a half hour. The whole thing isn’t gonna take any longer than an afternoon on Church Avenue. I’m serious.”

I swept my hair away from my forehead, my mother’s habit. I didn’t ask Ronny to tell me his plan again or describe the beach in more detail. I didn’t say something, anything, just to keep the conversation alive, as I would’ve when our time together was new. “He’ll know,” was all I said.

I lived with my parents in a two-family house sandwiched between two bulky apartment buildings. Ronny’s building was on one side, and on the other side was Dante’s. Dante saw me leaving Ronny’s that evening and met me at my father’s gate. I acted at first like I didn’t see Dante, like he wasn’t there.

“So your boyfriend’s all better, huh,” he said, knowing that I’d been with Ronny. He handed me a slip of paper. “When you and him break up, you should give me a call.” I doubted his phone number was actually written on the paper. Everything was a joke to him.

But I could no longer tell him that I didn't have a boyfriend. "Thanks," I said, and I took the chewing gum from my mouth and wrapped it in the paper and threw the paper at his feet.

The image of Dante that lives in my memory is one of him standing outside his building at 60 Westminster Road, where he so often held court with other boys from the block. His face is perfectly still, intent, focused on something outside the border of my memory. If I dug deep enough I could probably remember the names of the kids who used to hang around Dante: They were older and interesting in a detached way, like celebrities. But when my mind turns to the image of Dante, the other boys are indistinct, lost in motion, flat, featureless faces and half bodies joined to other half bodies in unnatural, improbable ways.

At home, my parents were having a rare argument. They were speaking in hushed voices, but as I passed their bedroom I heard my father say "boyfriend" as if he was uttering a dirty word. Or at least I think that's what he said. If I'd stopped and put my ear to their bedroom door I might be sure. But I continued on to my own room and the phone awaiting me on the edge of my desk. The encyclopedias were also in my room, on their bookshelf, but I was yet to read more than a couple entries from the "B" book.

August was the month, I thought to myself as we got on the Q train at Church Avenue. It was the month when families journeyed to the beach. I could picture these families huddled on a Saturday morning train destined for Coney Island or Far Rockaway. Clouds of cold air escaped from coolers

as mothers dug for bottles of beer. Fathers opened the bottles, letting the caps fall to the floor, while their children drank from juice boxes and puffed on chewing gum cigarettes.

Of course, it was not August: Back on Westminster Road a day-old snow was turning to mush, as day-old snows had always done. On the Q train, a boy of four or five sat across from us and called out subway stops from memory before the conductor had a chance. There was only a handful of people in our car, all of them black and Latino, and the boy's announcements made them smile and even exchange friendly glances.

At the 7th Avenue stop, the boy and his mother got off and a few white people got on. None of the white people were together. They sat separately and one of them took the seat that the boy had been sitting in. The train moved, and Ronny soon set his hand on my thigh and slid closer to me. His bony knee now jabbed my leg every time the train shook. I moved my leg, but his knee found its way back.

By the time we reached DeKalb, the last stop in Brooklyn, Ronny had his arm wrapped around my shoulders and his free hand was stroking my inner thigh, which was something he'd not even dared to do in his stairwell. There were only two other black people in the train and they were sitting on the opposite end of the car. Ronny slipped his hand under my jacket and came across the bathing suit top I had put on that morning because though it was winter, you never knew.

"You brought a swimsuit?" he said, as if it was the stupidest thing.

"That's what it looks like to me," I responded.

Suddenly, we spilled out onto the bridge, leaving the tunnel behind. The bridge's steel columns flew past the train's windows, and behind the

ever-moving columns was Manhattan, its buildings standing steadfast like statues. Skylines were not everyday encounters for me and I half-consciously got up and went to the doors and peered out a window. Maps showed Manhattan, the shape of the island, but they didn't hint at the skyline, the buildings that seemed to nearly prick the clouds above.

"You ever been between the cars?" Ronny asked. He'd come up behind me. I turned to face him. The train had stopped, and the conductor came over the loudspeaker to explain the delay, an incident at the station ahead. "Come on," he said, taking me by the hand.

I stepped out onto the narrow walkway and witnessed Manhattan from above, the way I'd seen it in books and on TV. All too quickly, though, I realized that the things below resembled, more than anything, a little toy world: clouds painted onto a backdrop of flimsy blue cardboard; plastic boats chugging up an artificial river; building blocks of all heights placed carelessly, as if arranged by a small child; a bridge I could lift using only my index finger and thumb. It was impossible to believe that the black dots below were supposed to be people.

"You smell good, girl," Ronny said, running his nose across my neck.

"I know," I said, because I was wearing perfume my mother had bought me. I only then noticed that Ronny had undone my pants and pulled them partway down my behind. "What you tryna do, Ronny?" He kissed me like he was in a hurry to get somewhere. Ronny took something out of his pocket. He held it up, out and away like he was worried I might snatch it away, and I got a good look at the golden wrapper. LARGER SIZE CONDOMS, I read, and thought he was joking. "You got yourself some disposable mittens?" I giggled.

“Come on, girl” he said. “Let me get some.” The train exhaled and continued travelling across the bridge. I took hold of the chain-link railing at the same time that Ronny reached out to steady me. Wind started to beat at the arms of my jacket.

“Don’t be stupid, Ronny. We’re on the train. There are people.”

The train shook as it went, making the Manhattan buildings appear to tremble. “No one’s paying attention,” he said. He wasn’t lying: No one in the cars on either side of us was looking. And these people, faces I would never see again, couldn’t have seen more than our upper bodies through the window if they had been looking. “Where else we gonna do it?”

“Fine. But make it fast,” I said, taking his hat off. His hair had grown and I couldn’t find his birthmark. I thought about the globe in my history class and looked out past the island of Manhattan, past the horizon...Australia, the encyclopedia said, was founded on January 1, 1901. The mainland is three million square miles, which makes it the smallest continent in the world. It was where England sent its criminals. The first humans went there 42,000 years ago. It lays alone, between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.

I knew these things to be facts.

The beach itself was, as my father would’ve said, behind God’s back. We changed trains at 14th Street and took the L to 1st Avenue. After that, we had to walk up about ten blocks, then over until we finally saw water. Ronny crossed the street against the light. “Come on,” he said, and he took off like he was running sprints.

I stayed back until the light changed. When I caught up with Ronny, he was sitting on a bench facing a waist-high railing. I was about to ask where the beach was when I saw, on the other side of the railing, a tiny patch of sand, not much bigger than the walkway between trains and mostly covered in snow. It was as if God had started to build a beach, and then realizing his mistake, abruptly stopped.

“Can’t we go on the beach?” I asked, sitting down beside him. Above us, cars trampled a highway overpass. “Can’t we go on the sand? I didn’t come here to sit on a bench, Ronny. Did you hear me? I didn’t come here to sit on no – ”

“Lamoy, why you pretendin like you don’t see that gate?” he said, doing his best to sound like a New York kid. “Why you ackin like it isn’t December?” He lifted his hat to scratch his head.

I looked out at the other side of the river, at the more modest skyline of downtown Brooklyn, where at that very moment my father was “doing the bank’s work.” “You’re a fake,” I told him.

“Fuck you, Lamoy,” he said, like a boy talking to his younger brother.

Both of my parents had left home for good by the age of eighteen. From the time I was young, my mother liked to talk about my life after Westminster Road. She began sentences with “When you leave here” and “When you’re living in the suburbs” and “After you’ve moved up in the world.” My father, on the other hand, never said anything about leaving the neighborhood. He never openly disagreed with my mother. He just seemed to think that either way was fine.

The next day, Sunday, I woke up before my alarm sounded. Outside my room, there was not a light on in the apartment. I knocked on my parents' door. No light came from under the door. I knocked again. Still wiping the cold from my eyes, I went out to the kitchen. It was empty, dark. Back at my parents' door, I knocked once again. When I got no response from inside, I opened the door, just a crack at first and then a few inches. My mother was fast asleep, her body twisted in a way that didn't look at all comfortable. Next to her, my father was so tangled in the sheets that I could barely make him out. I closed the door behind me. The metal door handle had always been cold on winter mornings. I waited.

CHAPTER 2

Baby

Who knew how long Wesley Brooks stood out on the street below her well-lit apartment window. The hands of the clock behind the bar had been approaching one o'clock when the bitch-ass bartender had told him to "buy a drink or keep it moving." Wesley could not say how much time had passed since. After leaving the bar, he had called Renee from a payphone. Renee because his best friend's wife was up from Virginia Beach for the week. Renee because her phone number was one of the few numbers he knew by heart, even amid the head rush of three Hennessy and Cokes. Plus, Wesley was comforted by the belief he had left a change of clothes at Renee's. Renee, old diehard Renee. He had repeated those words during the fifteen or so minutes it took to walk to her place that humid summer night. Renee who would have given him her last dollar.

He did not want to go upstairs looking like too much of a scrub, and he decided that he would get some napkins from the grocery store, dry the sweat from his face, his arms. But before backtracking to Jerome Avenue, he took another long look at the apartment window. The blinds were down, but through the open slats he could see the room, its abundance of light, and how the light reflected off the cream walls. He was reluctant to move, to lose his vantage point, the way he had always been reluctant to rise from a comfortable position on his parents' couch.

At the store, not to make up for taking the napkins which were free, but to spare himself some of Renee's wrath, he bought a package of

Snowballs with the ten dollar bill he had refused to break at the bar. For some reason, the candy was kept behind the counter, alongside the condoms and the cigarettes.

“One a those pink things,” Wesley said, pointing to show the cashier. “It’s for my girl,” he explained to the person behind him in line.

Back outside, he took one last look at the apartment. The digital numbers of his gold-plated wristwatch, a thing of little practical value, could not keep pace with the sixty-second minutes that other watches so easily counted, no matter how often he replaced the battery. Now, it told him no more than what he already knew, that it was past midnight.

For the first time that week, he thought of the baby boy, their baby boy. Rest, he remembered, was near impossible with a small life sleeping at the foot of the bed. (“I can’t remember the last time I slept good,” he had told Renee towards the end). So he crossed to the liquor store on the other side of Jerome and broke a five-dollar bill on two miniature bottles of Jack Daniels whiskey.

As he returned to the apartment, approaching from an unfamiliar direction, he paid attention to the air conditioner protruding from the window. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he remembered it working. At the door to the building, he saw, however, that there was no wet spot on the concrete below. Still, there was the light, warm and inviting, a sign that his luck might be improving, that after a good night’s sleep his best friend might call him with a job for the first time that week.

When, after the third ring, Renee did not buzz him in, he used his key to open the building door and a second key to open the apartment door. Renee was in a predictable state: sitting cross-legged on the blue linoleum

floor with her eyes full of tears. The room felt like a hundred degrees, but Renee still had on the good clothes she had worn to work. The navy pinstripe suit pants and matching jacket were pressed perfectly, as if she had just taken them off the store hanger for the first time. Her shirt collar stuck up on one side, but this imperfection along with her red, swollen eyes only made the suit look that much more perfect.

“Jesus,” Wesley said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. “You miss a payment on the AC or something?”

“My baby,” Renee said to a square of linoleum. “My baby, my baby, my baby...”

He set his shoes beside the door, a habit that he upheld even though Renee had no rule prohibiting shoes in the apartment, and took the package of Sno Balls from the paper bag. “Don’t start that, Renee. It’s late and I’m tired.” He went up beside her and forced down her shirt collar. If he could get her mind away from those things that cut deep, he might still be able to milk a good night’s sleep from the remaining hours of the night.

But she did not acknowledge the coconut candy, and Wesley saw the prescription bottle open in her hand and the white dotted line of Xanax pills intersecting the bit of floor between her legs. Still, the Hennessey in his system told him that everything would be alright, that he only had to make it through one night with Renee.

“He wouldn’t shut up. I tried everything, but he kept carryin on,” Renee said, and she looked up at the crib, which was made by a company with a fake Italian name he could never remember. The name sounded similar to so many other words in languages he did not know. He had gone to help pick out the crib with Renee and her mother, but after seeing the

endless rows of cribs in the store, so many of the cribs made by knock off companies with names he could not pronounce, he had simply gone outside to wait.

“I was just tryna fix the place up, make it like a home for you,” Renee continued, her sobbing growing louder. “He just wouldn’t shut up.”

Piece by slow piece, it came to Wesley that a sound had not yet come from the crib, not an unformed word, not even one of those terrifying little coughs.

He did not notice he was moving at all until he had backed into the door, and when he finally caught himself and started for the crib, he did not notice the plastic toy crack under his feet.

“Don’t touch him. He ain’t breathin right,” she said.

“Shut up, Renee,” he said.

Partway there, he recognized, among the other smells of the sweaty room, the odor of dirty diaper. The odor hit him like cool air, easing him, because he knew the smell from days when his son was, as his father the mathematician would have said, as healthy as the day he had been born.

At the crib, though, he found the first sign: a pillow covering all of the baby’s tiny body. He cast aside the pillow. He reached out, touched the baby’s hand and felt a coldness that did not belong. He lifted the hand and let it drop and the hand fell like a rock. Death signs. The baby’s still chest and gaping mouth and open, unmoving eyes were also death signs, but it was not until he saw the baby’s dry lips and dry tongue that he became sure his son, Anthony, had taken his last breath. Seeing Anthony gone from the world extinguished the hope he had for the night and for the week and for

the nights and the weeks to follow, nights and weeks that were so far down the road they should have been outside of his now-for-now existence.

“Jesus,” he said, and though he did not hear, Renee cried even louder. “What the fuck did you do?”

“Tell me he’s not dead, baby. Tell me he’s okay,” she said. Looking down, he saw Renee beating his legs with her fists and, feeling nothing at all, initially cursed his eyes for misleading him.

“They can hear you in the goddamn hall,” he said.

“Who? Who can hear me?” she said.

“Stop fuckin yellin,” he said. He caught one of her arms and squeezed it until her light brown skin turned white. “What’d you do?”

“My baby,” she said, and he understood that she had been talking to their dead child all along and he slapped her and he slapped her again, the second slap bringing her down a notch.

He did not want to call his best friend; more than likely, his wife would pick up the phone and talk her shit about the responsibilities of a grown man to his family, though they had no children. The only thing to do was call Clare, the fifth grade teacher. If he wasn’t going to be in the door by the time she turned the lights off, Clare had told him after the second time they slept together, he shouldn’t bother coming at all. Nonetheless, she was the most reliable of his “acquaintances,” his name for the people in his life who were good for going to the bar or the club.

“Who you callin, Wesley?” Renee said. “Who you callin?” She knew that he could not and would not call his parents. “One of your girls gonna come fix this for you, Wesley? Huh?”

Renee was again worked up, making a commotion, and he could not hear Clare's answering machine over her yelling. He did not need to hear Clare's prerecorded message, but wanted to, if only to taste something he had tasted before.

He hung up the phone.

"Where is she, Wesley? Huh? Where is she when you need her?"

He dragged Renee into the bathroom by her arm. He didn't redial Clare for fear of putting too much of himself out there all at once.

"Thought you were saving up for a car," was all Clare had said when Wesley quit the sanitation department job. She had surprised him: While her words had indeed been a quiet criticism, he had expected her to lose her cool, to carry on about the many ways in which he was wasting his life.

Renee banged and banged on the door, as if it was locked, and her banging shook the whole room. A lipstick container and the Xanax pills trembled along the floor. On the ground below the crib, sandwiched between the floor and a lone pink slipper, was a box of Kleenex. The box, however, was empty, so he used his shirtsleeve to wipe the sweat from his face. Above the box of Kleenex was his son, who his parents had loved despite their condemnation of his engagement to Renee.

It was until about a month before Wesley's high school graduation that his parents had accepted that Wesley could not turn his back on Renee, four months pregnant. And then, his father the mathematician had told him to pack what he wanted to take with him and had drove him the eight blocks to Renee's in a Toyota that was two months fully paid off. They rode the whole way in an uncomfortable silence, his father's hands steadying the wheel, Wesley's hands folded on the small duffel bag on his lap. At Renee's,

his father told him to call if he ever needed anything at all with the baby. His father was not angry; there was only disappointment. It was as if suffering his father's verbal attacks for months had finally opened the gates of forgiveness to him. But he had already given up his house key and his father's forgiveness, if that's what it was, would not open his parents' apartment door. "Good luck, son," his father said, extending his hand for a handshake. Disappointment, Wesley had thought as he went up to Renee's, might be worse than anger.

Wesley got up and turned the fan to the highest setting. The fan blew Anthony's dirty diaper toward Wesley and the smell was no longer reassuring. To change the diaper he had first to make space. He pushed the unopened mail and unfolded clothes to either side of the bed. He placed the baby's limp body on the unoccupied section of comforter and got the diapers, the wipes, and even the tube of diaper rash cream which he knew was unnecessary.

He initially worked on the diaper as quickly as possible, as was his habit. But he soon realized that if he lived to a thousand years old the baby would never again fuss or cry or otherwise rush him.

When he was finished, he looked at the symmetry with which he had brought together the halves of the diaper, and saw that even through the alcohol, he had done good work. Renee said that Wesley's father was responsible for the child's wide, dimpled chin, the same chin that Wesley's brothers and sisters had inherited and that had skipped Wesley. Wesley did not see his father no matter how hard he looked at the chin. Still, he had worried that the mathematician's chin would be there, undeniably present, when Anthony shed his baby fat.

Before returning Anthony to the crib, he pushed down where he imagined a tiny lung would be and found that death had hardened the baby's chest. Then he cautiously reached out and felt the soft spot in Anthony's skull, a part of him wondering if the hole had not closed up in death.

The first and last time he had taken his parents' help had been in Anthony's third month. Wesley showed up at the front door prepared to refuse to enter their home, prepared to spit on any handshake offered him. But his mother, who came to the door alone, did not ask him in to begin with. Although his mother often left childrearing instructions or Bible quotes on his answering machine while he was at work, he had not seen or talked with her since being kicked out of the house. She stood the whole time in the doorway, taking up more space than Wesley would have imagined. Trying, Wesley could tell, to commit Anthony's face to memory. Did the Bible, Wesley had tried to recall, say anything about nosiness being a sin?

Standing over the crib, Wesley noticed that he had dripped sweat on Anthony's chest. He used a fresh wipe to clean the sweat and with the same wipe dabbed a patch of dry skin at the corner of the baby's mouth. But the dryness reappeared shortly after each dab, and he eventually had to accept that the dryness was not a mark against his work with the diaper.

At some point while he had been changing the diaper, he noticed, Renee's banging had quieted to a rhythmic sobbing, a sort of whimpering that he could live with. The loudest noise now was the summer night outside, so Wesley closed the windows, hoping to shut out the traffic and conversations on the street.

He lay down, closed his eyes. Renee had insisted that he make the call to his parents that first and last time, which was earlier in the same week he met a girl wearing knee-high leather boots in a Jamaica Avenue Duane Reade. Renee's mother, who usually minded the baby when Wesley and Renee were both at work, could not be there, had to go down to Philadelphia for a funeral. Renee had refused to call in sick or let Wesley call in sick to the sanitation people. This was in June, a few months after the last time Renee mentioned that August was a great month for weddings. Marriage, Wesley had always known, would not have abolished his mistakes, but it would have elevated him some in his parents' eyes.

He sensed a clutter on the bed around him and reached out to clear it away, but found the comforter bare. He sat up and surveyed the disorder - the mess surrounding the crib, invading the kitchenette - that was everywhere but on the bed. His first thought was to clean the room, give it some order, but he realized that he would not get a moment's rest in the apartment regardless and he dialed Clare.

The voice that answered on the fourth ring was not altogether Clare's; it might have been his friend's coldhearted wife's or even his own mother's. So Wesley hung up, suspecting he had dialed a wrong number out of habit. He dialed the teacher again, carefully, thinking twice over every number.

"Hello?" The woman on the line was definitely Clare, though her voice, masked by the throatiness of sleep, did not sound completely like itself. "Wesley? What time is it? Why are you calling so late?"

He didn't respond right away, waited for her to remind him of her rule or ask why he had hung up on her just to call back. Only when he was

sure that she was not going to say anything did he say, “I’m at the apartment. Renee’s here and I can’t stay here.”

“You can come over. I’m going back to bed, but I’ll leave the door unlocked,” Clare said. Renee, when she learned about the girl with the knee-high leather boots, had took her number from Wesley’s black book and left the cruelest messages. To Wesley’s surprise, the girl, perhaps because she was in her thirties, had not been mad, had not wanted to lash back at Renee, had even said she understood where Renee was coming from. Which had left Wesley privately feeling that the women were forming a kind of union against him.

“I’m sick of walkin,” Wesley said. “I’ve been walking practically all night and I’m done with all that.” There was a silence and he thought she had drifted back to sleep. “Hello?” he said.

“Are you asking me to come get you?” she finally asked.

He said nothing.

“I wish you had a car, baby.”

“Now’s not the time, girl. Just come on and get me.”

After a long pause, she breathed heavy and said, “Alright.”

“You awake? You gonna remember this conversation?” he asked.

“Yes, baby,” she said, taking another deep breath. “I’m on my way.”

With the windows closed, the heat had grown unbearable. So he turned off all the lights. Even the two nightlights he had placed in the outlets on either side of the room the week after they returned from the hospital with Anthony.

That first and last time, he had not seen his father at all and had not heard the man until he returned to get Anthony. He rang the bell and his

mother came to the door with Anthony, whose small, fat hands were wrapped around a brand new toy. As soon as Anthony left his mother's shoulder, he began to bawl, and Wesley, forever afraid of dropping Anthony and seeing his son's head crack into pieces, set Anthony in the stroller. Anthony quieted and Wesley heard his father talking and laughing in some other part of that apartment that had been his only home for his first eighteen years. However, he had been unable to see past his mother and unable to pinpoint what room the man's voice was coming from.

The toy, a gift from his parents, angered Wesley. There had been a time when his reason for not ripping apart the three interlinked plastic rings right then and there would have been that his mother had known him since before he had had the strength to rip apart the rings. That still had been a part of the reason, the beginning of it, but the most important part had been what she would say to his father, how she would pass on the details of the event.

Wesley again tried to get some rest, laid on his back, let his legs dangle off the bed. But through closed eyes, even, he could see the flashing red lights from the liquor store below.

That night, coming home to find the rings snapped into little pieces on the kitchen table, Renee asked who the toy had come from. "From them. Who else?" Wesley replied. "From your dad? Your mama? Or the both of them?" Renee asked. Realizing that he did not know, that he could not pinpoint the forces acting against him, he took up a handful of plastic pieces and threw them across the table at her. She took this as a joke and responded with a playful tap on the side of Wesley's head. The baby, too, swung an arm at the air and squealed.

Wesley stayed at the teacher's that night and the next four nights. The whole time he waited for Renee to call and tell him that his parents had asked to see their grandson again. When he had finally understood that there would be no such request, Wesley had decided he would mail the pieces of broken ring back to his parents, each piece sealed in an envelope of its own. By then, though, Renee had twice put the trash out.

Now, a siren wailed in the distance. As it neared, it filled the room until there was no other sound. He looked around, to see if the wailing would break glass or shake the floors. The siren seemed to announce him to the whole world, thousands of people he could not see and would never meet. There were no more lights to switch off; he went to the apartment door and opened it, figuring an easy entrance, an open door, would at least better the officers' moods for when they found the dead child.

But the siren did not stop. It went past the window and kept on toward another building elsewhere, a different emergency, becoming nothing more than a faint noise under the whirring of the fan.

Long after the siren had vanished, he found himself still looking down the stairway, waiting for someone – if not someone in a blue uniform with a badge and gun, then just someone. After that someone appeared on the stairs, after he had ushered the someone into the apartment, Wesley decided, he would call his parents for the first time in God knew how long, never mind that it was the middle of the night. Yes, he would call and give them some word of himself and maybe even of the crimes people committed.

CHAPTER 3

A New Arrangement

In the second hour of the layover in Miami International Airport, Simone Tanker - sick of sitting, hungry for something other than airport food - wandered down to Concourse H and found herself in a gift shop. She went in with the belief that she might find something for her father. She could not remember ever meeting the man, as he claimed she had, and she would not have recognized him if he had been standing behind the register in place of the woman reading a magazine full of photographs of Hollywood stars and the privileged children of Hollywood stars. “When you were three or four,” her father had started the first of the letters to her. “On your fifth birthday,” he had written in another.

The store itself was square-shaped. Rows of glass shelves protruded from three of the shop’s walls. There was likely a similar shop by her gate, in Concourse F. But a janitor, perhaps trying to impress her, speaking of “my” airport, had told her that the airport concourses were not far apart. There was time, plenty of it. The flight to Piarco International Airport was two and a half hours away. And after Piarco, there was the flight to Tobago. There had been a later, more expensive flight to Miami from John F. Kennedy Airport. Her husband, Harold Tanker, had urged her to avoid the long layover. At this point in their lives they could afford such things, he had said. “If you had the first idea about what we could and could not afford, Harold, you wouldn’t need me to do your books.” Dr. Harold Tanker, who liked to brag that the only vacation he had taken in the last five

years had been his great uncle's funeral in Texas. He made the money but the money was theirs, they had agreed as a young married couple.

On a shelf at the back wall's end, she came across a snow globe depicting a desert scene. To convey the reality of a desert, so that the desert was not confused with a beach, the maker had inserted in the sand a plastic snow-covered palm tree and a plastic snow-covered camel. "Can I help you?" asked the girl behind the counter, momentarily looking up from the famous faces. The girl could not have been older than sixteen. Simone wanted to ask, Shouldn't you be in school? "No. No, thanks. I'm fine." She shook the globe. She took a long look at the absurdity of snow descending on a desert. Of snow falling on the camel's back and rolling down its already white coat.

A middle-aged man and middle-aged woman, two of the shop's few customers, looked at products along a side wall. They spoke loudly, as if they were alone, in the privacy of their bedroom. Their loud voices, however, did not seem to distract the woman behind the register, who intermittently circled something or another in the magazine. The man wore a pink cowboy hat and leather suit, and rose-red cowboy boots. He made his way toward the back wall, suggesting items to the woman. With his every step there was a squeaking noise, but Simone could not figure out if the noise came from the boots or the pants. "No, no," the woman said to everything he held up. The way the woman said "no" assured Simone that she had known no other language but Spanish for the first part of her life. Simone turned the globe over and watched the snow fall to the sky from the ground. No one had ever told her how much daughters spent on fathers they did not know. In fact, she knew nothing of the language fathers and

daughters spoke to one another. She wondered whether seventy-six year-old men were similar to the men she had known as a young, single woman. Could they, too, be scared off by gestures of generosity? Did one spend more on a father afraid of flying? “It,” he had written one time, using his euphemism for death, “rumbles in my knees when I stand up and when I walk. But it is most present when I lie down to rest.” Simone had a phone and so did Edwin, but Edwin had not used his since his wife’s death two years earlier. Simone had not had sex in longer than that.

The man in the cowboy boots was holding up a stuffed animal that did not resemble any real and living animal. “No, no.” He put down the animal and picked up an eight ball that told fortunes. “No, no.” The Spanish-speaking woman playfully slapped his arm. “Stupid. You know he doesn’t need that.” It occurred to Simone that they were young people talking the way only young people could talk. “Remember,” said the man, “when he was talking about not being able to get any good advice?” Yes, Simone finally decided, his pants were doing the squeaking. And no, a father who had not fathered, who could not claim to know anything of his daughter’s life after age six, didn’t require a gift of any sort, let alone a world of water, snow, and sand. “Come on, honey,” said the woman with the Spanish accent, tugging on his shirt. “Let’s go. We’ll see what they have in Dallas.” A craving suddenly came upon Simone, who was not going to Dallas. Despite the fact it would do nothing for her hunger, she picked up a pack of gum, no pack in particular, and took it to the register.

The corridor outside the store was packed with people rushing to some gate or another. If she did not know about her father’s fear of flying, one of the men passing outside could have been him on a return trip from

some corner of the earth where he knew people she did not even know existed. The people in the corridor, Simone could not help thinking, were fortunate to be in a rush. A rush was less painful. This she had learned in a childhood clouded by a fear of doctor's needles. The intensity of her fear had given her the strength to resist small armies of nurses attempting to administer vaccinations and blood tests. When she was twelve and the nurses could no longer easily pin her to the doctor's table, her mother solved their problem by telling them to hide the needle from her daughter until the girl had closed her eyes. Her unwed mother who traveled as ash down the Harlem River.

Back at her gate, she found a seat overlooking the runway and the visible sliver of highway running alongside the airport. She looked at her watch. The natural thing for her to do would have been to go to a payphone and dial the nine digits that rang their home line and the four phones hooked up to the line. It was nearly nine on a Monday morning; her husband would be sleeping because she had not been there to wake him. Sitting at Gate 21, she could see him rolling over to answer the phone before the answering machine picked up on the fifth ring. "What time is it there?" he would ask, forgetting, first, that she was still in Miami, and, second, that there was no time difference between where he was and where she was headed. "There's a bowl of fruit for breakfast and a salad for lunch. Just look in the fridge," she would remind him. "I remember," he would say, whether he remembered or not. At ten-thirty the first appointment of the day would arrive. The night before, as she set the files straight for Bernice Earle, the sixty-nine year-old neighbor filling in in her absence, Simone had come to know by heart many facts of the ten-thirty's life - his middle name, his

mother and father's middle names, his blood type, his allergy to sulpha. By noon, the waiting room of the basement office would be full of children and the madness they towed in their wake. It was afternoons in the office that frequently reminded her why she had wanted no children of her own.

She shifted in her seat so that the payphone was over her shoulder. It was June, and she knew that outside of the air-conditioned airport Miami was a humid place and that only more humidity awaited her. In decades away from her place of birth, she had let go of a lot, but Augusts in New York had always reminded her how humidity could drain. And, too, she could imagine the weight of a grieving father.

The taxi driver who drove Simone from Piarco was sitting on the hood of his taxi when she came out of the airport. The sight of him sitting led her to search her head for a word she had known as a child. Hood, she said to herself. Hood, she repeated...But no thought followed, no other word settled behind the first. The word - "bonnet" - would not come to her until weeks later, after she had forgotten why she was searching for it in the first place. "The moment was longer than I at first realized," she would write a different taxi driver in one of the letters she would put under her and Harold's mattress. "It ended, of course, in the car. But it started when you were still working under the bonnet."

The driver said he knew her father personally and did not need directions to the house. Nevertheless, she did not put away the paper with her father's address, in case the driver realized he was mistaken, that the Edwin Pouchet he knew was a different Edwin Pouchet from some other

pocket of the island. And it was the paper that he glanced at in the rearview mirror when he learned she had been born and raised there.

When she asked about her father's health, how he had been holding up since his wife's death, the driver made a noise that was neither a grunt nor a sigh, neither reassurance nor concern. Some twenty minutes later, she broke a solid silence by asking how much longer they had to go. She had forgotten what it was like to drive in a country without large highways, how the goodness of the day - whatever little goodness it held - could slip away before the road led anyplace significant. The roads had always been too narrow, she remembered. Even for a small girl fourteen, fifteen, sixteen they had been too narrow. She remembered the potholes and the cement cracked across lanes. But she did not remember the roads being populated with so many bad drivers, and as they waited for a car to pass, she realized that a great many of the people on the road had been nurtured by a generation of walkers.

He did not respond to her second question for more than five minutes, until a few moments before the house came into view. "This he house right here," he said. They drove past the first opening in a U-shaped driveway, stopped at the second. A woman and a man sat in a front room, before large, open windows. The driver waved to the group. The group waved back. The woman called out, "Good day, Ronald. How you going?" The driver waved again.

"You're not coming in?" Simone said to the driver, feeling it would be easier to encounter new faces with someone at her side, even if that someone was himself a stranger.

"No, no," the driver said without offering an explanation.

She walked up to the house carrying a suitcase in each hand. Mango trees and plum trees and pomegranate trees flanked the driveway and blocked her view of the neighboring houses. The one-story house sat on stilts. It, Simone saw as she neared, was not as large and imposing as its height and scale made it appear from a distance. In fact, by the time she reached its shadow, she was sure her father's house was no bigger than any of the ones the taxi had passed on its way down the street. To the side of the main house, nestled between two mango trees on the property, a man cut a sheet of galvanized roofing in the doorway of a partially built smaller house. The smaller house was enough for a bedroom, and maybe a bathroom and small kitchen. All four walls of the smaller house were erected, but there was no roof. The man stopped working as she passed. The taxi, too, had not yet driven off. She felt eyes on her, and so she tried to minimize the sway of her hips. But there was little she could do; she had always possessed what some men called a "strong" backside.

The woman was standing when Simone came in through a freshly painted door with a top hinge that revealed rust in its crevices. This reminded Simone of what had not crossed her mind since Miami: Her father, old and grieving, the last of his generation of Pouchets, was fragile. The woman, who startled Simone by knowing her name, introduced herself as "Edwin's friend."

Swaying lightly in his rocking chair, the man did not acknowledge the new person in the room, and Simone noticed for the first time that the man was very old. The photograph Edwin had included in his last letter showed a man no older than thirty, not a man rushing towards death but a man with his two feet on Mount Irving beach, on the line made by the meeting of wet

and dry sand. But forty-something years could do remarkable things to a person. She herself was fifty-two; her husband was fifty-five.

She leaned in to give the old man a hug. The old man, who was the woman's 106-year-old father, had already lost his hearing and sight, and he could barely smell an onion under his nose. Sensing the oncoming object, the breeze it brought, he extended a hand. A handshake to announce he meant no harm. Simone, however, did not see the hand until she was already halfway to hugging him. "He was barely breathing in that rocking chair," she would tell Harold in their morning phone call the following day. "And old as he was, I was thinking it was Daddy and I thanked God twice for sparing him til that moment." When Simone released him, the 106-year-old exhaled deeply, and something in the way his breath passed her nose and cheek told Simone that he was not of Pouchet blood. "I blushed, Harold. I giggled and I blushed. I was blushing so bad I thought it might show." " 'Daddy,' Simone? Since when is Edwin 'Daddy?' "

The woman, Helen, offered her a seat, and though Simone wanted to see Edwin, she sat because the old man was not her father and, more so, because she did not want to refuse someone she had known for such a short while. The woman asked her questions she was not in the mood to answer. How was her flight? How was the drop from the airport? After a few minutes of questions, Simone turned and looked out one of the large windows. The taxi was gone from the driveway. The workman knelt on top of the small house, hammering the galvanized. "That is Nigel finishing things," Helen said, looking first at the workman, and then at the main house as a whole, as if to say, "Imagine all this." "Those rooms there" - she

motioned to the adjoining rooms of the main house - "they all built by Edwin. After Nigel finishes, Edwin says the house would be complete."

"Is he here?" Simone finally asked. "My father, I mean."

"Oh ho," Helen said, as though she had been awaiting the question all along. Simone followed the woman back to Edwin's bedroom. Helen went in, leaving Simone to look at a circular coffee table holding a short vase of hibiscus stems and a framed photograph of a woman standing under a hibiscus tree.

"Is this Versil?" Simone asked when Helen reappeared.

"Versil?" Helen said, looking around as though Edwin's first and only wife, the woman he had married at sixty-two, might be in the room. Finally, she saw that Simone was looking at the photograph. "Oh yes. That is she." In a year and a half of letters, Simone had put together bits and pieces of Edwin and Versil Pittman's story. In one letter, he wrote, "It is not possible for me to forget she lies down the road. It, too, does not forget." Another letter told how he awakened at first light on that last day and cooked breakfast for two, as was his daily routine. "She had been dead for five or six hours when I finished cooking. But her cheek was not cold." She looked at his grief with a skeptical eye until Edwin's friend collapsed while walking a mile and half to the grocery. "Carl," Edwin wrote, as though she had known the collapsed man, "got It while crossing the street." The few details she possessed about father did not include how many children he had scattered about the world, although she knew that her father had not stopped with her mother. "If you think it is what's best," Harold said when Simone told him. "But remember, you don't owe the man an inch."

Simone's time with her father did not include any lengthy conversations that would begin to bridge the decades they had missed. In the short visit, Simone would find nothing worth telling to Harold. She had her questions, but they were questions she could not see herself asking with Helen right behind her. He wore steel-rimmed glasses, and when he smiled hello, she saw the gold cap on his front tooth. He was sitting up in bed, the covers pulled up to his chest, a checkerboard on his lap. There was one white piece left among a terrain of black pieces. Draughts, she said to herself, pulling the word from her memory. She stood in the doorway and he did not motion for her to come closer. She took a few steps into the room only after noticing the bulge of stomach that had formed over the years in a narrow mirror on the wall.

"Tomorrow," Edwin said after he had asked about her travel, "we will go see a friend in Charlottesville."

A sigh from Helen confirmed that "friend" was also a euphemism. It was possible that the woman's handwriting in the letters belonged to Helen.

"Today I am feeling not bad," he announced.

"But how have you been doing?" she asked, not knowing if he was "father," "dad," or "daddy."

"Like I said, fine, fine." His attention returned to the checker board. He took up the white piece and jumped one of the black ones. "Fine, fine," she heard him say over and over as she squeezed past Helen, who was leaning in the doorway. Friday came to an end.

A little after seven the next morning, Simone woke and went out to the living room. She went on her tiptoes, even though Edwin had written in

a letter that he no longer rose from bed before ten. Her mother had hated to be disturbed in the morning. Maybe that was where her parents had taken a misstep. She stopped at the coffee table outside Edwin's room, and lied Versil Pittman's photograph on its face, and then she took the hibiscus stems from the vase. She did not have her glasses on, so when she looked at the garden out front, she was met with vague shapes of purple, blue, and orange flowers. She would have to take a closer look, but the orange might bring new life to the house.

After returning to her room, she did sixty sit-ups. Then, she stood before the mirror and viewed the bulge from the side. If she could remember correctly, she'd done sit-ups last in a physical education class in her junior year at Hunter. Looking at the bulge reminded her that there were videos that could show her if she was doing them correctly. She turned from the mirror, and thinking that she might be able to catch an extra hour or two of sleep before Edwin woke, she climbed back in bed. Her mother, forever unwed, had a head of hair that did not need to be relaxed, needed only to be blow-dried. "To think how hard your father's hair musta been?" her childhood hairdresser had once said, touching her own hair which was as wooly as Simone's. "She doesn't have a dad," her mother had replied. Her second date with Harold was at a restaurant on the other side of Queen's Boulevard. After dinner, they crossed the street and tried to catch a cab. "I ain't holdin my breath," he laughed moments before he kissed her for the first time under the hair salon's awning. The two events were many years apart, but her mind could not untangle one from the other: More often than not, when that first kiss played in her head, her mother was inside the hair salon, standing over a young Simone.

The sound of drilling suddenly entered her room, drawing her from bed and to the window. The window, however, would not budge, and she had to settle for calling through it. "Excuse me, I'm trying to sleep here." Her first words of the day surprised her. She had not thought her American accent would be so obstinate. "Buff" was the word that came to her when Nigel Stephens walked shirtless out of the small house. Real buff, not the brand of buff people purchased with gym memberships.

Nigel took some steps out of the doorway, looking from side to side. "Sorry, Miss Simone," he said to the driveway, and he took a couple more steps. The sun was behind him, and she realized that he could not see past its glare on the window. Even without her glasses, she could see that his complexion was somewhat unique. Indeed, he was black, but a certain reddish quality was clear evidence of some East Indian or Carib Indian ancestor. She felt an urge similar to when she saw a dab of dried glue on a table and wondered whether it had dried or was still soft and malleable. "I'm sorry, Miss Pouchet. I will keep deh noise to a minimum," Nigel said to a mango tree. He was now an arm's length from the window, but he could not see how little space lay between them. Edwin, probably, had told him her name.

Men and woman of all ages began dropping by on Saturday afternoon to see Simone, newly returned, a girl who had grown into a woman off-screen, without their knowledge or consent. Some visitors were, like her father, approaching their ends. And these people asked about her mother's death, a story they knew but wanted from closer to the source. After she told them about that final hospitalization, the ashes, the urn, they told her

that though she was dark like her father, her mouth and eyes were all her mother's. "When you coming back home?" some asked.

The elderly visitors and women, however, were outnumbered by men who were not too far above or below her in years. Some walked up the driveway, some drove. Almost all of them stole glances at some exposed section of flesh, while saying they had gone to primary school or secondary school or Sunday school with her and had come to see how she was holding up through the years. Regardless of whether she had a faint memory of the man or, as was most often the case, she did not know him, she could see in their manner that they still hung onto the image of her as a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old girl milling around her mother's yard. "It's like there's a line of them waiting round the corner," Simone told Harold on Sunday morning. "They just keep on coming and coming. You would think I'm the only woman in Tobago." "You wearin your ring?" Harold joked.

The visitors kept Simone and Edwin busy through the weekend, so it was not until Monday morning that they left for the "friend" in Charlotteville. Edwin sat in the passenger seat of Nigel's taxi and Simone sat in the back. She did not ask Edwin how much he was paying the workman. Simone was not impressed by Nigel's driving, which was generally slow until he reached a sharp turn and seemed to speed up considerably. In these times, Simone had to hold on to the hand grip, which she thought might break altogether. Once they had rounded the corner, Edwin would wake up and look around, as if he was traveling in an unfamiliar world, before returning to sleep. After Charlotteville, they made visits to people who she had never met, but had heard her mother mention in conversation with relatives. They did not pull back into the driveway that night until after dark.

They set out Tuesday for Parlatuvier, on the other side of the island. When their glasses were empty, Edwin went inside with the woman to get more ice. Simone was left to sit in the gallery with the daughter of the woman, who was a sixty-seven-year-old widow. Finally, after fifteen minutes, Simone excused herself and went downstairs to sit in the taxi. “How long you gonna take to build this shack, Mister Nigel?” Simone said, using the title she had given him the day before, when she decided she had had enough of his “Miss” junk.

“I know what it is I am doing,” he said. He was leaning against the car. “We could build house here too, you know.”

“You could?” she said sarcastically.

“Yes. You’ve seen the house two houses over from your father?”

“You built that?” Simone said. “The one with all those mud stains smeared on the side?”

Nigel laughed a laugh that appeared genuine, and then stepped around the open car door so that he was facing Simone. “So this husband,” Nigel began, looking at her ring. “Where is he? Why he doesn’t travel with he wife?”

He also wore a ring, she had noticed on Monday, when she was equipped with her glasses. “Where is your wife, Mister Nigel?” she wanted to ask. But she hesitated when she saw Edwin making his way down the steps, and by the time got herself back together, the moment was over. Their return flight had been scheduled for Wednesday morning. But as they had been pulling up to the widow’s house, Nigel drove into a pothole, and Edwin had jerked into consciousness. “We’re going to have to wait until

deh house is finished,” he had said. “I couldn’t leave until it’s done.”
“Harold,” she said that night. “Harold, you said we could afford it.”

On Wednesday, Simone began to think Edwin was not going to return to New York with her, and by Thursday, this thought had partially solidified. Late Thursday afternoon, around three, Edwin interrupted Nigel’s work on the house and asked to be driven back to Charlottesville. Simone did not know what unfinished business he had there.

Arriving first at Nigel’s taxi, Simone took the passenger seat. She had sat in the back because she thought it would allow her to ask Edwin questions without Nigel hearing, but she now saw that that was not possible. “Tell me, daddy,” Simone said, forty minutes into the drive. “What was it about Versil?” In the rearview mirror, however, Edwin was fast asleep.

Not far from their destination, they came upon a section of road that broken, shattered as if something large had fallen from the sky onto the spot before them. Nigel did not notice it until it was too late. Once the car had passed over the break, he drove slower, but did not come to a stop until he had reached the Charlottesville house. She believed that damage would have been done to one of the tires, so she was surprised to see Nigel go under the hood of the car. For a moment Simone thought she would get out and stand by Nigel as worked, but she remembered that she didn’t know the first thing about what made cars go. She rolled the window down. “Need a hand?” she said. Nigel, perhaps, did not hear her. It was not until her second year of marriage that she learned that Harold couldn’t swim. In addition to rarely vacationing, he prided himself on being able to diagnose a child before his examination. In his opinion, the examination was simply

verification of what he already knew. But he was not always correct. “Even the weatherman can’t predict the weather,” he would then say.

After about fifteen minutes under the hood without any tools, he returned to the driver’s seat. Sweat spotted his shirt, which was avocado green, and she wondered if he would take it off. A stream of sweat that had interested her dried up before her eyes, and at the same time a new one began to forge a path.

“Why don’t you travel with her?” she asked.

Nigel followed her eyes to his ring finger. “I would if I did.”

“Huh?” she asked.

“I would travel with my wife if I did have one. Is my grandpa’s ring. He give it to my fadda and meh fadda pass it down to me.”

She did not know that she believed him. Men, she had learned, would tell you that they had built the sun for you if they thought it would get on your back. One day they were unmarried, and the next their wife of however many years was banging down your door. Still, she did not stop him when he placed a hand on her knee, a calloused hand that she immediately recognized had done much in its lifetime.

She was accustomed to cars with power, so she did not feel to roll up her window, and as they drove home, the car was filled with passing wind and they did not talk. Because they were driving on the other side of the road, Simone felt at times that she was driving without a steering wheel, leading the car with her eyes. When the car reached Edwin’s house, she was surprised to see her father awake in the back. The things she had thought would come back to her - the names for things, her accent, the geography - had not returned, but maybe there would be time to catch up on the other

side of their flight, in a world of perfectly block buildings. She did not call Harold that night. On Friday, she gave him their flight information and told him that their phone lines had been down all the day before.

Edwin lasted five months in the city. Through July and August, he carried on in his depressed state, spending the bulk of his days in bed, complaining about the humidity on those rare times he ventured out onto the streets of Harlem. Simone took an additional week off upon their return, but when he did not show any sort of progress, she went back down to Harold's office and left/put Edwin in the care of Beatrice, a Texas woman whose southern accent was as thick as Edwin's Tobagonian one. In a short time, her father put on ten more pounds, and Simone stuck Edwin's letters and the one photograph of him in the drawer where she stored jewelry that was no longer fashionable. They were kept separate from the letters she kept under the mattress. "To think that all these years I've looked down on Mummy," she wrote Nigel one day in July. "To think I blamed her for not marrying. What if she never loved him? What then?"

When it came to meals, Edwin mostly did not argue with what appeared on the plate before him. His one insistence was that his nightly chicken salad include shredded carrots and croutons. Harold could accept croutons, but rejected carrots for thinly sliced apples and corn kernels, telling Simone one night in their bedroom that he had not been raised to eat "rodent food." "Rabbits are not rodents," she said. On weekdays, Beatrice made dinner in the early evening, before Simone came upstairs from the office. She did not mind making two separate salads. She thought enough of Edwin, and she would do almost anything for Harold, who was the

closest thing to family she had in the city. Harold and Beatrice had been born in the same town seven miles outside Dallas. And though Harold had been brought north at a young age, before faces and names were impressed upon him, Beatrice saw that his parents' Sunday afternoon phone calls to friends and relatives had taught him something about those people that spoke to her of home. Weekends were not as forgiving as weekdays. Simone briefly considered trying to make a dish Edwin and Harold could agree on, salmon perhaps, what her mother had called "brain food," but the doctor had not mentioned salmon for Harold, and salad could do no wrong to a man who had suffered the rumblings of death.

Harold and Edwin's pickiness created additional work for Simone. She could excuse Edwin, but she had expected more from Harold, whose wife was still alive and walking the same ground as he. Despite the cushion Harold's practice afforded them, the living room had never been big enough, and so the square dining table was kept against a wall with three chairs around it. Harold, who usually reached the table first, had always sat facing the other chair, but began facing the window in late July. Edwin, then, would sit in either of the remaining seats, depending on how much he needed the extra warmth from the kitchen. Simone would join them once the food was on the table, the pan, the cutting board and the knives in the sink. Entering the living room, she would often find Harold staring at his reflection in the window, while Edwin told the story of him and Versil.

"I don't think me and Edwin really see eye to eye bout the way a man is supposed to handle his affairs with the mother of his children," Harold said one night, a few minutes after Edwin had set his dish in the sink's right

compartment and returned to his room. “Or - in his case - *mothers*.”

Simone sucked her teeth, and then shushed him. It was the last week of August, and he should have known by then what types of conversations were best held in their bedroom.

“Blood is blood,” she said. They were under the covers, the lights off. She was on her side of the bed, and she moved her leg so that it fell between his.

“His blood don’t seem that thick” he said.

She took her leg back. “Did you ever think to leave me?” Simone asked.

“Well there was that one time,” Harold said, and he put his hand on her knee to let her know it was all a joke. She took his hand in her own and raised it to her lips. She had decided long before that moment of Harold’s touch, before the airplane arrived to take her back to Miami International Airport, that her right knee was for Nigel. Harold could have the rest of her.

Also in that last week of August, Harold woke up one morning and noticed a cluster of small bites on his hand. He was a man of science and medicine, but he was also the first-born son of a woman who would wash her hands three times between meals. His mother had told him shortly after leaving Texas, when his mind was still absorbing the strange and unfamiliar sounds of New York, that bedbugs were one of the city’s more serious dangers. He didn’t wait until medical school to look into the matter. He spent a week of his freshman year at Jamaica High School in the library before Dorland’s Illustrated Medical Dictionary told him that the insect *Cimex lectularius* was attracted to carbon dioxide, not his cluttered desk, not

the pile of clothes on his floor. But while he knew her warnings were not scientific truth, he believed even as an adult that disregarding his mother would be a step towards tossing aside his entire upbringing and, thus, all that shielded him from the true evils of the world.

Harold itched and complained for a few days before Simone got it in her to go to the pharmacy. At the Rite Aid on 125th Street past Lenox Avenue, she picked up Bactine and Neosporin and, just in case the combined strength of the two was not enough, Cortaid. The Duane Reade at Frederick Douglass Boulevard was closer to home, but she liked to ride the bus because the map showed the path her mother's ashes had taken out to the Atlantic. She turned the corner onto 138th Street, and saw the Mr. SleepWell Mattresses delivery van parked outside the townhouse. She found the main apartment door open, and a man in a uniform coming downstairs with the mattress and box spring tied together. Two boys of about ten stood on the sidewalk throwing pebbles at each other. Simone moved from the doorway to let the man pass. At about the same time he came out onto the street, one of the boys jumped into the open door of the delivery van and began to turn the wheel.

"Vroom, vroom" said the boy. "Vvrrrrroooooom"

"Get out the truck, kid" the delivery man said. He dropped the mattress and boxspring, and they both fell slowly onto their sides. The man looked like he wanted to pull the boy from the driver's seat by his neck, but he did not take more than one step in the van's direction. "Get out the fuckin truck. Don't make me ask you again."

"Hey mister, you dropped your papers" the other boy said, pulling on the delivery man's jeans. The boy bent over and began to gather the

envelopes. As the envelopes accumulated in the boy's hands, she turned and saw that the light was on in Harold's office.

"Vroom."

That night, she told Harold that he could sleep in the living room. After she wrote to Nigel, she placed all of the letters in the drawer with the old jewelry.

September came, and the weather cooled. The day after she let Harold back into bed, Edwin was willing to go on a fifteen minute walk with Simone. Afterwards, she ate lunch, and then went down to the office. A boy waiting to see Harold stood in front of a poster a man who had his organs painted on him. "This man don't got no heart, mama," the boy said. "Yes he do." His mother did not look up from her magazine. "Is right there. You jus not looking properly. Use your eyes." "Nuh-uh. You're wrong, mama. He'd don't got a heart. He got everything but a heart."

Beatrice said she would cover for Simone on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Before October, Edwin had lost five pounds, and he began to forget pieces of the Versil story. Simone began to pull the obituaries from the *Post* before Edwin could get to it in the morning.

Three weeks before first snow told Edwin that New York was not for him, Simone went downstairs for a file and found him with Bernice. She, in fact, heard Bernice's moaning before she walked in the door and saw Bernice in her bra. Later, she would think that she was not as taken back as she should have been. "What you doing to Bernice," she said, with no sense of how loud she was speaking. "Stop it. Stop it. Take your hands off her." She pulled Bernice up by the arm, and Simone was surprised that she did not

seem to weigh more than a sheet of paper. Bernice's shirt, which had been lying across her knees, fell to the ground and Simone retrieved it for her. "Sorry," Edwin said. "Are you okay?" Simone asked Bernice, a question she asked the woman twice more between the basement stairs and the front door. "Yes, I'm fine," she answered every time.

Bernice was more than happy to be taken from the basement and the man in it. "Versil," Edwin had said as he unlatched her bra. Versil was the name of her second childhood dog, one that had been killed by a stray. Bernice Earle, the woman from Texas, had married at sixteen and had never in her married life meandered.

It was from Helen that Simone learned about Nigel's accident. "No, no, not Nigel," Simone overheard Helen telling Edwin. "The boy is in the hospital. Some youth give him a bad drive." It was their first day back. Edwin and Helen were in the kitchen, Simone in the living room.

They walked to the church where Versil was buried. Simone stood across the street as Edwin went to the grave. Only a few minutes had passed when, in her mind, she saw Nigel coming down the street in a wheelchair. A woman rolled him along, and Simone wondered if she was his wife. But when the woman paused and pointed to something on the other side of her, Simone saw that the woman wore no ring and had a nametag pinned to her shirt. Edwin stood in the graveyard, his head directed toward the horizon and its infiniteness, his body gently trembling. The wheelchair became stuck on something small, a rock or crack in the pavement. The nurse did not try to the navigate around whatever stood in their way; she pushed and pushed

until finally the wheelchair began to once again make its way down the street. Soon enough, it was past Simone and traveling down another street.

When they returned to the house, Simone left Edwin in the living room overlooking the driveway and went to her room. She dialed Harold twice, but both times she was unable to get a connection. She wanted to think that the problem was with the people at the Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago, but the recorded voice had an American accent.

Edwin was sleeping by the time she returned to the living room. There were certain sleeping people that Simone could not stand to watch, felt she had to interrupt, but Edwin was past the disturbed sleep of a man who had lost. A woman with an American education could do well here. If she was not decent work in Tobago, there were people who commuted to Trinidad by ferry every day. Childless, the only promise she would have to break would be the one she had made to Harold, and in ways that promise had already been broken. But no, she did not have it for Nigel. Not even if in the end he became once again a standing and walking man. This realization was somehow a relief. Simone took a seat in a rocking chair within arm's distance of her father, and in very little time, she saw Nigel being pushed up the driveway by the nurse. In those first days back there had been many visitors, mostly women, and there would be many more.

By the time the wheelchair had reached the curve in the driveway, Simone could see that the nurse had her mother's loose curls and her mother's complexion, which her canister of foundation had called medium-dark. They stopped at the top of the driveway, and Simone saw that the

nurse was indeed her mother, but her mother at a young age, a mother she had never known.

Soon, she saw herself stand up, go down to the driveway, and rest a hand on Nigel's shoulder. "What did this to you?" she heard herself ask. Neither Nigel nor her mother acknowledged the question. Her mother's eyes seemed to be closed, and Nigel was looking at something other than the mother's daughter. From where she sat in the living room, Simone saw herself take a step to the left so that she was more in the line of Nigel's and her mother's sight. Nigel was breathing hard, but the mother didn't show a sign of exertion. The mother stood with a neutral gaze, as if she was making up her mind about a taste of food; her daughter waited patiently for an answer, as if the day would never end. In her seat, Simone, too, waited for either Nigel or her mother to say something. Indeed, the human heart was a small, small thing. Its smallness permitted barely enough room for two. Simone rocked in her chair for some time, until her father woke and the gathering dispersed. Simone waited, wondering who would be the first among them to talk, the whole scene outside her father's window resting on the fabric of her eye.

CHAPTER 4

Gifts at Daybreak

Arima Constance went downstairs shortly after four-thirty that Thursday morning in November. She walked down from the third floor apartment to a shapeless pre-dawn morning, out onto a street bearing vestiges of a week-old snow, a street lit by a little moonlight and even a little more streetlamp light. While dressed to brace an unusually cold November, Arima was without a shower and, thus, was not a full arm's length from sleep. After the woman from the hospital's call some thirty minutes earlier to tell her about Desmond's condition and whereabouts, she had formulated a plan for the next hours of her life and the plan included going to the corner and hailing a gypsy cab to Harlem Hospital, but as she turned from locking the apartment building door she caught sight of the dogs. The dogs, three neighborhood strays, were, as usual, huddled around a tree on the other side of the street, heads down, eating. Arima stood without moving, did not pull the key from the door: In her concern for her boyfriend, she had forgotten the dogs and was startled to find a small part of her universe unscathed and intact, a short walk away.

A cab came slowly up 146th Street and the driver looked at her as he passed. But despite all that was urgent and pressing in her life at the moment, a part of her desired to be at the other end of that short walk, to rest her hand where it might fit well, perfectly, on one of the dogs' necks, in the crook between the head and the shoulders.

Her hand on the key in the door, she then saw a woman cross the street toward the dogs, a woman dressed as she was, though she did not recognize the woman as herself until the woman looked back over her shoulder and smiled. Arima rubbed her eyes. She looked up into a streetlamp, thinking that if sleep was coming back to play a trick on her, some light might clear things up, might realign her universe. A few snowflakes fell from a barren bough, landed on the front of her boot. She again rubbed her eyes. But when the Arima who had crossed the street did not come back, just stood on the curb and smiled, she took a breath of frosted air on her tongue, locked the door behind her, and began up the block.

Surprisingly, she did not feel any of the fear she suspected a woman walking alone at such a late hour and on such an empty street should. Still, between the apartment door and the corner, she turned around half a dozen times to see if what she'd left behind at the tree was not some thread of a dream momentarily corrupting her reality. By the time she reached the intersection of 146th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, her thoughts had formed around the possibility of strays giving a woman something to take to an man in a hospital bed.

Time was no longer moving with the hands on her watch, and she couldn't tell how long she had been standing on the corner when the first cab went by with a passenger in the back seat. More than five minutes, at least. In her days of going out, if she could remember that life with any accuracy, there had always been plenty of cabs to take her and her best friend back to Brooklyn from the Manhattan nightlife they so loved. Despite the fact that her parents' brownstone was closer to the city, her

friend had always been dropped off first because it was Chandra who had two children to get home to and – when life was holding out to her an upturned palm – the children’s father as well. When the second occupied cab came and went, Arima checked her watch and looked back down the block, and then took herself to the subway station on 145th Street, despite her rule against taking the train after dark.

The year’s first snow had come down two weeks earlier and there had been a second wave about a week after that. What white had fallen was now a mess: more ice than actual snow, more hard than soft. Water that had been snow gathered in potholes and fed into tiny rivers which were banked on one side by the curb. That same water had made its way down the subway station steps, forming a neat puddle on the last step, as if the water had decided at the last minute to spare the ground directly below.

It would begin to snow later that morning, as Arima was leaving the hospital in a confused and hurried state, and though it would stop before nightfall, snow storms would come and go until early December brought a warm spell. Most people resented snow in November, saying it was too early for cold; but the woman who worked in the cubicle beside Arima kept saying it was God’s earth and He could send down snow whenever He felt the need was there.

At a little past one that Thursday, hours before she was to watch a part of herself go to the strays, Arima rose, as she often did, to the absence of Desmond’s weight on the bed that was theirs. In truth, the bed was his: He had bought it years before they met. The dining table, too, was his before it was theirs. The same could be said for almost everything else in the

place. But of the five years and five months that had passed between Arima Constance and Desmond Mitchell, three of them had been spent in and among the things of 260 West 146th Street. Three years, even if one subtracted out the occasional month or two they went without seeing or speaking to each other. Before the apartment, Arima had lived with Nathan and Anne Richards, her birth mother's cousin and the cousin's wife, in the upstairs room of the Brooklyn brownstone that was the Richards's, and during their fallings out, it was to the brownstone she returned.

Though she had found comfort in the way of things as they were, Desmond had not always left at all times of the night. In the beginning of that, about halfway through the first year together in the apartment, Arima would sleep through the night as she'd done for most of her then twenty-eight years; and she would wake to find herself alone in bed, with nothing more than some sense that the disruption of the blankets on Desmond's side of the bed had occurred some many hours earlier. It was perhaps the accumulating weight of this knowledge that began to wake her at odd hours of the night. Soon, she was waking and going to the furnace to catch a glimpse of her boyfriend before 146th Street carried him out of sight.

Once waking up became a regular part of her life, she found a routine. She would fill a kettle with enough water to last until morning and put it over a low flame. Then, she would watch the nighttime street carry on in the absence of people as she crossed back and forth over the line of sleep. Around seven in the morning, an hour or so before Desmond returned smelling of a nightclub - bitter alcohol and a thousand cigarettes - she got up for good and poured a cup of coffee, which he would drink down before leaving for his job at Hunter College's cafeteria.

The woman from Harlem Hospital had called ten minutes before four-thirty. On the third ring, Arima rose from the window and went to the phone on the kitchen wall.

“Good morning,” the woman on the line said. “Misses Mitchell?”

“Who’s this?” Anne and Nathan had raised her to answer the phone in a certain manner, one that included a Good day or Good night, depending on the time. Tiredness, however, could strip a woman of what she’d known as habit since the outset of puberty. “Who’s calling?”

“This is Harlem Hospital Center. Am I speaking with Misses Mitchell?” the woman asked.

“Misses Mitchell? You’re looking for Desmond? He’s not here right now.”

“No, maam. The hospital is looking for a Misses Arima Mitchell. She is one of the emergency contacts in the file we have for Desmond Mitchell. Can you please put her on the phone? Or will you take the hospital’s message?”

“What’s the problem?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s confidential. Can you put Misses Mitchell on the phone?” Arima listened behind the woman’s voice for the noises of a living and breathing hospital – machines beeping, wheels turning, phones ringing, urgency – but there was none of that.

“I’m Misses Mitchell,” Arima said, though she had seen long ago that Desmond, Desmond who was five years her junior, would never be the one to make her a Misses. “What’s the matter?”

The woman told Arima that Desmond had walked out of a bar on 125th Street and tried to hail an unmarked cab. The next driver to come

down the street hit him and, after knocking him down, took him by the arm of his jacket. Three and a half blocks later, as the driver perhaps realized he was committing a second crime, the cab stopped and the driver laid Desmond down on the back seat. The driver, whose name was confidential, took him to Harlem Hospital where he left Desmond in front of the emergency room doors with a company card with his name on it in the jacket pocket. The woman on the phone gave the medical names for his injuries and, when she'd run through the list, repeated it in common language.

“Oh my Lord,” Arima said over and over while the woman was talking. Along her way to adulthood from childhood, she had come to understand that such situations called for prayers; however, she came up empty, could only remember the first couple inches of the Lord's Prayer and it was those inches that she began repeating over and over in a whisper.

“Well, you ought to come here,” the woman said before getting off the phone, as though they were old friends who'd been out of touch. “And if you have any trouble at all, you just ask for me. Lissette Alvarez.” Arima took a hotel pen from the bedside table and started to reach for a napkin from a bar in Harlem, one of Desmond's spots, but Lissette Alvarez was a name she thought she would not forget.

While she should have known better, a part of her expected the ER waiting room to look like the other Harlem Hospital waiting room she and Desmond had sat in before his flu shot two years earlier. Arima had convinced him to get the shot. He fought the idea, saying the flu wouldn't kill him. Even after he agreed to the visit, he continued to fight and Arima

had taken a sick day from work to accompany him to the hospital. That was two winters ago and he hadn't gone for another shot since.

On a clipboard at the receptionist's desk, she signed her name along the first available line and put her time of arrival. "How many people are before me?" Arima asked the receptionist.

"Ten or so. Maybe eleven," the receptionist said without looking up from a file that had a patient's full name and some numbers written on the tab. By the way the woman said it, Arima knew that the woman's answer never changed, regardless of how many people were sitting in the waiting room.

In the file for Desmond Mitchell, Arima knew, there were the forms he'd filled out on the day of the flu shot. All her memories of Desmond were kept in one of two compartments, Good or Forgettable, and the flu shot had been a good day. They had been, that day, like a couple on TV. Whispering in each other's ears. Unburdened by the problems of real people. As a sort of joke, Desmond had put down "Mrs. Arima Mitchell" on the form and, turning a two-month-old engagement ring around her finger, she had leaned over and taken his earlobe between her lips, sucked it halfway down her tongue, the way he liked. The ring, with all its shiny stones, was still on her finger on the day of Desmond's accident because it would have been too much trouble to take off. It would have required too much hot water.

"You can take a seat over there," the receptionist said, indicating a chair in the first row, beside a middle-aged couple. Arima could tell that the receptionist was not new to the late shift because nothing in her face said

that it was five in the morning. How long have you been here? In this hospital? Behind this desk? With that hairdo?

Arima took a seat in a chair in the rear of the room, three rows back from the talking couple. She found that her eyes had adjusted to the neon lights above and sleep began to overtake her. Before leaving home, she had quickly wiped herself down with a washrag and she now wished that she had also taken a cold shower.

She did not know when she eventually fell asleep. When she woke, she looked over her shoulder at the window facing the street and saw that it was a new day outside. The clock on the wall above read seven-forty-five. A woman had relieved the receptionist who had first helped Arima. The man with the familiar face was gone. Her boss would not be in for almost another hour and, wanting to hear a voice from her life, she thought to call Chandra but knew that her friend would be busy getting her children off to school. She waited until eight-thirty to call work and tell them that she would be late. When she sat back down, she felt the pain of hunger, but she did not want to go outside and risk miss hearing her name called, so she bought a bag of chips from a vending machine in the corner.

At nine-thirty, Arima went to the receptionist's desk. The new receptionist looked up over the top of a file, this one with a different name and different set of numbers on the tab. "Lisette. I'm looking for Lisette," Arima said after the woman told her that there were about ten or eleven people in front of her.

"Lisette who?" the receptionist asked, and slowly picked up a clipboard.

“Lisette,” Arima said. “From the hospital.”

The receptionist looked the clipboard up and down. “We have no Lisette here. If you give me a last name, maybe I can do something for you.” But it was that last name that had left Arima, and it was that last name that Arima searched for until the receptionist called her name over the ceiling speakers at ten-thirty. A nurse met her at the receptionist’s desk and took her to Desmond. Desmond’s bed was one of eight in the room. The curtains were pulled closed over each bed, and Arima stood looking at an anonymous bed in the middle of the room until the nurse pulled the curtains on one in the last row of beds.

Arima followed the nurse to Desmond, who was a horrible mess. Cuts and scraps sliced across his distinctive characteristics, many of them following the natural lines of his face. In addition, his jaw was seemingly held to his face with a metal contraption, and she first thought that it was the contraption that kept him from talking. Not until two weeks later would Desmond be able to tell her in his own words how he had been injured. Even then, he would have to write his words and he would have forgotten for good pieces of the story, pieces that seemed most important because they were forgotten. Despite what had become of his face, a face that had been beautiful, perhaps too beautiful for a man, it was the casts on his arm that were the toughest on the eyes. When she saw his arms she wanted to reach out to him, but the nurse was right behind her, waiting, she sensed, to tell her that Desmond was not for touching.

“Can you hear me, baby?” Arima asked.

Desmond blinked his eyes.

“Oh, baby. How you doin?”

Desmond blinked.

She saw that there was nothing she could do. Still, she wanted to stand by Desmond, felt it was the thing to do. But she was already hours late for work. On her desk in midtown Manhattan, there was a stack of papers waiting for her. Form A goes in this bin. Form B in that one.

Arima turned to the nurse and asked, "How long till he gets better?" Without touching him, she extended her arm toward the cast on Desmond's left arm.

"You never can know for sure," the nurse said.

"How about his arms? When will he be able to use those?" Arima asked. She felt her eyes wetting. She rubbed them and that brought more wet. She sniffled.

"Like I said, you never know for sure. You can ask the doctor though," the nurse said.

It had been snowing for less than five minutes when Arima stepped out onto Lenox Avenue. It was past eleven-thirty. Thinking back on the hours she had spent in the hospital, she could not find one thing to place in the Good compartment. Arima stepped into the street and put her arm up to hail a cab. She saw herself working until at least nine that night, doing the paperwork her boss would drop on her desk at four forty-five before going back to finish the paperwork he was putting on her desk at that very moment.

A cab stopped and she got in. The driver began down Lenox. "I know a little place," Desmond had told her that first day at Macy's. He had come up to her while she was in the men's underwear section, buying

something for a different man, one who was well down the road to being her boyfriend. Desmond asked her to dinner before he asked for her name. She was not the type of woman who looked for or found men in public places and was thinking of an excuse that would send him away when he said, "I know a little place," and then he raised his hand to his face and stroked his chin. That was all it took. The gesture was one she had long ago attributed to her own father, a man she knew only by a lost photograph and relatives' stories. Arima set her purse down on the seat beside her. The cab turned on 125th Street and Arima saw the flow of people descending below ground, into the subway station, which grew farther and farther away from her.

In the next weeks, Arima went to visit Desmond every day. On weekdays she would leave work at four-thirty to get to the hospital by the time visiting hours began at five. Though the bank for which she worked was not the government, her supervisor watched everyone's hours closely, and because she was one of two black people there, not counting the janitors and maintenance people, she knew the supervisor was watching her hours even more closely. So after leaving Desmond at the hospital, she always returned to her midtown office building to put in the last half hour of her eight hour day.

"What's a half hour?" Charin asked her on the Tuesday of that second week. "Why don't you just leave afta we done at five?"

"I don't want D laying by himself when the other visitors come in at five," Arima said. "Is it wrong for me to give that to my man? It's not."

Because work was always awaiting her, she never intended to stay with Desmond for more than an hour or two; still, the time passed surprisingly

easy, despite the fact they could do little to communicate, and when she finally looked down at her watch, she would see that it was near nine. Not believing her eyes, she might check the clock on the hospital wall or she might ask some visitor who had been there for less than an hour.

The Bank of New York paid for employees' cars when they were working late. In the first week in December, the same driver took her back to Harlem from work two consecutive nights. "That is quite a job you got, miss," the cab driver said the second time. "I hope your company pay you extra for these nights you giving them." Both trips, Arima fell asleep during the drive and woke in front of 206 West 146th Street to see that the other Arima was standing across the street, with the strays. But Arima, thinking of nothing else but bed, forgot the woman and the dogs by the time she reached the top of the stairs and the apartment's front door. The cabbie gave her a company business card with his name and number written on the back, but when she called him that third night a recording told her there was no such working number.

Desmond spoke for the first time since the accident on a Wednesday in mid-December, and though the words added up to nothing really, just an unintelligible mumble, Arima set the day aside as Good. Two days later, a Friday, she managed to finish the last of the week's paperwork early. Her supervisor had meetings on Fridays and she snuck out to the hospital an hour before any of her co-workers were to leave for the weekend. She made it to the subway station by four-fifteen, which put her in a good mood. Desmond had always met her at Columbus Circle, blocks away from the building where she worked, and she was only now learning that she did not

like riding the subway uptown by herself after four-thirty, when the cars became full. A week and some days ago she had felt a hand on her behind, and, turning around, she had come face to face with a nice-looking black man in a navy pinstripe suit. She had wondered as a teenager where she could find such black men. Men in suits. Men who were perpetually clean shaven. Men smelling of expensive cologne. By the time she turned to face him, his wandering hand had returned to his side and he smiled at her, and then his face headed in the direction of what could have been a wink but might have been a grimace.

She arrived at the Harlem Hospital waiting room before four-forty-five that Friday. There were not many available seats, and she ended up sitting across from a woman and her son of about three. The boy, resting in his mother's arms, his head in the crook of her elbow, was blowing warm breath on the glass window near his face and wiping away the condensation. "Desmond," the boy's mother said whenever she caught him with his lips on the window, "Desmond, stop it. Stop it right now," and the mother would lightly smack his hand. The boy immediately obeyed his mother, but after a minute or so he would begin to gradually turn back toward the window, as if drawn to it by some force, until his lips were once again resting on the glass.

Though she watched the boy intently at first, Arima did not get a good look at his face. Like the rooms in most large buildings, those in Harlem Hospital that did not hold patients were too hot during the winter months, and Arima felt herself going off to sleep. A couple times, the boy's mother stirred Arima with her sharp reproaches and Arima opened her eyes enough to see her smack his hand. In her dream, the boy was sitting on the edge of her brain, where it tapered down to a natural ledge. Leaning over, he

blew on the inside of one of her eyeballs, changing her pupil from its natural brown to various shades of green. Then, to various shades of blue and so on across the color spectrum she had learned as a young girl. "I don't even know you," she heard herself say over and over, though she was not present, just her voice. "We never met and here you are invading my dreams." Eventually, a fog gathered in the chamber of her head, thickening with the boy's every breath. And what she could see of the dream gradually became less and less.

It was five-thirty when she woke, and the waiting room was all but empty. She stood and began down the hallway leading to the inner hospital. She knew the way to Desmond's room on her own and didn't feel that she needed to ask the receptionist for permission to pass. She was still trying to figure out if the woman and her son had been real or part of her dream when she turned the corner in the hallway that would bring her to Room 32, where the hospital kept Desmond. The hallway light in front of the door to Room 32 had been out for weeks. Out of habit, she stopped in the resulting shadow for what was to be a split second and scanned the well lit room. Before she could leave the shadow's cover, she saw the mother from the waiting room and her three-year-old son at Desmond's bedside. What caught her eye more than anything was the mother's hand resting on Desmond's arm. The mother still held the boy in her arms; the boy rested his head on his mother's shoulder. When the boy finally lifted his head, as if noticing Arima despite the lack of light, Arima saw immediately that the boy's face was full of her Desmond at every edge and every crease. That was all she needed to see for her to know that it was time to leave.

Arima needed a seat more than anything and she found one in a restaurant across the street from the hospital. The restaurant, a soul food place, was nothing more than a hole in the wall, one of those small places where the owner played the owner part as well as the waiter and register clerk parts. The owner, seeing Arima enter, picked up a menu. As he walked around the counter, he exchanged a look with the restaurant's sole customer, an older man reading a day old newspaper. A look that said, Check out this pretty little thing.

"So what can I get for you, darlin?" the owner said after he'd been standing at Arima's table for some time.

He had come to the table with only a menu. No pad, no pen. Arima asked, "You don't need something to write on?"

"I keep it all in here, sugar," said the owner, tapping the side of his head. The older man laughed quietly over the top of his newspaper. "Now, what can I get you?"

Arima wasn't the least bit hungry, but she felt it would have been wrong for her to take up a seat without buying anything. "French fries. You got French fries?" As a girl nothing had made her more content than a plate brimming with French fries.

"Sure do, sugar. It'll take a few minutes though. Gotta throw em in the deep fryer. Anything else, darlin?"

A glass of water would have been nice. But she felt that to give him more in the way of words would have been to ask for who knew how much more Blah blah, sugar, Dum de dum, darlin. Despite his habits – his late nights, the drinking, the drugs – she had not thought him to be a man who needed more than one woman, and it was her new understanding of this

man she had known intimately for more than five years that perhaps stung most. Her own mother had gone through the first thirty eight years of life without a dependable man. When her mother finally found one, Arima's birth father, she watched him go off down the road to work one day to never return. Had this woman and her child heard Desmond speak before she had?

Less than a minute after the owner returned with Arima's order, before she had taken two fries from the plate, the mother from the waiting room and her child exited the hospital. Arima followed them down Lenox Avenue with her eyes and when they went out of view, she got up and went to the doorway to see what direction they would go, where they would turn, and where that turn might take them. It was past six, the first hours of the weekend, and people lined both sides of the street, people all coming from somewhere and going somewhere else. Yet Arima managed to keep track of the boy's head as his mother walked them down past 136th Street and then past 135th Street. After 135th, they became difficult to pick out of the thick crowd and Arima took a few steps down the street. Then a few more and a few more after that. Seeing that the pretty little thing was slowly leaving the restaurant, the older man set yesterday's newspaper on the table, rose halfway out of his seat and called out to her. "Hey, miss. Miss. You're forgetting your food, miss. Where you goin without ya food?"

She did not follow the mother and her boy any farther than the subway station that day. From where she stopped, though, she saw them turn on 132nd Street and go east. The next Friday she again finished her work early and snuck out of the office. When she got out of the 135th Street station, she did not look back at the hospital but went straight to a

laundromat on 132nd Street, where she had last seen the boy and his mother. She sat in a chair facing the window, and after ten or fifteen minutes, she took up a magazine from a table and pretended to read alongside the people waiting for the machines to clean their dirty clothes or dry their now clean clothes. The mother came down the street around six carrying the boy in her arms. Arima went to the doorway where watched them walk on the other side of the street past Fifth Avenue, though she did not follow them as she had done the first time. Making the trek back to 206 West 146th Street. that day, as well as the days after that, she felt closer to the answers to more than a hundred questions.

Between mid-December and early January, Arima went back to the area surrounding Harlem Hospital three more times. Some weeks she did not make it because with the approach of Christmas and New Year's the papers began to create bigger piles on her desk. That first Friday she waited for the boy and his mother in a deli on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 132nd Street. It was hailing and, until they came down the street, she acted as if she would have liked to go outside but could not because of the poor weather. Two weeks later, she waited for them at a McDonalds on Madison and 131st, and a week after that she then waited outside a gas station on 125th. Though she had planned to follow them every week until she found out where it was they went home to, the gas station trip was the last time she made the trip to east Harlem because she was swamped with work during the following weeks, and in early January she learned that she was eleven weeks pregnant with a child that could only have been Desmond's.

In the months leading up to Pearl's birth, Arima lived with the people who had raised her, her birth mother's cousin Nathan and his wife Anne. For all of January and February she had continued to live at 206 West 146th Street. At first, when Desmond was injured, she slept better than she had in years because there was no longer anything leaving the bed in the middle of the night. After discovering Desmond's woman and their child, however, she began to be visited by that small part of her that had left one night in November. Her sleep, then, became once again reduced to fifteen minutes here and fifteen minutes there, all at the furnace by the window. This was no less sleep than she had been getting for years, but, suddenly, she felt she could not deal with it. How did I ever live this way? she asked herself one morning in February, a week or so before she moved back home. On Nathan and Anne's block and the surrounding blocks there were no stray dogs and the visits from that other her across the street stopped.

Also, she grew away from her memory of what happened that last day she visited Desmond at the hospital. And as the weeks became months and months became a year, the people involved in that time of her life – the woman from the hospital who had called her and the mother of Desmond's child – blurred and blurred until they were one.

She named the baby Pearl, after Anne's mother. Pearl, in her first six months, caught two colds, and for some time Arima did not believe that her daughter would live past a year. If she woke up before the baby started crying, she would walk over to her crib, expecting to find the baby lying dead, and when she saw that Pearl had made it through yet another arduous night, she figured that death was simply waiting for her at the end of the day. She made numerous trips to a midtown Duane Reade during Pearl's first

year and it was on her last trip to the pharmacy in January that she ran into the woman and her son, who was now five or so years old.

At first, when she spotted the woman, she did not recognize her. When she had placed the face, she tried to avoid the woman, going up an aisle on the other side of the store. But as they spent more time together in the store, Arima felt that she didn't need to change her path for this woman. In an aisle by the pharmacy, she found what she was looking for: Tylenol Cold for Children. There was another woman with a cart in the aisle and Arima was forced to leave her cart and the stroller with Pearl in it to venture down the aisle for her daughter's medicine.

After she had the medicine in her hand, she turned around and saw the child, Desmond, at her baby's stroller. To keep germs away from her child, she had put a clear plastic covering over the front of the stroller, and Desmond now had his face up against the plastic. Arima expected to hear her daughter crying, but she heard nothing other than a ceiling fan. Still, she walked up to Desmond and told him to leave her child alone. Desmond looked up at her, as if to make sure she had some authority in the situation, and then he returned his face to the plastic covering. Pearl, six months old, giggled and this bothered Arima. She put her hand on Desmond's shoulder and peeled him away from her baby's stroller.

"Desmond," the boy's mother said. She had been looking through all the aisles for her child and had finally found him. "Desmond, come here now. I told you to stay by the magazines."

Desmond looked at his mother, and then looked at Arima, and then put his face back on the plastic covering.

“Desmond,” Arima said. “Desmond, your mother is calling you. Go to your mama.”

“Desmond get over here,” his mother said.

But Desmond did not take his face from the plastic covering for some time and when he did, the two women were not looking at him, but at each other.

CHAPTER 5

The Air on Her Skin

On the October morning that the police officer was shot and killed in the housing projects on 155th Street, Selma Harris was enjoying a sleep fit for the dead and ascended. She was not awakened by the gunshots, nor by the ensuing sirens, nor by the alarm clock her son had ordered off the television. The clock was meant to keep her from losing track of time, from forgetting to wake, eat, sleep. The alarm went off for an hour every morning, and because she did not know how to turn it off, she had moved the clock to the living room and turned the volume down to an imperceptible level. But if Selma had happened to be awake, if her bladder had summoned moments beforehand, she likely would not have heard anything odd, nothing more than the sound of sirens in the distance. She lived more than five blocks away from 155th Street, and as usual her windows were closed and latched, the blinds pulled.

What ultimately woke her was a long strip of sunlight that had slipped between the curtains and slowly made its way up her face with the climbing sun. She was sewing the sleeve of a sweater for her daughter's youngest child when Janice Hollimon knocked at about nine. "Kingdom has come," Janice said before she was fully through the door. "The world as we've known it has finally gone." Janice, a neighbor and friend of more than thirty years, relayed what she'd learned of the shooting on the morning news, which she never missed. "If the police can't protect themselves," she said, shaking her head, "who's gonna protect us?"

Selma tried several times to remind Janice that this was not the first shooting, nor would it be the last, but Janice did not hear a word. After fifteen or so minutes of Janice saying, “I can’t see a thing from this window or mine,” Selma gave up on the idea of the sweater and dressed.

It was a mid-October morning but the weather outside seemed from December, and before they had left the Dunbar courtyard, she regretted not wearing a jacket. The two women walked arm in arm up 8th Avenue, stopping occasionally to survey the scene ahead of them. At 151st Street, Selma refused to go any farther. “This is fine,” she said, and stuck her arm across Janice’s chest as one would to keep a child from crossing the street against traffic. “I can see perfectly well from where I’m standin.” From the corner, they looked out at the whole mess: the large crowd; the yellow police tape darting between clusters of people, disappearing as the crowd thickened; the clutter of police cars intersecting each other in all directions; and, above everything, police car lights spinning red and blue.

“Thas enough,” Selma said after some time, and she slipped her arm through Janice’s. “I’ve seen enough.”

They returned to the living room of 5D, upstairs from Selma’s apartment, where Janice’s nearly deaf husband sat reading the newspaper. Through the rest of the morning, Janice took phone calls and visitors. Before two, a small group of women was gathered in her living room. It seemed that each and every woman had heard some rumor or another. One of the rumors held that the 28th precinct was going to commandeer a billboard on 145th Street and use it to advertise a reward. “Can they do that?” Selma asked. “Can they take someone’s advertisement like that?” She

knew that they very well couldn't, but didn't want to go against Regina James, the woman who had suggested such nonsense.

"Course they can," Regina said. Regina, a large woman, was seated on one end of the couch, taking up an entire cushion and half of one beside her. "They the government, Selma." Regina was a subway toll booth attendant and it often occurred to Selma that she hadn't seen the least bit of the world, sitting below ground all day. It had been Regina who had suggested that Selma should "consider keeping company" with a man, any man. "Don't you think it's bout time," Regina had said in Janice's living room, "that you let the here and now be the here and now."

Once or twice before dark, Selma stood up and put her purse strap over her shoulder. But Janice told her to sit back down, it was early still.

When Janice's hard-of-hearing husband finally announced in that loud way of his that he was going to sleep, Selma was the first out Janice's door. As she descended the stairs to her apartment, she decided that she would give herself four sprays before bed. "Tonight," she said, without the slightest idea she was talking out loud, "an extra two doses, Selma." The perfume bottle, long ago emptied, had been the last thing her husband Lucius gave her, never mind the small packages he sent to his aunt in her name once she had arrived and settled in the city. Feeling the bottle's air on her skin brought her closer to an old scent and the distant memory of a man she had known and loved as a young woman. Still, she received even more comfort from seeing the pyramid-shaped perfume bottle standing on the living room dresser, beside other things of importance: a black-and-white photograph of Lucius, her marriage certificate, a poem with no title that Lucius had written.

Next to her son's clock, in the last reaches of its red light, sat a wood-encased clock that had been Lucius'. "Why say bye when I'm a see you so soon? So soon it's gonna feel like tomorra." Decades had passed since the hands of the clock had moved from the two or the five, but she sometimes imagined that the hands had switched places and that the clock had really read 5:10 all those years.

Days before his nineteenth birthday, Lucius had received a letter from a cousin saying that there was work for a black man in the Adirondacks. Lucius had not the slightest idea what lay outside the limits of Black Mountain, North Carolina. But with nothing more to rely on than a letter from a cousin he'd never met, he hastily made arrangements for Selma and their two babies to stay with an aunt in Harlem. The plan, as he made it, was for him to join them in a matter of months. "Soon as I get things together," he said.

Over the years, however, Selma noticed that the return addresses on the letters and small packages that he sent her were from places farther and farther from New York. Still, she was neither shocked nor hurt when Lucius's aunt told her one day four years later that her husband was lying dead in a hospital in New Orleans. In fact, she went to work the next day, a Tuesday, and kept the news to herself for more than a week.

Finally, she told the children one night at dinner and comforted them without feeling at all sorry for herself, a new widow. But since retiring from her job at the post office four years earlier, Selma had found that she sometimes had to fight off a recurring image of him as a young man under a North Carolina sky.

Selma was putting the bottle of perfume back on the dresser when she heard the two voices on the street below.

“It’s strange seein the block empty like this,” he said. “You wouldn’t think it was a shootin. Woulda thought it was World War III or something.”

“Know what it is?” a young woman said to the young man. “These white folks movin in. The police tryna keep them safe and everything else good in the world.” Selma recognized the voice of the young woman, Shakira Jacobs, as she would have her own daughter’s. Shakira’s grandmother, Lucie Pearl Jacobs, had lived a long and relatively happy life in the Dunbar Apartments before an unforeseen death had taken her in the middle of the night.

“Yep,” the young man said. “Ain’t that the truth.”

“Nothin we can do about it though,” Shakira said.

More than she disliked eavesdropping, Selma disliked filling her ears with street talk. She believed that just hearing it was some sort of sin in itself. Also, against the stark quiet of the uninhabited street, their voices seemed louder than any other sound the world could produce. Shakira and the young man might as well have been sitting in her living room, right next to Selma at the dining table.

“Nothin to do but look out for you and yours,” the man said.

As they spoke, pictures came to Selma of all that she couldn’t actually see. From where she sat, her view of the street was blocked by a pair of curtains. But because she’d lived over 8th Avenue for twenty-something years, she heard Shakira and the man as if seeing them.

Before disappearing, the police had announced a nine o'clock curfew. Selma looked back at the dresser and saw that it was nearly eleven-fifteen. The clock needed new batteries and the red numbers on it were almost imperceptible. But there was enough light to see all that was on the dresser, cluttered together in too small of a space. She liked to wait until the clock batteries were everything but dead. Not only to save money, but also because she couldn't appreciate the new batteries until she had first seen the numbers grow faint.

"So when are you gonna give me a shot with that woman a yours?" the young man asked.

"Better quit that," Shakira said. At Lucie Pearl's funeral, Janice had said of Shakira, "I think she's one of those." One of those. Janice had a way of avoiding words she found unpleasant and Selma had first thought that she was talking about Shakira selling drugs.

It was now past eleven-twenty. "Kira," Selma said. "Kira Jacobs. Get inside before the police come back round."

"Who's that?" the young man asked. "Your mama? Who's that?"

"Kira," Selma said.

"Keep it down, Miss Harris," Shakira said. "You gonna wake the whole damn block."

"I'll keep it down when you keep yo behind off the street," Selma said.

"That old bitch needs to shut her damn mouth," the young man said, and Selma could tell that he was speaking not to Shakira, but to her window.

Both Shakira and the young man started walking. They could have been going anywhere, but Selma liked to think that Shakira, at least, was

headed back to the Dunbar. As they went, Selma heard the young man say some of the foulest things about her, as though she was out of hearing range. “I’ll call the cops,” she wanted to call out. But she sensed the whole building was awake and listening.

“I think she’s one of those,” Janice had said at the funeral. She said it looking not at Shakira, nor at Lucie Pearl’s daughter, nor the man Lucie Pearl’s daughter had brought to the church, but at Lucie Pearl herself lying dead in her casket, as if by lying there she was accepting the burden of responsibility for her family’s wrongs. “You know,” Janice continued, “I think she’s one of those who’s into other women and all that junk.”

“Stop that,” Selma whispered. “That’s not right to say with Lucie Pearl lying right there barely cold.” She didn’t want to talk during the reverend’s sermon, but she felt the dead deserved someone to come to their defense.

Three days after the shooting, Selma’s daughter Dana called from New Rochelle and said that her two children were not coming for their monthly visit. Her youngest had an art class and her oldest had a music lesson. And then, of course, there was the shooting incident.

For days after the incident, a large flatbed truck, like the ones in parades, circled the neighborhood. Where a float would have been, there stood a woman who repeatedly announced a \$10,000 reward for “any information leading to an arrest.” After dark, the white woman making the announcements would step away from the microphone and lean on the side of the truck as it continued to circle. Tied to its side was a banner that read 1-800-COP-SHOT. The truck – along with everything else that came to

disrupt the whole way of life of people – was gone less than a week later. The patrols, the rewards, the rumors, the curfew – they all vanished by the time Janice Hollimon received her eviction notice in the first week of November.

Two days after the eviction notice, Selma went to the hall closet to look for an IBM typewriter she'd used only once or twice. She found the IBM in the closet, under some shopping bags filled with loose papers. The levers were rust-coated, and dust rose into her eyes as she carried the machine to the living room.

The typewriter still worked. She made space for it on the dresser by moving some things onto the floor. She typed standing. *Dear Landlord*, she started. After she said everything, she held the letter up in a ray of the brown afternoon sun. The words and sentences before her didn't amount to much. No ideas had made it onto the paper, simply emotional declarations. *How can you* was one of the phrases that kept being repeated. *How can you kick Janice out her home? How can you do this to me? How can you live with yourself?* Her letter, she recognized, was not much at all. After reading the first sentence of it again, she dropped it in the trash. It landed face-up so that the words showed.

In all his letters, Lucius had tried to comfort a homesick Selma with words about how Harlem would never be their home. Three years after the day she had gotten off the train at Penn Station, he had still been writing about how close oh how so close he was to lying next to her at night. Selma's daughter was six and her son was seven when their father died without ever having stepped foot in the state to which he'd sent his family.

The children, however, knew no other place but Harlem until they turned eighteen. Then her son Ty went off to the Stanford University. He returned not more than once every five years. To question her.

“You’re peeing blood,” he would say to her.

“No, I’m not,” she would say.

“This isn’t blood?” he’d say, pointing to the toilet bowl.

“Yes, it is.”

“You’re peeing blood,” he’d repeat again.

“No, I’m not.”

He hadn’t abandoned her totally, however. He sent a monthly check that, together with her small pension and social security, was more than enough. The December check came from California on a Friday, about two weeks after Janice had moved out. For days, the check weighed heavily on Selma’s mind because it had been with Janice that she made these Sunday trips to the bank and grocery. A Sunday came and went. More than once, she caught herself thinking about the walk to the bank and rubbing the small bald spot above her temple.

Selma’s daughter called to say that Selma’s grandchildren were again not coming down from New Rochelle to visit. “Think about it, Mom,” Dana said before getting off the phone. “The train takes less than forty-five minutes and it’s nice up here this time of year. Really lovely. Think about it.” Neither her daughter nor her grandchildren knew it, but those visits with her grandchildren gave her a reason to clean up and let the light into her apartment, put on her most important clothing, and walk out into the world.

“Put Eliot on the phone,” Selma said after she’d spoken with her daughter. Eliot, Selma’s youngest grandchild, had worn leg braces day and night for the first seven years of his life. When his bowlegs did nothing to improve, the doctors had told Dana that there was nothing more they could do and Dana had taken that to mean her son was as God wanted him to be. “Put Linda on the phone,” Selma said after speaking with Eliot, and when she was done with Linda, she said, “Let me speak to Eliot.”

After hanging up the phone, she got dressed and went out to the grocery and then the bank. At the bank, like everywhere else, Selma usually let Eliot believe he was doing all the important work. She would give him her bank card so that he could open the security door. She would then give him a deposit slip and tell him what information to put down. And after the deposit had been made, she would let him take the receipt from the machine. This had once been the game with Linda too.

It was with the bank less than two blocks behind her that the man appeared from out of nowhere and took her purse. She had been walking uptown, absentmindedly looking at a patch of darkness below three dead streetlamps, when she noticed what might or might not have been another person walking on an otherwise empty street. By the time a working streetlamp turned the shadow into a full man, Selma was just outside the streetlamp’s circle of light, an arm’s length from him.

They collided. The man, though not particularly big, was sturdier than Selma, and she fell back a few steps before finding her balance. The man reached out and grabbed her arm, and she could not immediately tell whether he was keeping her from falling or keeping her from running away. Still, she sensed she would not be continuing up the street just yet; she let go

of the cart she used to carry her groceries. She looked at the man, wondering what he wanted, but got nothing in the way of an answer because a hood cast a shadow over the top half of his face. She was three long Harlem blocks from the home.

“Are you gonna rob an old lady?” she said, though she was not completely sure if she was being robbed.

As if she had given him the idea, the man then reached out for her purse. His hand, however, missed it and fell on her arm. The man searched for the strap of the purse, patting her arm as a blind man might feel for a doorknob. He was not wearing gloves, as she suspected all criminals did. The man was blocking her way down the street. She felt no urge to scream or otherwise request help. She thought, however, that she might simply turn around and head the other direction. Perhaps trouble would not follow her across 145th Street. She took a step back, but he tightened his grip on her arm and pulled her toward him, and she could not help but take in the stale barbeque sauce on his breath.

“You’re not that old,” the man said, and raised his head and the hood fell back off his forehead some.

The boy was no older than eighteen. Something in his eyes attested to the fact he was less than a criminal, nothing more than a young man who had strayed from a better path. In a matter of seconds, she connected the something in his eyes to the something in the eyes of a young boy she’d once known. With her free arm, she touched the bald spot above her temple, and then asked, “You Beth Steede’s child?” This was more a statement than a question. She didn’t notice the weight of his hand leave her shoulder.

The man did not say yes, did not say no. Nor did he make any gesture to lead her one way or the other. “I’m sorry, ma’am.” He spoke like he understood. “I don’t know you from Adam. But I gotta eat too.” He turned and walked away from her, going back the way he’d come. Again, he nearly disappeared under the dead streetlamps, and as he reemerged under a light, she noticed he was holding her purse in his hand. She felt the barren shoulder of her parka, a blue cotton and polyester thing she had worn for all of her winters as a postal worker. The space between them growing, Selma saw that the man looked like everything she had instructed her children to avoid in the world. A hood pulled over his head. Clothes that were meant for someone twice his size. That way of limping as he walked.

At 147th Street, the man looked both ways and crossed 7th Avenue headed toward 8th. Once he was on the other side of the street, Selma fell to her hands and knees, like a flag when the wind dies out. Her head found a dark place under her body. Thinking there was only one thing to do, she tried to cry; however, nothing came. She thought of all the people who might appear – a passerby, a policeman, Janice, her grandchildren – and when no one came, she lifted herself up off the pavement.

At the pay phone in the middle of the block, she searched her coin purse for a quarter and a dime. The world at Frederick Douglass and 149th Street was as it had always been: people walking the streets; young men standing on the corner; the Africans huddled around a gypsy cab; across the street, Maxwell’s Barbershop full of customers. A man who lived in Building A sat on the stoop. Selma found a dime and began searching for a

quarter. She had begun using the small purse a couple years back, after deciding she didn't want her bills and coins to mingle.

She found a quarter and fed both coins to the phone. The number to the first locksmith in the phone book did not work. The second locksmith answered the phone and reminded her it was a Wednesday night in Harlem. He said he would come and open her apartment in an hour or two. Soon after she got off the phone, the man who lived in Building A stood and went into the courtyard. Selma went to the stoop and sat down where he had been sitting. Less than fifteen minutes passed before the man who had stolen her purse appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

"Thief!" she said. She had spoken without thinking and the word came out too loud, and while the vast majority of the street continued about their business, a few heads turned, following the sound of her voice back to its source.

"You cheated me," the man said. He held a license in one hand, a purse in the other. "There was barely a dolla in that purse."

"So give it back then."

"Alright," he said, handing her the purse and the license.

She began to thank him, but before she could get halfway through her sentence, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys. Her grandchildren dangled from the key ring.

"Fair is fair, ma'am. I gotta get something," he said, walking by her. Within minutes, Shakira opened her window and called down, "Hey Harris. Why don't you get yo ass out the street? People are tryna get some rest."

When the thief came back out, he set the keys down beside her on the top stair.

“Don’t think you’ll get far,” Selma said. “You can run, but word of your actions will make their way to your mother.”

“Ma’am, my mom been dead for more than three years. I should know: I’ve been goin to her grave every Christmas, every birthday, every Mother’s day.” In his right hand, the one that had held her purse, there was a small bag he had taken from her closet. The bag was full, but its shape didn’t tell Selma what he had taken.

“Don’t say that. Don’t say Beth’s dead,” she said.

“Lady, I don’t know any Beth. But my mom hasn’t taken a breath or walked a step in more than three years.” He bent down, touched the keys with the tip of his index finger, and said, “Thank you.”

That night, Selma walked through her apartment, taking it all in. The man had taken what valuables laid in the open and left nearly all of what lay on the dresser, give or take a necklace or two. She replaced the batteries in her son’s clock. Her daughter’s Christmas cards had been knocked over and these she set upright. She picked Lucius’s perfume bottle up from the floor where it had fallen and decided that one dose would be enough. She heard Kira. She heard children singing along with the radio.

She got into bed. In the faint moonlight, she saw a spider web that had formed since she last cleaned for her grandchildren. It hung where the wall and ceiling met. Standing on the bed, she broke the web, winding it around her finger like yarn around a spool. She waited for the spider to return and then crushed it under her finger. It did not occur to her until later, as she was drifting to sleep, that the spider had died without any understanding of how small it was among the things of the world, and she

began scanning the rest of the room – the floor, the walls, the bedside table
– for further signs of life.