

Love

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1926: *When Beatrice tears the world*

When the last shudder passed through me, I got up from Leo. Without talking, because we never talked afterwards, he rested his head on the folded rice bag and stared up at the ceiling of the bush house. I opened the door and went by the river to wash myself, not wanting to spend the rest of the day with between my legs feeling slippery, slippery. The water was cool, the morning too for that matter. As I squatted down, my cotton dress disturbed the dew on some Shame Charlottes and other low plants at the riverbank. The Shame Charlottes' leaves closed, like little hands in prayer, as the cotton touched them. All of a sudden, birds darted from the trees overlooking the river. Two signs? If I told Leo, he will fly from me just as the birds flew from the trees and I will need to hide my face like the shameful plant? Or I ought to be thankful, my hands in prayer, as what we have together will take flight?

By the time I had returned to the bush house, he was up and dressed with his walking stick in one hand and a thick cow rope in the other. Before I could say anything, a cow in the distance bellowed, like a person calling a name. Leo looked in the direction of the noise and not at me. They need pasture, he said. They calling for me.

This man and his animals, eh. He talks to them, hears them talking back. But each one of those cows is destined for the abattoir some Friday. I went right up to his face and called his name in a whisper like I do when we were about to get to the top of our mountain and he gripped my hips to stay on earth a little longer.

He turned toward me and smiled.

We will take flight. There will be no shame today.

His face was so perfect. Straight nose. Good soil on his head. A tall slim-body man.

Betty. They calling. He squeezed my left shoulder like I was a man-friend in a rum shop and he had just bought a round of drinks but couldn't stay.

Leo. I put my hand on my stomach. I am pregnant.

He dropped the rope, then staggered back like I had pushed him.

Wha' yuh ah sey?

The grove was quiet. The trees and low plants waited. Only the river splush-splashed in the distance as it carried away our natures, mixed together.

You heard what I said, my lover. I am three months.

The cows called in the distance and he looked in the direction of the sound.

I backed away from him. What is the matter, Leo? We've been turning turtle for months now. You and I. What is it?

I don't know, Betty.

What you don't know?

I don't know what we going to do. Well, he looked up, Ann making a baby too.

The sliding block puzzle of my thoughts moved round, and made a scraping sound, until everything made sense. The other day, I noticed Ann in town and she had put on a little weight at her middle. A heaviness in her chest. A brightness in her face.

I touched his cheek, the same color as my hand. We are a match. Complexion. We look at the world the same way. I have the womanhood to match his manhood. A match.

A vexation was rising in me, like an agouti pacing in a cage, because he was talking about Ann, when I was telling him about our child. So, I put my voice soft so I will sound tender, like a new leaf on a corn stalk. What, love?

It's getting late and you need to get to work. Leh ah we talk 'bout dis later, nuh?

He started to talk bad, like a man from the village, which meant his mind was already gone from here. From me.

Alright, I said. The 'gouti was growling and throwing itself against the rusted BRC wire.

Don't be vexed, he said. He knows me, like I told you.

Me and you will work something out, he said and touched his nose to mine, then turned and followed the sound of the cows.

I followed the well-trodden path back to Bacolet Trace and into Scarborough proper. Then, through the streets of the town and up Scarborough Hill to the General Hospital on Fort King George that overlooked the crisscrossed streets, the close-together houses, the clustered harbor, and the blue water then the dark blue that marked the beginning of the Caribbean Sea.

The morning went by quickly. I collected the sheets and towels from the canvas bin on the ward and took them to the wash house near the bell tank, a round metal building, like an overturned bowl, with an iron gate at the front. Teresa and Sherva were already there, standing at the washtubs, rubbing clothes along the scrubbing board that looked like a row of steep concrete stairs along the inside of the tub. From the door, it looked like they were washing clouds, white clothes among thick, white suds. I went next to Sherva, said a quick Good Morning, plugged my tub with the rubber stopper, and grabbed the bucket to fill it at the brass standpipe.

Eh eh, yuh nuh see am? Teresa said to my back. She reach late an' ah talk 'bout Good Marning. Ah good day dis!

Teresa was as ugly as she sounded. Short and squat. Hands broad and veiny from washing everybody's clothes in the whole of Plymouth to feed her short, squat children.

Leave she dis marning. Yuh nuh see she face fulla trouble. Sherva had finished the first of her morning batch and had thrown another in the soap water.

I am fine. Just feeling a little sick. I poured water in my tub.

Sick? Yuh ah breed, town ghul? Teresa again.

This wouldn't bother me any other day. But today Teresa's taunt was true. She had five children and I wondered if she was one of those village women who could tell a woman was pregnant from the smell of her perspiration or from the way she walked. I fixed my face with a smile. I'm sick of you, Teresa. You know

that? Sick of your backward, Bottom-side talk and your face that is as broad and as black as a coal pot, so early in the morning.

See. Is you wha' start she up, Sherva said and started washing. The soap made a squeaky rhythm, as she washed cotton sheets and diapers from the maternity ward with both hands, and only used the tub's concrete scrubber, to rub out stains.

Teresa sucked her teeth and was silent.

I sorted my first batch and threw them into the tub with some disinfectant. I left clothes with heavy stains, blood, and toto, black stains that I don't think could come from a human, to soak at the bottom of the tub to wash later, and soaped up the rest with my hard blue soap.

The washing, and the nice breeze blowing at this height across the Fort, made me forget about Leo's face looking toward the cows and not at me. At tea break, I went to use the lavatory and realized I had left my drawers in the bush house. I was so taken up with telling him and Leo not saying the things I thought he was going to say that I forgot it. I pictured the white cotton thing on the small table where Leo and me . . . I mean Leo and I . . . had tea from a burnt cup, when we were hungry after breaking our one- or two-day fast from each other.

I wasn't sure if to be vexed with myself or with Leo or Teresa for clucking her tongue and laughing at nothing. I wanted to go back to the bush house right then. The door wasn't locked, just kept closed with a piece of wood that spins on a nail to keep the door from swinging open. Anybody could go there and find my bloomers. And take it to the Obeah man and do something to me. Even Ann might find it and kill my child or mash up Leo and I.

I ate my biscuits and tea quickly and went back to the tubs. I didn't take the whole lunch, and slapdashed the bedding that wasn't soiled, washed soiled spots on the ones I was soaking, rinsed everything fast, fast and was waiting to sign out by half past two.

In Bacolet, the river mumbled secrets the mountain told it on the way down. I wondered what the river said about me, because, sometimes, when Leo and I had the wild feeling that people like us get, he lifted me up and we straddled, standing up, open air, my body thrown back, my fingers touching the ground. The thought now made a wetness between my legs. Too bad nobody but the crayfish and the short grass near the water understood what the water was talking about. Overhead, birds made crisp chirps in the trees. I spun the wooden latch, went in, and put on my drawers in the mostly dark. Bright light sliced the walls in places

Back in town, as I walked up the dirt hill to the house where I lived with my mother, I passed through a cloud of sweet with spice at the end of the scent. Coconut sweetbread. As I neared the house, I saw Mammy at the dirt oven, near the guinep tree, with something on the wooden peel.

Ohhhh, Betty coming, I called out to her so she was sure it wasn't the voice of some spirit on the wind.

Aiiiiii, she answered without looking back, and carried the peel with two sweetbreads to the kitchen at the left of the house.

I passed her and went to the base of the four steps that led to the drawing room. Tired. No strength to go up. Mammy put two more pans of sweetbread in the kitchen, hung the peel on the nail and came to me. Before I thought about what I was going to say, I was crying.

Let us retire inside, Mammy said, held my hand and helped me up the steps.

In the drawing room, I sat on the settee and drank the water she gave me. Then she brought me sweetbread. A broken-off end with caramelized sugar and slightly burnt raisins. Sweetbread makes me feel better. Black fruitcake made me feel best.

Mammy didn't ask what happened. She told me to bathe and change and went to wash the nice glass she had taken from the bureau so I could drink the water. I was glad to be told what to do, because I couldn't think for myself. I only thought of the dundun drum-sized space that was going to be left if Leo and me—and I—were to . . . I can't even say it.

Later, after dinner, we sat in the drawing room. One kerosene lamp, the smoldering orange end of a mosquito coil, and the glow of Mammy's pipe jumbled the shadows and made Mammy's face look like the bricks on the powder house at the fort.

I told her all that had happened that day.

Hmmmm. What exactly you want?

I want Leonard, Mammy.

That is all? You want a man?

I want Leonard. Not a man. Leonard.

What in the way of what you want?

Ann. People's mouths when they find out.

That's all. Mammy drew on the pipe and blew out the smoke, a ghost among the overlapping shadows.

Ann is—this dark room full of smoke and shadows was the only place I could say this out loud—Ann is Leo's common-law wife. And my niece, Mammy.

Ahhh, we at the root of it. She sucked the pipe, tapped the mosquito coil, and ash fell off in a soft gray curve.

I think he wants to leave me, Mammy. Make me look like a fool in front of the whole of Tobago, from Crown Point to Charlotteville.

You sure? I don't read him like that.

I don't understand how.

How what?

How he could want her more than me. Me and he is—

Him and I are . . . Mammy started.

Him and I am are the same. And she is so . . . so black. I am more beautiful than Ann. He said so. I am the most beautiful woman in all of Tobago. Leo is the best-looking man anybody ever saw. Him and I are a match.

What you want? She held the pipe at the corner of her mouth.

I could hold him and make him never leave me. Make him leave Ann. Take his hair to Brothers in Plymouth and make him stay with me and forget about she as long as he live.

Her. Forget about her.

Yes, her.

Leonard is a butcher in Town Market, who makes a good sale every Saturday. He leaves his cows to pasture in Bacolet and nobody steals them. Ann has a shop by her house, and a stall near Manny Rum Shop. You think these people stupid? You might get through at first, but when they go to check their business and find out it's you who in their way, dey go tu'n yuh ovah! An' you an' yuh pickney go dead an' bury. Is that what you want?

No, Mammy. But what to do?

Go see him tomorrow as normal. All men get surprised when they hear 'bout a baby.

I waited.

And stop keeping this secret.

How?

Let people know you and him are together.

But Ann?

You passed that. Passed that since the first day he asked you to come see him

in Bacolet and you went. People knowing will help you. If anything happens to you, niggergram will say that Ann do it. She's an Anglican, big in the church, and needs to look good. And she knows my hands not pocked, because if she go out for you, mi ah go ah Charlotteville fuh she an' she pickney dem. Mammy released the ash from the coil.

You will get a Charlotteville wokman for me, Mammy?

I will pass Plymouth and go straight to the end of the island to find the best Obeah man. I promise you that! She slapped her thigh.

We laughed, noising up the night.

I tell you I will walk to Charlotteville, right? She laughed, spilling a little smoldering tobacco from her pipe onto her lap. Then she flicked the false candle fly onto the floor.

I got up and covered the embers with the base of my enamel cup, ending the danger to our two-room wooden house on concrete piles.

My body was like air, and I touched my belly, hopeful for the future, like I was when I washed myself at the river earlier that day. Mammy smoked the last of her pipe, rinsed her mouth at the back window, and went to bed.

I sat for an hour or so more, listening to cricket songs, the galvanized roof's crackling as it contracted in the cool night. Then, as I turned down the lamp and moved the coil to the bedroom, I replayed our conversation and chuckled to myself. Thoughts of what I was going to say to Leo the next day and how I was going to let Tobago people know my business and still smell like a rose were trying to surface. But I wrapped them up in the Royal Gazette and pushed them down to a place I had for those things, like a broken teacup that you wrapped up so it wouldn't hurt anybody. The teacup was pushed so far down that I slept a deep dreamless sleep, weary from the long day.

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The next morning, in Bacolet, Leo was wild. When I approached the bush house, he pushed open the door and said, I could smell you, enno.

There was no wildness in me that day. But all of me was bruised from the day before, a bruise that only the touch of flesh could salve. So I obliged the ocelot he was that morning. I stripped to my petticoat and gave the river something to tell the sea when they met in the muddy delta later that day.

When we were done, we lay on our clothes on a worn dirt patch behind the bush house, looking up at a clear blue sky. A sign that we will find clarity in this situation?

Cows, who had eaten the grass within the circle that their rope allowed, moaned deeply for Leo in the distance.

I sat up and looked down at him, and at the light-brown cotton shirt near his head to see if a strand of hair was caught in the fabric. I could take it, easy, easy, when he went to pee. I ought to have insurance if I was going to take a risk and make a child.

Have the baby, he said without looking at me. He turned and studied my face, like he was seeing me for the first time. Ann will never understand. You hear?

I looked up at the sky and smiled. Clarity.

He put his head on my lap, then got on his elbows and cupped my belly in both hands. We bind together now, he said, then got up and peed in the bushes at the edges of the clearing, his long back to me. After we dressed, he gathered his tools to answer the morning call and I went to the river to rinse the wildness from between my legs and put on my drawers. All of me was covered and complete.

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A few days later, early on Friday morning, Mammy and I were brushing our teeth with ashes at the back of the house, when we heard Leo saying Good Morning from the front yard.

Mammy rinsed her mouth and went to meet him.

It was not fully daylight; only the sun's forehead was visible. People in the houses on the hill were starting to stir, lamplight shimmered behind curtains.

When I got to the front, Leo was under the guinep tree, akimbo with a crocus bag at his feet. He brought provisions. Green bananas, cassava, and bush mangoes.

Mammy pointed at the bag with her chin. She held up a parcel wrapped in brown paper. And beef, she said

Beef bones too, Leo said. To make soup. Strengthen you and the child.

Thank you, I said. I was worried that the neighbors, cousins, and semi-cousins, all living on family land, might see him. Then remembered that I ought to let people know. The hill was a good place to start. But it was abattoir day, and Leo couldn't stay.

Well, he said. Betty. Miss Ailith. Later. He went down the hill and onto Cane Street.

Every week after that, he brought a new crocus bag of provisions and took away the empty one. We continued to meet in Bacolet, on the same days, Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

When I started to get big, by five months, we found other ways to join together. But it was different, as there was a tide inside me that remained high, and had no low. I craved him more than before. Sometimes he was afraid and stopped in the middle of our business to ask if I was all right. Those times, he looked as innocent as a rabbit, eyes darting, voice like new leaves in the wind. When I nodded yes and touched his hips so he could continue, he moved as if I was made of glass and he would break me. Afterward, he said, you too much for a woman sometimes, Betty. Too much.

*

Teresa, with her inquisitive self, noticed me sitting and washing with my legs closed at one side of the tub. When she asked me what was the matter, I told her straight that I was pregnant for Leonard.

The music of her rubbing bedding against the washing board stopped. Leonard Alfred from right Scarborough dey? she asked.

I pretended not to hear her and washed a baby's chemise that had two small dark-brown stains, blood maybe. I put the stains between my fingers and rubbed the brown circles until they were gone.

He han'some suh tay, Teresa continued. An' him have plenty prapaty all over 'bago. Yuh do good, ghul.

I felt Sherva watching me and turned so our eyes made four.

Dat is not Ann Leonard, over on Broad Street? She husban? Right down de road dey?

Ann don't have a husband, I said.

Hmm, Sherva said, and went back to her washing, a wall between her and I after that.

He mus'be hang good an' nice too, Teresa pierced the silence Sherva made and held her crotch, roughly. He ah go inside yuh pum pum, smooth an' straight, like bucket inna well. Yuh ah lucky ghul. Mi nevah had nothin' like ah dat suh.

After that day, something in Teresa recognized something in me, and we didn't argue anymore.

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Leo gave me two pounds a week so I could prepare. I had a crib made out of teak from Trinidad. When the man, an ace carpenter from Speyside, came to drop it off, I talked to his wife, who painted and varnished the goods they made, and told her who the father was. She didn't know Leo, but telling them, business people who had customers here and there, meant that people in Speyside might know.

Mammy brought me a Singer and I made white cotton diapers and chemises in blues and pinks and yellows.

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I was seven months when Ann came. I had come home from work and was in the kitchen kneading flour to fry bakes in tallow later that evening. Mammy's uncle in Whim had died, and she went to help with the cooking for the wake and to prepare for the funeral. I couldn't go because pregnant women couldn't be near the dead or go in the graveyard. I covered the dough so it would rise a little and came out of the kitchen to find Ann in the yard, under the guinep tree, where Leonard had stood when he brought a hog leg three days before. She was in a plain, loose maternity frock and a headtie. Belly big and carrying low. Tall like Leo, her back straight. The tree cast a shadow on her face.

I come to see for myself, she said.

I closed the bottom half of the kitchen door, went near the house, and eyed her, her body tense like a mapepire about to spring.

She came toward me and I expected her to box me in my face or push me down. But she turned and went to the kitchen. Hanging on a nail at the top part of the kitchen door was an empty crocus bag that Leonard had brought, filled with provisions, days before. Mammy had packed the yams and a hand of plantain in a parcel, put it on her head, and carried it as her contribution to the wake.

Ann put one hand behind her back and held the bag with two fingers, like she was examining cloth in Kurie Store in town to make a dress. Hmmm, she made a noise in her throat, recognizing the bag that traveled between my house and hers.

She looked around the yard, at me, turned and went down the hill toward Cane.

I had been holding my breath and let it out when her plain frock had gone from view. Then I searched the ground, dirt with short wild grass, to see if Ann had thrown anything in the yard. Powder. Beads. A strange stone that didn't look like other stones. Something to kill me and my child if I were to walk on it. Something to mash up Leonard and I. I retraced her steps and tried to avoid walking where she had walked. Then realized that I would have to go back to the kitchen, right where Ann was standing, to ball the dough and get the pots for the fireside. I went under the house, took the long stick with the nail attached for picking guinep, and used it to shake the lower half of the door until the cabin hook slipped out and the door swung open. I used the stick to knock the crocus bag off the top part of the door. It fell on the ground like a ragged dress. I went to the side of the open kitchen door, careful to avoid where Ann had walked and went in. My heart beat in my temples, as I uncovered the enamel basin of water and poured salt in it. I filled my hand with the brine and sprinkled the salt water at the door, in front of the kitchen then stepped into the yard. I sprinkled as I retraced Ann's steps until there was saltwater in the entire front yard and on the crocus bag. Down the hill where she went. Mr. Walton, who lived behind us, was coming up the hill, two pieces of lumber on one shoulder. When he saw me, he came off the path, turned and told his wife, who I hadn't noticed, Nuh walk deh. The wife, a thin woman with legs like a yard fowl, looked through me, moved her cloth-wrapped parcel from her head to her hands and followed her husband as he made his own way in the low shrubs that lined the dirt path. I sprinkled to Cane Street and threw the last of the water in the direction that Ann went. Good riddance, I whispered, and flung my hands in the direction of my lover's common-law wife, to chase her and thoughts of her away.

*

On Wednesday, in Bacolet, the bush house was empty. Leo's stick and cutlass were gone. He had come early and left. My footfalls on the wooden floor echoed against the galvanized roof of the five-by-seven structure. The empty house with only the sounds I made, talking back to me was a taste of what it might be like if Leo left me. Outside, there were cow sounds on the wind. He was probably

almost to the other side of Bacolet by now. The soil was dark and damp from bush rain that fell, sudden and warm, and left the air cool and full of water. I am a stupid woman to be in a clearing in the bush with my big belly, and can't follow Leo through the pasture land. A vexation came and I had the urge to call his name so that the wind would carry the sound and box his ears. The pregnant river jeered at me.

I went to work, and had to say something nasty to shut Teresa up from talking about Leonard. Yes, she looked up to me now. But I hadn't seen or heard from Leo since Ann's visit and I wasn't sure what to think, so couldn't bear to hear Leo's name, when it could be that he was finished with me and this belly. Sherva washed in silence, the wall still up.

Leonard wasn't there the Thursday either. Mammy wasn't back yet, so I couldn't ask her what to do. I couldn't sleep. Every shadow in the house danced around me.

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On Saturday, I went to the market in town to find him. It was just after five o'clock, from the bell at the Anglican Church that Ann and her children went to. The sky was school-uniform navy, and the light of a few kerosene lamps made the market into a fairy place that might disappear when the sun had fully woken up. Vendors were still setting up their stalls. Men and women carried goods in wheelbarrows and on donkey carts. There were a few cars, the trunks laden with provisions and fruits for sale.

My nose caught a scent, like metal rust and sugar. Blood in the meat market. I followed the rusty sweetness until I saw two men in white flour-bag aprons talking near a rickety wooden table on one side of a wide paved concrete aisle. At the other side of the aisle, in the back of a stall, a man was bent over in the fairy light. There was something familiar about the shape of his elbow and the deliberate way his arm moved as he did whatever he was doing just out of view. The baby kicked as the man stood up to put a wooden cutting board on the table. Leo.

What you doing here? His eyes widened like he was surprised to see me.

You don't graze in Bacolet no more? I stepped closer to the stall. All around me, other butchers traveled down the aisle to set up. There were men alone, who parked donkey carts near the entrance and carted bags of meat from animals

killed the day before. The carcasses were hung in the abattoir overnight to drain the blood so the meat wouldn't spoil fast. Some men brought their wives and others their sons to cart meat, and once Tobago people filled the market, cut pieces to order. Whatever didn't sell, butchers took home for their own families.

This is no place for you, Leo said. I will meet you up the hill when market close.

I lifted the hem of my cotton skirt and moved behind the stall, but couldn't go farther as there was a large wooden bin, filled with meat.

Careful, he said, and moved from behind the bin toward me.

Freddy, yuh deh good, man, a voice asked.

I turned to face the voice so whoever said it could see my belly. Mammy was a wise woman. It was one of the two men who were talking near the entrance.

Mi deh good, Solow. Leo kept his eyes on my face.

Jus' tell ah we if yuh need any help, the shorter of the two said. Any help at all. The man grinned and showed his large jackass teeth.

I held Leo's arm at the elbow. My Leo was a man above these men.

Marning, Pretty Miss. The taller one bent his head and touched the front of his straw hat as he went. I followed the red band on the hat, as he walked among the people coming and going. He looked back at me, but I turned toward Leo so didn't see when he turned away.

Come, Leo said.

I followed him out the meat market, along a path where the lamplight didn't reach. When we were in a dark patch, a basin of silence among the noise, he leaned his face close to mine. One of Ann family saw us walking out Bacolet together.

She came to drop Obeah in my yard on Monday.

Eh suh? He froze.

Of course, eh suh, I shouted so he would know that I was angry.

She wouldn't do you anything. That child is mine and she wouldn't do that to me.

You still grazing in Bacolet? I had to know.

Betty. I told you Ann wouldn't understand. You and she is close family. So I have to be on Broad Street these days.

The sun peeped over the horizon to see what people were doing, lightening the navy blue. Our patch of dark wouldn't last much longer.

I waited.

When things cool, I will send for you. But you getting big now. He pointed at my belly.

The light moved in to rinse the darkness like stains on clothes.

Seven months, I said and touched my belly. I didn't look but felt eyes on me. Us. And the noises got quiet near us, like we were doing something important and people hushed themselves out of respect.

I know, he said.

It's still there, you know, just taking shelter, I said and slid my hand down my belly to my crotch.

That is why, he paused, that is why. . . . That is why. He smiled and shook his head. Don't worry, I will take some shelter in Bacolet just now. He touched his forehead to mine, turned and made long strides to his stall, where customers had already gathered.

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He sent for me two weeks later. One afternoon, somebody's child came up the hill and bawled marniiiiing until Mammy and I went in the gallery.

Mi lookin' fuh Miss Beatrice. He was naked except for khaki schoolboy pants with holes all over it.

Don't shout the message from the front yard, Mammy said. Come inside to tell us.

The boy walked to the space in the wooden gallery railing and came in, his ten toes on the wood floor. Mr. Alfred sey Miss Beatrice cyan tek shelter from tommorrow, the boy said.

Mammy looked at me, a question in her face.

Something we talk, the other day, I said and smiled.

Okay, Mammy said.

The boy waited, and twisted his body to scratch his back with one hand and a red circular sore on his shin. He wiped whatever came off the sore on his pants.

He paid you? I asked.

A shilling. But de Mister sey yuh go gimme a Redspot.

Alright, I said, and got up. My legs were swollen from washing earlier that day, straight and stiff like legs on a new stuffed doll.

You stay, Mammy said, and went to get the sweet drink.

The boy smiled, and showed straight white teeth that didn't belong in his dirty face.

Going back to Bacolet didn't mean that Ann had an understanding. It meant that Leo and I had one. An understanding. And that was all that mattered. There was another reason, too, that we had to keep having relations. It helped the baby to come easier, to slip out of me when the time came. I could drink boiled ochres for that, but that was for women who went with a man they met in a village harvest and never saw him again. Never told him he had a child. That wasn't me. I had a man and my child had a father.

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I ordered two crochet hats, two booties, and seven bodices from Molly, a woman from Roxborough, who makes them nice, like they came from England. I got blankets and everything to prepare. Mammy made me a blue cotton sack to pin on the baby, to stop the evil eye.

By eight and a half months, I was full like a breadfruit, skin tight, legs too swollen to put on my shoes. I stopped the washing. Bacolet was too much. The child slept on the spot where my torso met my right leg, so that leg was numb, heavy.

One morning, I came out of the bathroom and was walking up the steps when my water came down, wetting the steps and the house dress I had on.

I bawled for Mammy, who was in the kitchen.

Ohhhh, she answered me.

Come quick, I shouted.

I here. Mammy had a look on her face.

What happen?

Go on up the steps. You in any pain? Her eyes left my face and went to my legs. I followed her gaze and saw red streaks in the water that had fallen on the steps.

That happens sometimes, Mammy said. Go inside. One of Astrid's boys will get Mr. Gray. She held my hand and guided me up the steps to the bedroom.

By the time Mr. Gray's car pulled up Scarborough Hill to the hospital door, pain bloomed like ink spreading in water in my lower back. I held on to Mammy's hand in the back seat.

What the blood mean? I whispered to her for the third time.

The doctor will tell us. She got out and went around to my side of the car, held my hands as I rocked my way forward and out of the Renault.

Mr. Gray walked ahead of us with the bag of clothes and baby things. I've been washing at Scarborough General for two years and had never walked in the front door. Just came up the hill, took the dirty clothes from the wards, and went straight to the wash house. As I waddled in, a nurse in a pink uniform and a hat like a paper boat called for the orderly, a thin man in a white gabardine jacket that was too big for him, to bring a wooden wheelchair. I sat down and let the people around me take over, the pain in my back more than me. I. me.

The labor lasted eight chimings of the bell at the Anglican church. I bled more during the labor, so by the time my daughter was born the room was filled with black and brown doctors and nurses, with sweat on their brows and eyes that only looked at me when my child screamed to say that she had arrived in the land of the living.

The matron, Ann's cousin, put the baby on my chest, as if she was resting down a fork after she ate. She talked to the doctors as if I wasn't there, cut the cord, and asked the nurse to tidy me up.

Fiona was beautiful. Fair with reddish hair, the same texture as Leo's soil. Her face more like mine and Mammy's. She didn't take much more for Leo.

When I nursed her for the first time, Mammy pinned the blue sack to the chemise near the baby's chest. How you feel? Any pain? Mammy wanted to know.

A little when she's nursing.

I have plenty bush medicine for you when we get home.

What the blood mean, Mammy? Why you wouldn't tell me?

A part of the afterbirth came off and it bleed a little. She touched Fiona's head. She look like a queen. Ent? My granddaughter, my Queenie.

Mammy? I moved the baby away from her.

It might mean that blood might spill in the yard. Her fingers traced the swirls of hair that framed Fiona's face.

I regretted that I didn't let the question stay in the yard, lingering on the steps like a neighbor waiting to be let in the door. I always had to press things. I pressed Leo. I pressed Teresa. Now I pressed Mammy and wished I never heard those words about the yard. And blood. And my daughter, who I already know I am going to love the most of all the other children I will have. Because she is something Leo and I made together. I will not press her like I do other people.

God Almighty, help me to be a better person.

You alright? Mammy interrupted my thoughts.

What was that you call her?

What, Queenie?

Yeah. That is a nice nickname for her. Right, Queenie? You like that? I put my nose at her neck and inhaled her sweet, creamy love smell.

Her eyes were still closed, reddish blonde lashes on her cheeks, and her warm breath against my breast. It would be twenty-one days before she opened her eyes. I hoped she would open them when I was nursing her, so the first person she saw in the world would be me.

