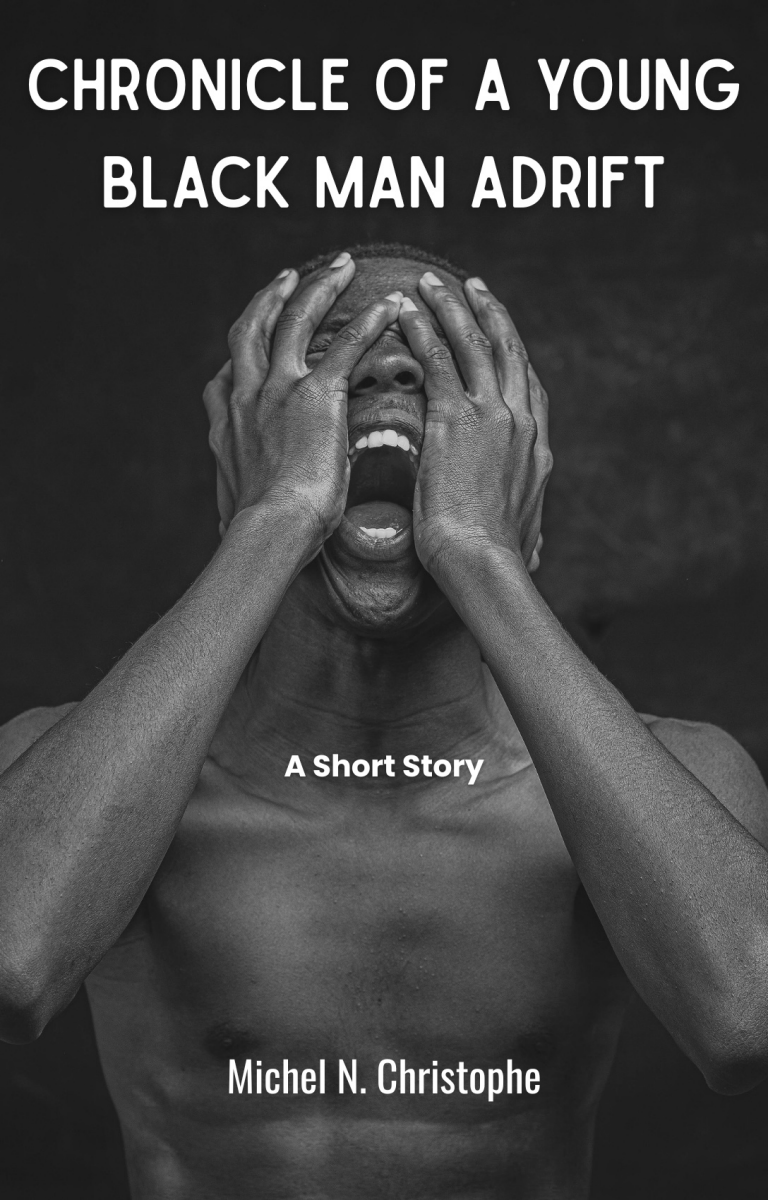
CHRONICLE OF A YOUNG BLACK MAN ADRIFT



A Short Story

Michel N. Christophe

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Chronicle of a Young Black Man Adrift

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"It is a very strange sensation to inexperienced youth to feel itself quite alone in the world, cut adrift from every connection, uncertain whether the port to which it is bound can be reached, and prevented by many impediments from returning to that it has quitted. The charm of adventure sweetens that sensation, the glow of pride warms it; but then the throb of fear disturbs it; and fear with me became predominant when half an hour elapsed, and still I was alone."

Jane Eyre - Charlotte Brönte

I decided to leave for England at a moment when the thought of continuing to live in France had become unbearable. Adulthood had stripped away any illusion of integration and revealed, with brutal clarity, that skin color could be wielded as an instrument in the professional world. The backwardness of attitudes smothered my hopes of growth. I longed to be an end in myself rather than a means to someone else's ends, and I no longer trusted the Frenchman's ability to recognize or allow the expression of my worth.

Everything around me felt confused and unstable. My only refuge was the spacious apartment my mother had bought in the Paris suburbs to shield us from the arbitrariness of rental agencies. The walls of that fortress had protected us well. As a child, intermittently and carefree, I had lived in this vast, cold country. Back then, all I knew was the feel of my feet on the carpet, the immediacy of the present moment. Life was beautiful. As an adult, this country—mine on paper—offended my

sensibilities. It was inhabited by people who frightened me.

The apartment in Créteil became the stage for all the exhausted debates on Third World identity. Sitting cross-legged on a patch of carpet, we rebuilt the world, rewrote history, lanced old wounds, and lost ourselves in the past. By dawn, all that remained were our powerlessness and our aborted dreams. In the early hours, drained and sated with verbal jousting, we once again recognized our own foolishness. Shame engulfed us as we fell asleep. Even as many of our acquaintances despaired in the tropics, we dreamed. We were lucky. Tomorrow, we knew, the sun would rise again.

Two of my cousins, Patrice—a friend from Martinique I had met in high school—and I lived there peacefully. It was our space of freedom, a haven of relative calm, one of the few places in this inhospitable country where we could speak without fear. With a view of the lake of Créteil, Paris XII, and the courthouse in the distance, perched on the fourth floor of Les Choux—a futuristic, utopian building, emblematic of French architecture of the 1960s and 1970s—we were aware that we were considered almost privileged. We were students, we had a roof no one could take from us, and our heads were full of aspirations. With every affront, every lie we were taught, we swallowed our revulsion and offered the

most passive resistance in the name of our degrees. It was the price to pay.

I had completed a master's degree with honors. The university had become nothing more than a place of solitude. I had to find a job and take full responsibility for myself. One by one, my younger brothers and cousins came to study and arm themselves with an education. Everything signaled that it was time for me to make room. The apartment in Créteil had shrunk considerably since I gave up my room. I slept in the living room on an uncomfortable sofa. I missed having connections. I dreaded the future. My life was in disarray. My options were dwindling.

I spent most of my time at the Pompidou Center, exploring the job market, learning how to succeed in interviews, and trying to map out the rest of my life. One evening, as I was returning home, a neighbor intercepted me at the foot of the building, hoping to escape the overly persistent advances of a Beninese suitor who was harassing her. The voluptuous, sultry bombshell drew every gaze, even the most reluctant. With her prominent, perky breasts, the pronounced curve of her round buttocks, her intense gray eyes, and her mulatto features, the chabine had the power to unsettle both fools and the most intelligent men. Confident in my support, she turned to him and said:

"Yvon, allow me to introduce my boyfriend."

The young man stammered a few words before fleeing. With barely concealed pride and jubilation, she informed me that the coward had told her:

"I love you because of your fair skin!"

To silence such nonsense, I felt the urge to run. These superficial considerations irritated me. Upstairs, my real future girlfriend was waiting.

Vanessa, whom I had met at university, hid her affection behind a closed face and misplaced pride. Her sensuality intoxicated me. I wanted to open myself to her, to know her intimately, to dismantle her defenses. Our friendship had survived the end of classes. Now we were having dinner together. I had to make her a serious proposal. We got along well, but I feared she would once again make me feel the weight of her pride. Her charm and the poetry of her form frightened me. She was a breath of fresh air, like shea butter on dry skin. She could be my salvation, a beacon in the darkness. We had met in Mr. Kodjo's class, a memorable professor impossible to ignore; his voice resonated powerfully in our minds. His tone, his accent, his gravitas, his volume, and the force with which he spoke of Africa filled us with a shared thrill.

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The small Brazilian restaurant, quiet on Sunday evenings and wedged between a thrift shop and a shoe store, offered an intimate setting perfectly suited to a romantic dinner. When I arrived with Vanessa, a group of four was just leaving. In a corner, a few feet from the entrance, three silhouettes—two men and a woman—were barely visible; only their teeth caught the dim light. A soft thread of Brazilian music drifted through the room.

"Vanessa, do you like this place?"

"Yes, the atmosphere is nice. Cozy. You think of everything."

"You inspire me, that's all."

I anticipated her every reaction. I wanted to bend this Amazon to my will, tame her heart, claim her passion. With a woman like this by my side, failure seemed impossible. After the first caipirinha of the evening, I took the plunge.

"I brought you here to get some clarity about us. We've known each other for a year now, and you know how interested I am in you."

"Dieudonné, you know my position. I'm not interested in sex. At least, not right now. I have important things to deal with."

"It's not that I don't want to, but… who's talking about sex? Everyone knows my interest in you goes beyond the physical."

"What about all those girls who are always hanging around you?"

"They can hang around all they want. It's you I want. I know what you've been through. I'd like you to come live with me. You don't have a place of your own right now."

"But neither do you. Have you forgotten?"

"That's exactly why I'm asking you to come live with me in London."

"London? And what would we do there?"

"What's better here? At least there's work. While we're working, we can improve our English. And when you've had enough, it's not that far. You can always come back."

"You act like it's already decided. Don't think it'll be that easy with me."

"Easy? You've been frustrating me for a year. Sleeping next to you is torture. Why pretend you don't love me when you scare off every girl who shows interest?"

"I like you. That's not the same thing. And I'm not scaring anyone away. Those girls are dumb as rocks. You should thank me."

"Fine. I want you to come live with me in London. Just the two of us. I want you to be my girlfriend for real. You're the one who makes my heart race, even if you are infuriating."

"Give me some time to think about it. But don't expect much."

The waiter interrupted us.

"Ma'am, sir, have you decided?"

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Vanessa made me happy. She had accepted my proposal; she was coming with me. The three of us—Vanessa, my little sister Karyn, and I—were strolling along the boulevards near the Odéon, offering Paris a final, lingering goodbye.

Then, as if conjured from thin air, a modest silhouette stepped into our path. Despite the simplicity of his appearance, there was no mistaking the presence it contained. Aimé Césaire—Martinican poet of volcanic truths, father of Négritude, the man whose words could tilt the axis of a young mind—stood before us. We had seen him on television only the day before, and now here he was, in the flesh, impossibly present, as if summoned by our unspoken longing.

For a moment, I doubted my own eyes. When I finally managed to greet him, I found myself unable to release his hand. He needed to know—somehow—that during my turbulent teenage years, his words had helped me shape my political consciousness.

With the gentle curiosity of a man accustomed to encounters, he asked who we were.

"Oh, we're just children of Négritude," Karyn said lightly.

"Three half-Africans, half-Caribbeans," I added.

"As long as there are Black people, there will be Négritude," he replied, jubilant, as though pronouncing a blessing that had been waiting for centuries to be spoken aloud.

I felt a surge of elation rise through me.

Karyn looked at me with mischievous, sparkling eyes. "To preserve this historic moment for all humanity," she teased, "don't wash that hand now."

The imp! My beloved sister always knew how to pierce solemnity with laughter. My happiness overflowed; it felt too large for my body.

Vanessa, meanwhile, had remained silent through the entire encounter. Serene, composed, almost contemplative. Perhaps she hadn't read his work. Or perhaps she was simply absorbing the moment in her own quiet way, letting the magic settle around her like a soft veil.

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London was the one place in Europe where Black people had lifted their heads high and made their presence unmistakable—where the government had begun taking concrete steps toward equal opportunity before the law. In England, they made up barely 1% of the population, yet their impact resonated far beyond their numbers. For a few francs, Vanessa and I set out to reclaim our dignity, to rediscover ourselves, and to give shape and meaning to our lives.

Traveling light, we arrived at Victoria Station and caught a taxicab to a youth hostel on High Street Kensington, where we spent a few nights before finding a room to rent. After two days and countless phone calls, we finally settled in one of London's most vibrant districts: Brixton, the beating heart of the British Black world. A multi-ethnic enclave in the southern suburbs, home to nearly a quarter Black residents. A godsend.

A tiny Ghanaian landlady had a room available at a reasonable price. There was no point in bargaining. The house lacked central heating, but the weather was still

mild, and she assured us the issue would be resolved within a few weeks. There was no hot water either, but that too, she promised, would soon be fixed. In the meantime, we would boil water in the kitchen, mix it with a little cold, and pour it over ourselves from a pot each morning.

The adventure had begun.

I tormented myself with questions. *Why had Vanessa agreed to follow me into this chaos?* I, Dieudonné—no shiny BMW, no striking looks, no influential connections, and even less money in the bank. The thought stung every time it crossed my mind.

All I truly possessed were an immense hunger to make something of myself, a head crowded with dreams, a naïve belief that I could conquer the world, and a reservoir of hope that seemed inexhaustible. She, on the other hand, was breathtaking, drop dead gorgeous, elegant, poised, her manners and taste revealing the contours of a bourgeois upbringing. Perhaps she had seen some spark in me, some potential waiting to unfold. After all, I had been top of my class. Yes, maybe that was it. And besides, people enjoyed my company. I could be witty.

Deep down, I knew that dragging her along without a clear destination had been a mistake. The guilt gnawed at me. I was a broke young Black man with no roadmap, no guarantees—only willpower. I was afraid, but I kept moving anyway. I challenged the shifting ground beneath

my feet by walking as if it were solid. If nothing else, I knew how to put one foot in front of the other with a certain boldness.

Vanessa accepted almost everything without complaint. Her life over the past year had unraveled so painfully that she had, at times, been forced to sleep in a stairwell. A year earlier, back in France, her mother had suffered a nervous breakdown. Her older brother had just completed yet another detox program—heroin was his poison. Her younger sister, still a minor, had gone to live in Togo with their father, who was battling cancer. Her older sister had moved in with her boyfriend. We had crossed the Channel in search of something less brutal than all that. Vanessa couldn't speak about her family without tears rising instantly. So, we almost never spoke about it.

Her mother had been born in Marie-Galante, that majestic island moored between Grande-Terre and Dominica, into a family of sugarcane workers. She had taken advantage of the BUMIDOM program to leave for France, working as a nursing assistant by day while attending evening classes to become a nurse. Vanessa's Togolese father had been studying architecture when her parents met at a party. They married and stayed together for nearly twenty years before divorcing over an affair. Perhaps that was why Vanessa despised infidelity so fiercely.

As for me, I was supposed to work as a French assistant in a private school in Wimbledon, a lovely town in London's southern suburbs. One of my professors had arranged the position. The school was a parish institution run by Irish Catholic priests. Vanessa quickly found work in a fashionable clothing store on Oxford Street. With her poise and impeccable manners, she had no trouble convincing employers to hire her. Weekend modeling had taught her how to charm.

We had been living in that Victorian building for four weeks, lighting a small stove each evening to push back the growing chill of October. Privileges were a distant memory. Even the smell of gas no longer bothered us. Only the morning shower—taken in a freezing bathroom—still felt like a daily trial. And then there were the meters: those stubborn little boxes that constantly demanded coins for electricity in the bedroom and gas for the stove. Even the telephone in the hallway ran on coins. Each tenant had a similar meter mounted beside their door. The house held eight rooms in all. We lived on the ground floor, as did the owner. Couples and single lodgers occupied the upper floors. Everyone was from Africa. Nigeria and Sierra Leone dominated the census.

The landlady was almost a ghost. She returned home late—around two in the morning—and by the time the house stirred and woke up at seven, she was usually gone again. If we needed to reach her, we had to slip notes

under her door. Her eyes, when we caught a glimpse of them, carried an exhaustion that seemed carved into her bones. Suffering was visible, etched plainly across her furrowed face.

When we first arrived, she had asked whether we were Caribbean or African. Cautious, we answered that we were African. She nodded and replied:

"Good! That's better. If you'd been from the Caribbean, I would certainly have refused to rent you a room. Caribbean people never rent to Africans—they say we're too dirty. And they're right. But we have to live somewhere, don't we? Call me Auntie, my children. We're one big family here! The house isn't quite ready yet. I'm fixing it little by little. We've seen worse, haven't we?"

Living together in such cramped, uncomfortable conditions was beginning to strain the harmony Vanessa and I had enjoyed until then. We started arguing about the light I kept on too late to read, which kept her from sleeping. Auntie's promises remained unfulfilled as winter crept closer.

The most provocative of our neighbors disrupted the entire house. She must have had at least four lovers. Her curves and sensuality explained the steady stream of men. Each had his designated visiting day and his own key to the house and to her room. But sometimes an impatient lover would show up unannounced and run into another—at any hour of the day or night. Then came the

insults, the screams, the blows, and the tenants' complaints flying in every direction.

One night, around 2:30 a.m., she had barely gone to bed when Auntie heard bursts of laughter coming from the voluptuous neighbor with the oversized behind. That was the moment she decided to restore order. Minutes later, the two women were hurling insults at each other with such ferocity it felt as though a tragedy was about to erupt. The entire household stayed awake, cell phones in hand, watching the spectacle unfold.

That night, Vanessa and I decided we would leave this place as soon as our finances allowed.

The next evening, as she returned from the freezing bathroom where she had just washed up, Vanessa warned me that someone was stealing the gas we had bought with practically our last penny. I leapt to my feet and rushed to the kitchen to catch the culprit. There I found a very confused young Nigerian man, apologizing repeatedly. I told him sharply not to do it again, reminded him that he had his own meter and his own stove, and that he should feed *his* coins into *his* box instead of exploiting our already desperate poverty.

To my surprise, he suddenly burst out laughing.

"French?" he said, my accent had betrayed me instantly.

Before I could react, he grabbed my hand and shook it so vigorously that my anger dissolved despite myself. His name was Hakeem.

Vanessa received a plane ticket. Her father was going to be hospitalized in France for several weeks and wanted to see her—and give her a little money. He had made the trip from his native Africa. She had to go meet him. In the meantime, I was about to spend three penniless days locked in our room, surviving on my own saliva.

On the afternoon of the second day, someone knocked on our door. I opened it to find Hakeem. He invited me up to his room to watch a video. He knew we had neither a radio nor a television; apart from our voices, no sound ever came from our room. And perhaps he wanted to break the monotony of his own life, to share the little he had with me—as if to redeem himself for the gas incident.

He offered me a meal composed mostly of spices. As I tried to decline, my stomach growled so loudly it nearly drowned out my words. Without hesitation, he pushed a fragrant, overflowing plate toward me. Before he had finished half of his meal, my plate was already spotless. We punctuated the film with warm, easy conversation. Hakeem was already glowing with the unmistakable light of friendship.

When Vanessa returned, she was greeted by two wide, toothy smiles—hers answered with a look that sparkled with joy.

The next day, Vanessa and I began searching for another place to live. We weren't the only ones. The easy woman upstairs had been told to vacate her room within hours. Evicted. No one shed a tear.

In the hallway, a young man from Sierra Leone was arguing with the landlady. His pregnant wife sat at the top of the stairs, hands resting beneath her round belly, watching the scene with weary resignation.

"I've had enough of your 'call me Auntie'! You're not my aunt—it's just blackmail. You've been telling us for months the heating would be fixed, but meanwhile my wife is breathing burning gas! Yes, we're Africans, but you're not going to use that to exploit us. No, we're not paying more rent—it's already too expensive. In fact, we're leaving as soon as we can. And that's very soon."

His words gave me the courage to speak. I told the landlady that Vanessa and I would also be leaving shortly. She launched into a long lament about the loss of respect for elders and swore that Black people were ungrateful.

"From now on, I'll rent to Arabs!"

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Lewisham lay in southeast London, a quiet pocket of the city where life felt gentler, almost forgiving. A working-class town of 240,000 souls—12% West Indian, 9% African—it carried the hum of diaspora, the comfort of familiar faces, the promise of a softer landing. From now on, we would be sharing a large apartment with a young Mauritian who had recently converted to Catholicism. His ad had been explicit: he wanted practicing Christians. The rent was affordable, and for the sake of decent housing, we were ready to play the devout.

We rented two rooms: a small furnished one with a single bed, a table, a chair, and a wardrobe, which we transformed into an office; and a larger bedroom with a double bed that Vanessa arranged with her delicate, instinctive sense of order.

The rest of the apartment was bright and well equipped. Sunlight poured through the windows as if blessing our new beginning. The best part was that our roommate was almost never home—always working, or

at mass, or visiting his sprawling extended family. Vanessa worked long hours too. Her salary, combined with mine, softened the edges of our daily struggle. Two incomes changed everything.

On Saturday evenings, Hakeem came to visit "the Frenchies." Though Vanessa didn't drink, we often ended the night in a trendy pub or wine bar. She would sit with us, amused, watching us gulp cold beers to the rhythm of wild music. And sometimes—when the mood caught her—she would rise and dance. Each time she did, people gathered around her as if drawn by a magnet. By 11 p.m., it was time to leave. We'd say goodbye to Hakeem. He had moved to Battersea, south of the Thames, near the river. He needed a bus to get home, and at that hour, buses were scarce. The following week, he would introduce us to his new girlfriend. Vanessa would feel less alone.

Outside, apart from the drunken crowds spilling into the streets after closing time, the city slept. Vanessa leaned on my shoulder; her feet ached. We walked slowly toward the apartment. Out of sympathy, I tried to lift her, to carry her, but I was too exhausted to follow through. She smiled with relief, as if to say, "No, really—I'm too heavy."

We burst into laughter, wrapped in the quiet complicity of two people learning to survive together.

She caught her breath, then asked softly: "Dieudonné, what do you want out of life?"

The question startled me, though I had turned it over in my mind a hundred times.

"I'd like to become a university professor."

"Why a professor? Aren't you tired of studying?"

"When I was little, my mother kept telling me I'd never amount to anything. That I was insignificant. She was convinced I'd fail my high-school diploma. So I worked hard—just to shut her up."

"Obviously, she was wrong. I understand… but you've already proven yourself."

"Yes, but the truth is, I don't know anything else. And being a professor doesn't seem so bad. I was so determined to prove her wrong that I never imagined another path. What about you? What do you want out of life?"

"I want my own dance studio. And a career in show business."

Stunned, I burst out laughing—nothing had prepared me for that answer. Vanessa pressed her lips to mine, quick and urgent, as if to silence my disbelief.

Hakeem's girlfriend wasn't bad looking at all. Her intelligence made her even more striking. She and Vanessa became fast friends. Men are weak. I am a man, so I kept my distance. Still, I couldn't help feeling a pang of sadness when Hakeem pulled me aside and confessed:

"I don't want to go too far with her. She's the kind of girl you marry. I'm too afraid of that. Sooner or later, I'll have to tell her."

His confession weighed on me. The girl was wonderful. For her, Hakeem would be nothing more than a brief, fruitless detour. I judged him harshly—his cowardice mirrored my own. It forced me to face a truth I had been avoiding: I loved the pleasure Vanessa gave me more than I loved her. I no longer had the courage to look beyond that. I, too, was afraid. Afraid of losing what we had by speaking too loudly of love.

First, I had to build myself. And I had to do it quickly.

I had been drawn to Vanessa's beauty and to everything she embodied. She was strong, untamable, proud, upright—everything she insisted I was, though I doubted it. She invigorated me. I had gone to England hoping to reclaim some of the pride I believed I once possessed. Instead, I found only other wounded souls, bullied and battered, fighting for the right to exist. I was searching outside myself for what she seemed to cultivate effortlessly within: self-esteem. Was there any refuge from the gnawing sense of inadequacy that threatened to stunt me?

All my life, I had run—from places, from people, from belonging. Belonging felt like a trap, a surrender of my fundamental freedom, a burden of responsibility I feared I could not carry. My family had offered nationalism as a

cure, but adulthood had revealed how small I felt inside. So I chose the easy pleasures of the flesh with the woman I desired above all others. I endured my own foolishness.

It was cold. The weather was bleak. I needed to get out, to distract myself, to escape the prison of my thoughts. Vanessa was lying on the bed reading; she barely looked up when I entered the room. Hakeem had told us about an American film. There was a screening at nine, and she agreed to go. Streatham was far, but it didn't matter. We were finally happy to do something together. Just the two of us.

From the top deck of the big red double-decker bus, we silently contemplated a human anthill: Black faces, white faces, the poor, the wealthy, Indians, potbellied men, punks, Rastas, businessmen and businesswomen in saris, kilts, boubous—an entire world rushing past beneath us. We were far from central London, where cigars and fur coats paraded aristocratic ease. Here, people jostled one another on the pavement, each fighting for space, for breath, for life.

Vanessa and I enjoyed the film. It was late now, and we had to make our way home. We strode down a wide avenue toward the house. In a moment of tenderness, Vanessa slipped her hand into mine. The four-lane road beside us was almost deserted. A few moviegoers walked toward the bus stop, just like us.

Then a shrill scream tore through the night.

Behind us, a woman in her fifties was waving her arms wildly, signaling danger with a desperation that froze my blood. I turned—and terror seized me. Instinct took over. I dove to the ground, dragging Vanessa down with me.

Across the street, a long rifle was pointed directly at us. It exploded, spitting fire. Bullets shattered the wall above our heads, spraying stone and dust where we had just been standing. The shooter and his accomplice fled into the darkness.

I wanted to do the same without missing a beat—but Vanessa had already leapt to her feet and was sprinting toward the attackers. Witnesses scattered in every direction. Somehow, I managed to catch up with her. Had she lost her mind? They had a rifle. What did she think she could do—punish them with her bare hands? I wrapped my arms around her, trying to hold her close, to calm the fury that had overtaken her.

We rushed to the local police station. A bored officer made us sit for more than fifteen minutes before agreeing to listen. He took a few notes, then casually informed us that the National Front headquarters was in Streatham, right across from where the shooting had supposedly happened, as if to suggest we had no business being in that neighborhood at that hour. Unmoved, we left him to his little nighttime refuge. The attacker had violated our sense of safety; the officer finished the job by stripping us of dignity. We had been the only Black people on that

street. The message was clear: even the simplest pleasures were not meant for us. Their gaze tried to shrink us, to trap us inside their fear.

Beer and cider offered a thin veil of lightness over a life that was becoming hard to bear. Vidia had the church, and it seemed to soothe him. Perhaps it was better that way—better that he had faith to lean on. Communication felt like a burden. Vanessa watched me closely, worried, wanting to know what was happening inside my head. But nothing was happening. At last, nothing. Only exhaustion. I was tired of the constant rejection, and the fear it stirred in me was beginning to harden into rage.

The life I was living made me feel insignificant. It denied me any sense of safety. My ambitions were constantly colliding with the reality of my poverty. I spat at the world that had been imposed on me, and it spat right back.

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My tiny family was dying. There were too few children, too few men left to sustain it. What remained were disillusioned women whose only hope lay in the few children they had brought into the world—children protected only by their good manners. It was an unequal fight. Our weapons were pitiful. With growing despair, we seemed condemned to repeat the desperate patterns of our fathers.

A week before leaving Paris, I had insisted on introducing Vanessa to the only adult member of my family still living in France. A distinguished old gentleman, Cousin Marcel—my grandmother's cousin—exuded Frenchness in every gesture. He opposed independence for our island. He was kind, but unbearably pedantic. A Latin and Greek professor at a seminary, he had left Guadeloupe by boat as a young man, convinced he was destined for the priesthood. To his great regret, that dream had slipped through his fingers. His father had never recognized him.

We began with the customary tea at his place, accompanied by small dry biscuits. He asked about Vanessa's origins, claiming he had visited both Marie-Galante and Togo. He made polite conversation, complimented her good manners, her beauty, her impeccable French. Then we spoke about my plans now that my studies were nearly complete. When I told him I intended to move in with her, his reaction was brutally tactless. He exclaimed:

"No! Not like your mother. Not that again!"

The refined man had had no time to polish his words. He set the tone. After a long, suffocating silence, I found myself apologizing profusely before escaping his disapproval.

The incident brought back a childhood memory—something I had overheard by accident, without anyone knowing I was there. If I remember correctly, Cousin Marcel had befriended an African student from Cameroon who worked in a grocery store in Les Halles to finance his law studies. The student had gotten into the habit of walking him home after he finished shopping. That student was my father. His name was Napoleon. The old Frenchman in blackface and the young African would chat and bicker cheerfully, sometimes late into the night. Neither was married in the colorful Paris of the 1960s. Cousin Marcel became his mentor.

My mother, Inès, was also in Paris at the time, studying medicine thanks to her sister's financial support. She wasn't alone—her younger brother, Gaétan, was pursuing his studies as well, though they didn't live together. Inès stayed in a boarding house run by nuns, while Gaétan rented a room in a private home. At the end of the week, they would sometimes visit their mother's cousin, together or separately. One day, at his place, Inès crossed paths with a clumsy young man who, struck by her beauty, made a fool of himself with his awkward attempts to get her attention.

It took Napoleon a full year to win her over. She was fascinated by the Africa she had discovered through the literature of Négritude and the stories she had heard. Africa represented the forbidden, and the forbidden always carries its own thrill. Even though Napoleon worried her a little—because all his curiosity was turned toward the West, which she embodied so perfectly—she hoped he would tell her more and reveal something of the Africa she idealized.

He could have taken advantage of her innocence, mystified her, fed her fantasies. Instead, he showed himself exactly as he was: a man ready to prostitute his soul, his imagination wide open to the wonders of Europe. He had been conquered by Europe, and he had surrendered his faith and his inner world to his colonial master.

When it was confirmed that Inès was truly pregnant and it was not a false alarm, Napoleon was jubilant. Wedding preparations were rushed to silence the gossip. Honor had to be preserved. She was his visa, his conquest of France was assured, his ticket to a better life. A Black woman who spoke white. He paraded his Venus with a firm arm. He knew that she had yielded after a year—for reasons he didn't fully grasp—and wasn't crazy about him, but he didn't care. He believed, in time, she would adore him.

In the Caribbean, privately, Inès's parents were furious. They pretended to be delighted, publicly, and organized a reception for their second daughter's wedding. An African man—they knew she was impulsive, but not *that* impulsive. Without warning, four months after the wedding, Inès showed up at their door with a belly larger than her head.

With her brother as her accomplice, she fled, taking advantage of her husband's absence to reach the airport. She refused to endure his overbearing family. She refused to "stay in her place." In truth, she didn't even understand what place they meant, or why she should remain in it. In her family, women chose their place, and their voices mattered. In just a few months, she had suffered too many rebuffs from a man who wanted her to be a wallflower, when all she longed for was authenticity—and a chance to discover the hidden glory of Africa.

By leaving her husband, Inès gained a fundamental freedom she had never known before. She could no longer rely on the support of a family she had offended twice: first by marrying an African man, then by divorcing him. Two taboos in the 1960s. A single mother at twenty-three, she refused to let her mother, her father, or her husband dictate her behavior. Despite everything, she never felt responsible for her parents' divorce. On her grandmother's orders, her mother begun divorce proceedings the day her father's perpetually feverish private parts proved to be a public asset.

Once my classes were over, I had to wait forty-five minutes for a bus to Wimbledon station, then wait again for the subway, and finally endure an hour-long ride home. It took me nearly two hours to get back every evening. So when a kind student first offered to drive me to the station, I accepted without hesitation. Whenever she saw me at the bus shelter, she would stop and offer me a lift. I was grateful—though increasingly uneasy. After several months, one day, instead of heading straight to the station, she took a detour.

"I'd like to talk to you. Would you mind if we stopped at the park for a minute?"

"A minute? No problem."

What could she possibly have to say that she couldn't say in class? We got out of the car and walked to a bench in

the empty park. Shy and pale, she made me nervous. She stammered a few words:

"I like you… and I want to go out with you."

My jaw dropped. My ears burned. My tongue felt thick and useless, but I managed to whisper:

"That's not possible. I'm flattered, but you're too young… and I have a girlfriend."

"But I'm almost an adult. I'll be eighteen soon. And your girlfriend will never know."

Intimidated by her determination, I clung to the only strategy I had—repeating myself like a broken record:

"I'm flattered, but you're too young. And I already have a girlfriend."

We walked back to the car, in silence, keeping our heads down. She drove me to the station.

The weeks that followed were an ordeal. The girl began sabotaging me, causing so much disruption in my class that I was finally forced to confront her. That was when she delivered her ultimatum:

"Either you date me in secret, or I'll tell everyone you're my boyfriend."

I felt utterly alone and exposed. Who would believe I had nothing to do with this? I was sinking into despair. Fear gnawed at me constantly, and I lost control of a once excellent class.

One Friday afternoon, on my way to catch the bus, a group of young people called out to me. Among them, a

boy stared at me with open hostility. In that moment, I knew I had to make a decision. This situation could not continue.

Vanessa had not spoken to me in almost three weeks. I had walked away from the school before the end of the year. I wasn't working anymore, which meant no paycheck either. Despite my countless phone calls, my visits to employers, my applications dropped into mail slots and reception desks, nothing worked. Every day, my pockets grew lighter.

I suspected Vanessa was deliberately coming home later than usual to avoid me. I now slept in the small bedroom. On Sundays, I could feel her trying to stay in bed as long as possible so she wouldn't have to face my crestfallen expression. I had become persona non grata in my own home. When Vidia returned from mass, she was far more inclined to chat with him. They spoke loudly about nothing of consequence and made sure I heard every word.

I could not enjoy myself. My memory of a troubled identity weighed a ton. I moved through the world as if dragging a long, invisible chain behind me. Every gesture, every ambition, every attempt at setting roots carried the weight of a beginning I had never chosen. It wasn't simply that my birth was "unacceptable" in the eyes of others; it was that I had absorbed their judgment so completely that it became the lens through which I saw myself.

Enjoyment was the only remedy. I clung to that thought. I needed to forget so I could finally live. I felt tortured by my thoughts! A life that starts badly can still end well, I told myself. But in the meantime, I had to chase whatever scraps of pleasure I could find. The best way to forget? I still didn't know. And why on earth had I told Vanessa about the girl at school?

Hakeem came to visit quite often now, even in the middle of the week. He helped me financially without offending me. He asked for help, I gave him French lessons. He no longer greeted Vanessa. He just walked past her, stiff-backed, jaw tight. The two of them could barely stand the sight of each other. Those two didn't like each other very much anymore. When he broke up with his girlfriend, Vanessa called him a typical, stupid nigger. Had he been in my shoes, he would have beaten her up a long time ago. They avoided each other like the plague. The little money he slipped into my hand allowed me to keep searching for work, but mostly it bought the beer and cider I needed for my slow descent into hell.

My sperm felt stale and my morale scraped the bottom. After two months, most days, I slumped in front of the small TV we had bought after moving in. Vidia and Vanessa drifted in and out of the room, shooting me disapproving looks. I wanted to lash out at them. The

only thing that lifted my spirits was the thought of the next few bills Hakeem would bring.

Meanwhile, Hakeem was starting to seriously consider going back to school. He was changing. He talked about going back to school, about applying for a scholarship. He devoured the few books I owned and discussed them with a hunger I envied. Something in him was shifting—slowly, but unmistakably. A slow but sure transformation was taking place. Sometimes he dragged me along to surprise parties or birthdays organized by his friends. I met new people, widened my circle a little. Vanessa, for her part, had a whole constellation of friends she'd picked up at work or on the street. Invitations flew in every direction, but somehow I was never included in the celebrations. I watched life swirl around me, vibrant and noisy, while I remained on the outside, nursing my drinks and my despair.

One evening, as I climbed the stairs to our floor, I heard quick footsteps darting away from the small bedroom. When I reached the door, I found a large poster taped to it—a grotesque chimpanzee head, all teeth and menace, with my name boldly scrawled at the bottom. I rushed into the big bedroom and found Vanessa doubled over, shaking with uncontrollable laughter. For the first time in weeks, I kissed her, and she didn't pull away.

The next day, I waited for her. The rice was nearly burnt, but the sauce and meat I had prepared were

perfect. When she finally came home, I greeted her with open arms. She stepped into the dining room reluctantly, almost suspiciously. But when she saw the meal, I had prepared for her, she sat across from me, surprised and disarmed.

I wanted to know everything about her, the truth beneath the truth; I wanted to find the courage to love her the way she deserved to be loved. She unleashed the full force of her long-repressed bitterness. She confessed how desperately she had wanted to fit in with the Caribbean part of herself, to embrace it with her whole being—only to grow exhausted from loving it and never feeling loved back. In that exhaustion, she began to hate it. I listened without judgment.

After that night, something changed. Our relationship improved. We spent long hours talking about anything and nothing; sometimes we even laughed uncontrollably. We ate together, slept in the same bed again, read the same novels, watched the same shows. Slowly, we relearned how to appreciate each other, aware of how deeply we needed one another. For the first time, I felt I truly understood her.

I met an elegant Guyanese woman on the subway at London Bridge. She sat across from me, absorbed in a French textbook, her posture composed, her face framed by the quiet assurance of someone in her fifties. Curious—and eager for any scrap of practical guidance—

I dared to interrupt her thoughts. She responded with unexpected warmth, urging me to apply to public schools in the southern suburbs. They were looking for underrepresented minorities; it was the trend of the moment. If possible, they wanted more Black and Indian teachers. She even knew whom I should contact. I didn't mind being a stopgap. Anything that kept hunger at bay was welcome.

After several phone calls, I finally secured a teaching position at a public school in southeast London. Four classes had been left without a teacher. The school had cycled through four white instructors in three months; none had wanted—or managed—to cope with these disadvantaged children who had no books of their own. These poverty-stricken white, yellow, Black, and red children frightened those respectable ladies and gentlemen, who saw no reason why the burden of educating minds they deemed irredeemable should fall to them. Nothing in their well-meaning, sheltered lives had prepared them for this urban rabble.

After a firm handshake, the director told me I could start just after Christmas. He added that he would put me on a three-month trial period first—"and then we'll see!"

I was overjoyed. My first real full-time job—and finally something that paid more than minimum wage. Still, I needed work to carry me through the three weeks between Christmas and the start of the school year. It was

in the little shop run by two Jamaican friends, where I bought my daily ginger juice, that I heard about a Jamaican entrepreneur looking for extra hands to renovate an abandoned house he had picked up at auction for next to nothing. I asked a few questions and arranged to meet him the next morning. At eight o'clock sharp, a van pulled up in front of the shop to collect me.

The plan was simple: two weeks of work. The pay was only £100 a week—barely anything—but it was enough. Judging from the yellowed envelopes still scattered across the filthy floor, the house had been abandoned since the late 1950s. I knocked down walls, stripped wallpaper, helped install false ceilings, laid tiles, redid the floors, and cleared the garden of weeds. I had never done any of this before, but necessity forced me to claim expertise I didn't possess.

The neighbors were delighted. Someone was finally willing to rid them of the eyesore that dragged down the value of their own investments. For two weeks, I endured dust, startled bats, and the taunts of fellow laborers who never missed a chance to joke about my paper-scraping hands.

I was dirty most of the time, but it was the neighbors' stares that stained me the most. In hindsight, their contempt meant nothing. I only had a few days left on that construction site. My body ached everywhere, but

my soul felt steady. I had learned a bit of DIY and discovered an antidote to despair: action.

I worked alongside men who had never been to high school and had known only manual labor. They reacted instinctively, held strong opinions about everything, and were suspicious of anyone who liked to read—especially if he was Black. I kept quiet, but I laughed often. I threw myself into the work with enthusiasm. The best way to endure thankless tasks was to surrender to them completely, to empty the mind until only movement remained.

At the end of the second week, I received my £200. I bought a bicycle to ride to work and get some exercise. Exactly what I needed—more action.

The school had the stark austerity of a Victorian institution. It intimidated me. Its long, straight corridors—dimly lit and lined with photographs of cold, unsmiling figures—announced that seriousness was the ruling principle here. No students lingered in the hallways. The silence was so reverent that the sound of my footsteps on the parquet floor felt like a violation. I slipped quietly into the staff room, a large, cavernous space.

I was the man of the hour—for once. My arrival had been eagerly awaited. I was immediately engulfed by a riot of colors, a barrage of voices, and a forest of

outstretched hands. Dozens of hands reaching toward me from every direction. Someone sat me down, someone else offered tea, and introductions came at me in rapid succession. My eyes spun in a dizzying whirl of faces and solicitations. I was hot, then cold, and suddenly losing my ability to speak English—but it felt wonderful to be there.

Generation after generation, young proletarians had been transformed into arrogant petty bourgeois within these walls. Despite the school's lack of resources, nearly every family in this poor neighborhood dreamed of sending their children to Addey and Wood. Some parents would say, "At least they're demanding with the children." They weren't wrong.

The headmaster—whose posh English was occasionally betrayed by Cockney undertones—believed in enforcing iron discipline. Only that, he insisted, could guarantee the students' success. Meanwhile, qualified teachers were fleeing a profession gutted by government cuts. Education remained a recklessly undervalued sector.

One morning, as I entered my classroom, I was struck by the unusual calm. These normally distracted, restless students sat perfectly still, quiet as mice, waiting for my instructions. I suppressed a smile. Something was off. It usually took me at least five minutes to restore order. Perplexed, I walked to my desk, pulled out my chair, and was about to sit when a sudden explosion of laughter

stopped me. I froze. Two long pieces of what looked like human excrement were smeared across the seat, a crude insult laid out for me. More stunned than angry, I began to move the soiled chair aside when one student, brimming with enthusiasm, grabbed the fake feces with her bare hand and waved it triumphantly. The class erupted again. I was horrified—until I realized they were cheap plastic imitations from a joke shop. I had two options: hunt for the culprit and drown myself in paperwork, or defuse the moment. I chose to laugh with them.

Another day, on my way to the staff room, I noticed six Black girls sitting on a bench in the playground; one of them was in my class. Their eyes were red and swollen. One girl sobbed with a kind of frantic despair. I approached, hoping to help, but she dismissed me with a wave. There was nothing I could do. I walked away without understanding the cause of their grief.

Later, in the staff room, the department head—visibly uneasy—asked me to let a young white girl leave my next class twenty minutes before the bell. He offered no explanation, which only sharpened my curiosity.

I arrived early, knowing Rachel—the girl who had been crying—always came in ahead of the others to claim her favorite seat. She arrived soon enough. Before the rest of the class filtered in, I gently pressed her for answers. She told me that she and her friends had been

comforting a girl who had just learned that her younger brother had collapsed and died on a football field. Apparently, the whole school knew him; he had been popular, especially with the girls.

Then came the rest. The white student I had been instructed to release early had approached the grieving group, delivered a cruel remark about the boy's death, and fled the scene. The white student, it turned out, had told the distraught girls, "That's one less nigger in the world." The girls had sworn to rough her up after school.

If Rachel's account was true, that girl was a monster. I wanted to kill her myself. So that's why! I felt a surge of anger myself. Now I understood why I had been asked to let her slip out early.

During class, I did my best to ignore her. When the moment came, she raised her hand timidly, but I pretended not to see it. Finally, trembling with panic, she bolted for the door and disappeared without waiting for permission.

The next evening, the parent-teacher conference began at five o'clock sharp. Two more hours and I would be free to go. Tables had been arranged along both sides of the large room, each marked with the name of the teacher assigned to sit there. My grade books lay open in front of me as I contemplated the dozen chairs neatly

lined up across from my table. Parents were supposed to wait there for their turn. For the moment, no one needed me.

Math and English teachers were being mobbed. Indian—and more broadly Asian—parents had come out in force. A few white parents had done the same. Black parents, however, were scarce. Considering how many Black students attended the school, their absence was striking. Did they not care about their children's education? Did they not grasp the importance of these meetings? Or were they simply trapped at work?

A Nigerian mother approached and swept those thoughts from my mind. Her son stood beside her. I had nothing but praise for him. She was raising him and his brother alone, and she lit up when she heard how well he was doing. They moved on to the next table, smiling broadly, overflowing with gratitude.

Parents came one after another—Irish, Scottish, Cypriot, Pakistani, Indian, Rastafarian, Cockney. Hard-working London paraded past my table, thanking me, promising support, pledging to reinforce discipline at home. Little girls hid behind their mothers, bracing for a well-deserved scolding that I spared them with a gentle reminder to behave in class.

Then an elegant woman swept into the room, nearly knocking over a shy elderly lady who had been patiently waiting her turn. The newcomer, radiating

self-importance, demanded that I go fetch "Mr. Toupatou!"

Was it not obvious that I was sitting directly beneath my name, just like every other teacher? Rather than leap up and perform a jig or a biguine for her, showering her with Yes-Bwana, Yes-Bwana—which I very much wanted to—I restrained myself.

Instead, I calmly pointed to the sign with my name and asked her to wait her turn like everyone else. Her expression made it clear whose mother she was. She swallowed her distaste with difficulty and, without apology, allowed the timid old lady to go ahead.

No amount of schooling had prepared me for this.

At the market, well-stocked stalls stretched in long, colorful rows, tempting customers with their delicious displays. Chubby, jovial merchants conducted business at full speed, their laughter rising above the hum of the crowd. People swarmed everywhere. We had to spill into the road; the sidewalk was too packed to walk without bumping into someone. Newspaper sellers shouted offers of *Evening Standards* that no one wanted. A crowd jostled for the last bargains from this or that merchant, who rewarded them with a sweet smile and a hearty "tha." The Salvation Army, out in force, deafened us with their jingle bells. Children spotted me and tugged at their mothers' sleeves. "It's Mr. Toupatou, my French teacher!"

Homeless people, buoyed by the bustle, begged for coins. Vanessa walked beside me, her boyfriend, with her usual grace. Life was beautiful, after all. Money didn't grow on trees, but we had enough.

In no time, I had become friends with these children. If I ran into a group of them in the street, I could be sure they would greet me in loud, cheerful unison. My youth—and my excessive willingness to listen to them, to take seriously whatever they had to say—sometimes landed me in awkward situations. But nothing serious. I liked these little rascals, and that was the problem. They sometimes teased me mercilessly.

Georges and I were the only Black teachers in that enormous school. He had been living in exile for several years, a political refugee. According to him, the situation in his native Uganda was catastrophic. The civil war raging there claimed countless victims, and his ethnic group suffered disproportionately. AIDS compounded the devastation, leaving behind a trail of orphans the rest of the world seemed content to ignore. Georges was an activist, part of a small circle of expatriate intellectuals, and he never missed an opportunity to raise awareness about what was happening back home.

A history and geography teacher, he possessed an astonishing command of both subjects. He liked to say that intimate knowledge of one's people—of one's humanity—was the surest defense against those who

wished only to diminish or enslave us. His understanding of the great African empires alone was so vast that when he visited our home, Vanessa and I gladly let him lull us with his melodious voice. Like all teachers, he loved to talk, and he never needed to be asked twice.

In the staff room, armchairs formed a circle around a small coffee table. Along two of the four walls, a row of sofas sat comfortably near the circular radiators. Every teacher had staked out a place. Mr. Rama, the Indian biology teacher from Bombay; Mr. Lee, the Chinese math teacher from Hong Kong; and O'Brian, the Irish literature teacher, had all claimed seats near the radiators—just as Georges and I had. The periphery was where all the important conversations happened.

The initial warmth of my welcome had vanished. I was now simply one of the teachers—part of the furniture. Or perhaps just another piece of furniture. By nature, O'Brian was not a talkative man. He only spoke when his English colleagues had left the room, and even then, he confined himself to recounting how, early in his career, he had been called a *paddy* daily by people at the school who had no affection for "Irish vermin." Whenever the IRA claimed responsibility for a bombing, he braced himself for the renewed abuse of his colleagues. Only now was he left in peace; the number of Irish people in the region had grown considerably.

Once the principal finished his daily announcements over the intercom, Mr. Rama set about dismantling any illusions I might have had about the true nature and motivations of our employers. Visibly embittered, he had worked at the school for forty years without ever receiving the promotions he deserved. He was certainly not going to become head of the biology department anytime soon. Instead of appointing him—a man more than qualified—they had brought in someone twenty years younger, from whom he found it humiliating to take orders.

At a critical moment in his story, the assistant director entered the room, which contained only the two of us and the rising agitation of old Mr. Rama. She pretended to search for something. Mr. Rama glanced at his watch, gathered his belongings, and said to me:

"Now that I'm almost at retirement age, I don't give a damn what those people do. They have no power over me. But you, my friend—you must stay vigilant."

Then he left, the door slamming behind him. I sat there, confused, absorbing the bitterness of his words as they echoed in my mind.

Suddenly, the assistant director, visibly flustered, turned to me and insisted I ignore "the old geezer."

"If he's not head of the department today, it's because he doesn't deserve to be. You saw it yourself—he can't even be on time for his class. I had to intervene to send

him back to a lesson he should have started ten minutes ago. I would have given him a serious dressing-down if he'd stayed here a minute longer."

I chose to remain silent and retreated into the safety of my thoughts, unwilling to jeopardize a position I had fought hard to obtain.

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Vanessa's sister Catherine and a Tunisian friend, Hayet, were coming to spend the Christmas holidays with us. I didn't mind. On the contrary, I liked them. Their arrival promised a welcome break from the monotony. We had already been in London for two years.

Hayet was the first to arrive that Sunday. She looked as lovely as ever and spoke without pause, stopping only long enough to catch her breath. Everything fascinated her. She moved through the house as if discovering a new world, her delight so genuine it felt like a breeze blowing through a stuffy room. I found myself welcoming that sense of wonder.

Now twenty-two, she confided that at eighteen she had married a man in his thirties—a man for whom she had felt no attraction at first—simply to escape her parents' control and attend university. She had given him a son. Her husband, a medical student, was finishing his doctorate. Her parents, convinced that higher education was wasted on women, had planned to send her to

Tunisia, where an aunt had arranged a "good match" for her: the son of the village imam.

Hayet had since passed the CAPES competitive exam in English and had just begun her second year of practical training. Her husband had agreed to stay in France with their son while she visited friends. It was her first real break since getting married, and she had earned it. She and Vanessa were already deep in conversation when I left to pick up Catherine, who was due at Heathrow at six. The drive was long.

I had met Catherine once before, when she had invited Vanessa and me to dinner. She spotted me first. Less provocatively dressed than her younger sister, she was more cheerful and, above all, more mature. Unlike Hayet, she measured her words, weighing each one before letting it slip out. She had just broken up with her boyfriend after yet another fight.

By the time we reached Lewisham, night had fallen. Music spilled into the street; a celebration was in full swing. The women's joy was infectious. Our two guests would share the large bedroom. Vanessa and I would make do with the small one. Everyone lounged comfortably in shorts and socks, while I let my toes breathe. With the house to ourselves, we were free to enjoy the holidays. Vidia was spending Christmas with his aunts.

The doorbell rang. Hakeem stood there, draped in a beautifully embroidered boubou, his arms loaded with champagne, liqueurs, and beer. From the kitchen, the aroma of curried goat drifted toward us—rich, warm, irresistible—making me coo with anticipation.

In London, it was surprisingly easy to find the ingredients that recreated the scents of home. Brixton Market held the same magic as the markets of Kingston, Port-of-Spain, or Accra. The whole Commonwealth seemed to stroll through it. Women with generous hips moved through the pedestrian lanes to the pulse of calypso, rub-a-dub, and wild Juju rhythms, trailed by men who looked either like Rastafarians with knotted beards or like shaved coconut shells. You could find everything there: guineps, Cythera apples, Malacca apples, coconut sugar, palm wine…

The women ate, danced, drank, and laughed. By the end of the night, one by one, drowsy and spent, they drifted back to their rooms. I stayed in the living room, stretched out on the sofa, while Hakeem slept soundly, swallowed by the arms of an armchair.

At dawn, Vanessa came seeking the warmth of my body. She lifted me gently and carried me to the small bed, where she curled up close, fitting herself against me returning to a familiar place.

Around eleven, while Catherine and Hayet were still asleep, Vanessa and I rushed to clean up. Hakeem had left

us a note: *"I'll pick you up for the Fridge tonight. Free for women. Great atmosphere."*

Around noon, we took our guests for a long walk downtown. Piccadilly Circus was swarming with tourists. We visited the Rock Circus and posed with a Tina Turner look-alike. Carnaby Street mesmerized Hayet. She had never seen so many strange-looking people gathered in one place—people with black paint smeared around their eyes, razor blades dangling from their ears, businessmen in immaculate suits wearing battered sneakers. Their eccentricity reminded her of how orderly, organized, and conventional her own life had been. Here, she wanted to forget who she was, if only for a week—break the rules, shed her skin, live a little.

The Fridge was one of London's hottest clubs at the time. At around nine, Hakeem came to pick us up. The women weren't ready. To put an end to their endless chatter, I stepped into their bedroom. They were naked, about to get dressed, and I felt no embarrassment at the sight of these three supremely sensual bodies. They shrieked, blushed, and threw me out immediately, giggling even harder.

We reached the club around ten-thirty. The huge dance floor was already packed, to the girls' delight. In England, clubs close around two or three in the morning—just enough time to lose yourself. The electric atmosphere seized them at once. They had been writhing

on the dance floor for barely half an hour and were already drenched in sweat.

When a song we both liked came on, Hakeem and I danced like lunatics, but unlike the girls, we didn't draw a crowd. The place was full of stunning women, yet it was my girlfriend who drew every gaze. Men gathered around her, miming sexual acts under the pretext of dancing. She knew exactly the effect she had and seemed to revel in teasing them. She was having the time of her life. She clearly enjoyed manipulating men's desires.

Every now and then, my eyes met Hakeem's. He seemed to pity me. I blamed myself for letting my guard down, for having real feelings for this girl. I knew I had begun to love her more than I loved myself, and with a dull ache I resigned myself to the spectacle. I forced down the voice urging me to drag her away and make her dance "properly."

Fortunately, the club had two dance floors. I slipped upstairs to escape the slow erosion of my pride.

At the small bar upstairs, I was ordering a Bailey's when a man in his thirties touched my arm and whispered that one of his friends wanted to meet me. I didn't rush. I finished my order, nodded, and told him I'd join them in a moment.

They were two Black men surrounded by half a dozen younger blondes. All smiles, he introduced me to one of them, who looked visibly flustered, and urged me to take

her aside. She followed me a few steps away, unsteady on her heels. After a long sip of Bailey's, I asked bluntly:

"So, you like me?"

She blushed, lowered her eyes, and pretended to be offended. In an accent even thicker than mine—she must have been Swedish—she explained that she had simply made a comment about me to a friend, and things had snowballed. She apologized. I shifted tactics, softened my tone, and offered to buy her a drink. Then I let silence do the work, speaking sparingly, choosing each word with care. The strategy paid off. I had her.

We got up to dance. I made her laugh out loud. We touched each other now, lightly at first, then more deliberately, dissolving whatever hesitation or fear remained. The jealousy that had been gnawing at me half an hour earlier vanished completely. I felt good. My revenge was sweet—sweeter, even, than my attraction to this exotic northern fruit. What she stirred in me—desire, curiosity, unease—I couldn't quite name.

Suddenly, a firm hand yanked me out of my ecstasy. Hakeem's grip. He leaned in, breathless, and told me Vanessa was furious. She had come upstairs looking for me, seen me cooing with that sexy white woman who was giving me unmistakable looks, and had stormed back down in a rage. She had gathered her things and was threatening to kill me. *"We need to leave now before all hell breaks loose!"* he insisted.

I had no desire to leave. Secretly, I was delighted. But to appease Hakeem—who had promised Catherine he would bring me back to the lobby where she was waiting—I agreed. I grabbed my coat and followed him. From afar, I could hear my lovely girlfriend hurling insults. When I appeared in the doorway, she fell silent. She refused to give me more importance than I deserved.

Catherine took me by the arm, pulled me aside, and told me I had behaved like a real bastard. She understood why, but urged me to be patient with her sister. I had to understand her.

"What she did tonight wasn't right, but she doesn't really realize it. She's young, Dieudonné. All this attention is going to her head. You need to be there for her instead of running off and being a scoundrel somewhere else."

Vanessa burst in, cutting her off.

"What are you telling him? They're all the same. They're all jerks. Catherine, don't waste your time talking to this jerk!"

The tone escalated. I wanted to snap back, but Hakeem was already on me. He knew that when Vanessa and I argued, we terrified everyone around us. I followed my friend's calm instructions as Catherine, Hayet, Vanessa, and I piled into the taxi Hayet had finally managed to flag down.

Around three in the morning, unable to sleep, Catherine came into the living room where I was watching TV and started talking. We spoke about her family, her ex-boyfriend, her dreams, her aspirations. She asked me to help untangle her hair so she could braid it. I obliged, amused by the weight and texture of her thick hair. I even offered to braid it myself. She showed me how, and once I got the rhythm, we resumed our conversation. Just as I found myself telling her I wished her sister were more like her, Hayet crossed the living room on her way to the kitchen for a glass of water.

The next morning, a slap jolted me awake on the couch. I sprang up, ready to fight. This time, I was accused of conspiring with her sister behind her back. Vanessa claimed she had always known I wanted Catherine. She had seen it in my eyes—especially when I had walked into the bedroom the night before. I held her back as best I could; she was capable of making me bleed. Hearing the commotion, Catherine rushed in. Vanessa had only one thing left to say:

"Last night you were combing my sister's hair, and you think that's normal? You never do anything for me."

She was making a fool of herself. Her sister was already laughing at the absurdity of the scene. Only Hayet could have told on us. Releasing my grip, I told Vanessa I was convinced she didn't love me—that she had deliberately provoked me the night before. We needed to

talk about all of it. She began to cry, and at last the mask slipped. Sitting back on her heels, she insisted she had always loved me. But for her, love was supposed to be the most devastating experience imaginable. She only had to look at her mother to believe that.

"To love is to lose yourself," she said. "It's giving up too much of the little power you have."

"To hell with all those theories, Vanessa. You have to give yourself completely, without limits or restrictions. It's fear that destroys us."

I was speaking of something I didn't understand. I couldn't even say *I love you* to my own mother.

The next day, Hakeem arrived late in the morning. He wanted to take us to his friends' house to celebrate Christmas. Vanessa wasn't feeling well, and frankly, neither was I. He had borrowed a car and assured us that Catherine and Hayet would be in good hands. He would bring them back the next morning. It was time for them to go out and party like there was no tomorrow.

Vanessa and I lay on the small bed for a long time, wordless, one draped over the other. The silence soothed us. We were so afraid of breaking the fragile magic of that peaceful moment that we stayed there doing nothing, saying nothing, until the phone rang two hours later. It was my mother, my sister, my brothers, my grandmother—the whole family calling from the Caribbean to wish us a Merry Christmas.

The next day, Hayet and Catherine didn't get up until four in the afternoon. According to Hakeem, it had been a wild night. In a single evening, they had released the stress of an entire year. The rest of the week passed without incident. We spent our time visiting museums and wandering through London. Hakeem had already returned to his job at the post office, and Vanessa was back at work. I spent my days accompanying Catherine and Hayet through the shops where they spent their last pennies.

Catherine was the first to leave. She preferred taking a taxi to Heathrow rather than the subway. The next day, it was Hayet's turn. She chose the train. Vanessa and I accompanied her to the station. She wished us well, touching our hearts as she always did. It was then that I felt Vanessa's fingers searching for mine. I held them tightly until Hayet disappeared into the crowd. Then I let go, carelessly.

Vanessa's gaze darkened, filled with an unspeakable pain. I couldn't accept that gesture of tenderness.

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Two weeks later, the ringing of the phone shattered a long, blissful silence. I woke with a start, groped in the dark, pulled back the curtains, picked up the receiver—and heard the familiar click of an overseas call.

"Dieudonné! It's Mom. Well… (sigh) Grandma is gone."

"What? Nooo! You're joking!"

"Be strong, dear."

I had to move quickly—book a flight, notify my employer, and smother the grief rising in my chest. The trip felt endless. I landed in Guadeloupe around seven in the evening. Without ceremony, Cousin Eric and his girlfriend picked me up at the airport in his brand-new Land Rover. On the drive to Basse-Terre, we talked about the circumstances of our grandmother's death.

Around eight, I arrived in Carmel, just across from the family home. Men and women—most of them gray-haired—were gathered in the street, waiting patiently for their turn to enter the hallway and pay their last respects.

At the foot of the house, a few visitors recognized me and called out. Madame Monboudin, her eldest daughter, and a friend greeted me with warm smiles. When my mother's evening classes kept her away during my early childhood, it was at their house—playing for hours with her youngest daughter—that I first discovered friendship. Madame Monboudin and my mother had been colleagues, friends, mentors, and protégées to one another. I had adored this graceful woman. In my childhood, she had shown me nothing but kindness. I admired her strength, her steadiness, everything she represented during my most vulnerable years. Ebony-skinned, self-assured, she embodied Africa as I imagined it.

Seeing her again after so many years—despite the circumstances—I couldn't contain my joy. I kissed her, greeted her daughter and her friend, and kept her in my arms a moment longer. I accepted her condolences and stammered a few clumsy words about my life, trying to express what she had meant to me. Then, without thinking, I said:

"When I was little, I saw you as a strong African woman, a woman of—"

She cut me off before I could finish. Deeply disturbed, she interrupted me sharply:

"An African woman! *Ti gason oh!*" Then she continued, her voice tightening. "Your grandmother was

so angry when you were born. She didn't want you in her family. And…"

I was taken aback by the sudden turn the conversation had taken. She grew increasingly agitated, drawing curious glances. Her daughter and friend had to hold her back and pull her away from me. Stunned, I could no longer make sense of her or her words.

I heard myself reply mechanically that my grandmother had always loved me, that I didn't understand why she was saying such things. I had only wanted to show her the respect and affection I felt for her. At first, I couldn't grasp her reaction—but then it dawned on me. I had caused this incident myself. How could I have forgotten the complicated feelings so many people here carried toward Africa? Taught to despise themselves, some could not bear the comparison. And how could she have forgotten who I was?

I knew Grandfather Toupatou had never accepted this African addition to the family. His evasive glances had confirmed my intuition. In his eyes, my father was ugly and despicable. But never in my grandmother's.

Religion had been the center of Mémé's life. She rose early every morning, always at the same hour, and went to bed just as early. Her routine never wavered. She thanked God for more than an hour at dawn and again for more than an hour before sleep. During the day, she recited her rosary tirelessly. The cross was the focal point

of her room. She would bid farewell with the familiar Guadeloupean blessing, "See you tomorrow, God willing." I still have her cross.

Grandma was patient, diligent, and attentive. Nothing escaped her: not the growling of an empty stomach, nor a hint of frustration on the face of a spoiled child. She was considerate to a fault. She made sure everything went smoothly for everyone. She doted on us, her grandkids. Time and again, we escaped reprimands thanks to Grandma, who was quick to rectify our mistakes. We loved her madly. To know her was to love her. She tried to teach us only one thing: the meaning of love.

She made time for her grandchildren, wiped their tears, brought joy, and restored calm to troubled minds. No one could ignore her presence, even though she often tried to make it invisible. It would have been easy to underestimate her—but that would have been a grave mistake. She carried within her a powerful message.

To watch her in silence was to learn the true meaning of giving. Grandma embodied what we needed to become if we wished to endure. Her story was one of love nourished by hatred, a triumph forged in contempt for the spittle of men, a slap in the face of human stupidity.

The house was overflowing with people, and I struggled to locate my family in the crowd. In the garden, the men drank ti-punch and spoke in hushed voices, as if afraid to wake the dead. In the hallway and on the stairs,

all the way up to the first floor, people moved constantly, coming and going. At last, upstairs, I found them—my aunt, my mother, my sister, my uncles, my cousins, my brothers.

After hugs and kisses, my mother pulled me by the arm into the funeral hall. There, seated along the walls, women close to my grandmother kept vigil, prayed, and recited long rosaries with a contrite and attentive air. In the center of the large room lay the massive coffin covered with thick glass that preserved the air conditioning circulating inside.

With hesitant, labored steps, I let myself be pulled toward the head of the frightening coffin. My blurred eyes no longer recognized the person, serene but severe, who, in an imperturbable sleep, greeted me with her silence. She was frail, as if shrunken, and no longer resembled my grandmother, but I knew better... And that's why, without warning, rebellious tears started stinging my eyes, and the tension in the silent body became unbearable. I ran away to hide my emotion despite my mother's protests.

Grandma was the most generous woman I had ever known. She lavished a thousand favors and other kindnesses on all those who gave her the time and opportunity to do it. My Mémé was a tall, slender, refined, quick-witted, gentle, though at times bossy, black lady whom people came from far and wide to visit to

obtain a thousand and one things. She was loved, not only by her children and grandchildren, but by all the people she had personally touched and helped.

The journey back was long, very long. Despite myself, my mind wandered and brought back memories of events I would have preferred to forget, like the story my brother Jo had recounted.

"What was going on? What was that strange noise coming from the kitchen? Could it be one of those mice we had tried so many times to exterminate?"

Grandma was worried because she didn't want the noise to wake up the household.

"But a mouse couldn't lift lids and make cutlery clatter."

Yes, it was indeed the sound of cutlery and lids that she had just heard. She sat up, dropped her rosary and Bible on the bed, and rushed to the kitchen. In the dim light, she saw a figure twice her size who called out to her:

"Grandma. How are you? I hope that..."

"Young man!" she interrupted. "What are you doing here? How did you get into this house?"

"Grandma, it's me!"

"Who's me?"

"It's me, Jo."

Grandma burst out laughing mockingly, as if to say, "You can't fool me."

“Listen. Hurry up and help yourself, then get out of here before someone else sees you. Otherwise, there'll be trouble!”

Jo refrained from laughing in her face, realizing his grandmother hadn't recognized him and had mistaken him for a thief. It happened from time to time because of this damn Alzheimer's. Pretending to leave the house, he hurried back to his room.

My thoughts were automatic and tyrannical. I couldn't wait for the plane to land.

When you looked at my people, you had the impression that their culture sprang almost entirely from their suffering. A suffering born of ignorance, of a refusal—or an inability—to learn from the past and rebel against it. A suffering that had never been healed, that had shaped their gestures, their silences, their way of walking through the world. A suffering that had carved out its own aesthetic, raw and unmistakable. A suffering that fed on itself, generation after generation, becoming both inheritance and curse.

My aunt looked me straight in the eye before asking bluntly, “Why haven't you made something of your life yet?”

The question shocked and depressed me at the same time. How could she forget my culture, the one I wanted to hide behind? How could she expect more from me? I was doing my best to survive. That question cast a chill

over everything. No one, not even my family, had taught me how to be someone in the world. I only had my mother's shoulder to lean on, but too many people were already leaning on it. I only had needs. Things were really not going well!

Between wakefulness and drowsiness, my restless mind, in that slow plane, carried me even further into a repressed part of my memory.

I grew up in a world created for and by abuse, an island where almost everyone was the product of abuse. We were often abused, abusers, or both at the same time. Sometimes even disillusioned. A world of verbal, emotional, physical, political violence, and I'm forgetting some. A world whose brutal culture celebrated the sexual subjugation of one another, where children were seen but rarely heard, where the stupidity of men crushed the weakness of women, where prowess in bed counterbalanced any feelings of inadequacy.

Martin, a wizened coolie, all long and shriveled by the hardships of deprivation, as rickety as the miserable shack that sheltered his brittle bones, used to walk past the little Carmel nursery school at recess with his bucket filled to the brim with water. We always waited for him. Bombarding him with homophobic insults had become our favorite activity during our short recess. We would all shout in unison, "Martin, makoumè-la." He seemed to willingly play along. Bending down, pretending to pick

up a stone or a stick to throw at us, he would send us running in all directions. Then we would start all over again under the amused gaze of our teachers. The repetition of his mimed threats and our frantic running around got our blood pumping and triggered fits of laughter tinged with fear. The goal was not to get caught by the "makoumè."

Quickly bored by this daily dance, he would exaggerate his feminine mannerisms, slap his buttocks, and run away as fast as his overflowing bucket would allow him. We were afraid of Martin, but it was a fear that did not belong to us. It was taught, the fear of our elders, a fear ingrained in the definition of our culture. Martin was one of those people in our midst we had been taught to keep quiet about.

The plane seemed to be hovering, and I found myself thinking back to all the events that had marked my impressionable youth.

***

I first met Jeff in 1985, at the Gerville-Réache High School in Basse-Terre. It took me no time at all to realize he wasn't like the other students. You only had to look at him. He wore long shirts that brushed his knees and ripped jeans—years before that look became fashionable. His hair was styled in a way I could only describe as… eccentric. A jherry curl, or something close enough. His long, glossy strands made the gossips in the lower part of town green with envy.

He reminded me of a young artist I had just discovered: Prince. He looked exactly like the Prince on the cover of "I Wanna Be Your Lover," right in the middle of that era of long, straightened hair and scandalously tight briefs. Even his complexion and features echoed the singer's feline beauty.

He often sat in front of the high school, right by the entrance of a small snack bar always buzzing with student chatter. There he would be, cross-legged, surrounded by his disciples—what else could I call them? In the middle of a captivated circle, he delivered lectures,

remaking the world with grandiose phrases that echoed in the empty heads of the mulatto and white bourgeois boys who served as his sounding board. Saint-Claude and Ducharmoy were still strongholds for these exotic Europeans.

As I passed by, I watched—like everyone else—the great sapodilla-skinned guru teaching street knowledge and the virtues of bastardization to the so-called "thinking youth" of the heights of Saint-Claude. He didn't shock me; he amused me. His sweeping gestures, his theatrical outbursts, his flamboyant attire made him look like a skilled manipulator of weak minds. He was an original, no doubt. And how could he have shocked me? Wasn't I one myself? He resembled a sanitized version of all the visionaries with whom I already routinely wasted my time.

In truth, I had no desire to know him. I was simply glad he existed. His presence drew attention away from me, finally freeing me from the insistent stares of onlookers and professional busybodies. I had my small circle of friends, with whom I shared hardships, joys, and the occasional honor. And I had an expandable network of soul brothers who lived fast, partied hard, and stole whenever the urge struck. We were self-sufficient. We were the installment-plan babies, the fatherless, the ones happiness had forgotten—the offspring of an impossible assimilation, its most visible casualties.

An evening like any other, as I was casually making my way to join the procession of victims of boredom at the Champ d'Arbaud —the psychedelic playground of so many teenage veterans—I saw Robert appear, flanked by a gaunt Jeff with feverish eyes. Their sudden presence violated the fragile tranquility I had been cultivating. The sight of them irritated me. They made me uneasy, as if they had trespassed into a space I had never invited them to enter. I changed direction the moment I spotted them. What could they possibly want from me? I didn't care to know. The sun was setting, and all I wanted was to light my dream box…

They quickened their pace and caught up with me easily. Hadn't I already warned that Black boy from the volcanic hills of Saint-Claude not to bring strangers to my place?

There was no doubt: they were heading straight for my home—the little wooden shack beside the large family house. Robert introduced Jeff, who looked at me with the desperate hope of someone expecting a miracle. He wanted me to point him toward a public poisoner who could sell him something to soothe his youthful anxieties.

We were all crazy enough, desperate enough, or idle enough—take your pick—to devote ourselves to Saint Mary Jane, mother of all debilitating euphoria, with the fervor of true believers.

Despite my supposed ignorance of whatever they were discussing, I could already tell there was no escaping these two human carcasses. I lit one of the two spliffs I had and left it with them. No sooner had I turned my back than the agoulou-gran-fal planted his hand on my already exasperated shoulder. He complained about my offering and demanded a taste of what I had kept for myself. Clearly, he expected special treatment. He had the nerve of someone who had lived abroad too long—or rather, as my curly-haired Gallic neighbor liked to say, in the mother country.

I granted his request. The African in me still wore his heart on his sleeve.

The Colombian weed erased a handful of his brain cells, and the master of empty rhetoric grinned, showing all his teeth, yellowed by coffee and smokable poisons. He was a connoisseur, and I had always bowed to connoisseurs.

The next day at school, through my cheap sunglasses, I saw his silhouette waving enthusiastically at me—a greeting that irritated me more than it should have. The night before, he had shared nothing more than a vulgar spliff with me, and already he was losing his senses. For him, it seemed essential that we become friends.

Later that week, he even ventured into the shack I called my sanctuary from the cemented world of adults.

He came bearing the poisoned fruits of his nocturnal hunts, eager to share them with me.

The geezer wasn't without charm, and it was obvious he had no real grasp of the island's customs. By abandoning his dreary surroundings and the stiff formality of Saint-Claude, he was exposing himself to the worst assaults of a savagely grainy negritude. He also found, in me, a sympathetic ear willing to receive his rock music, his anarchist theories, his hopes, and his anxieties.

The Vieux-Fort lighthouse became our meeting point. There, we would stare at the horizon until our eyes blurred, dreaming of the adventures waiting for us somewhere—anywhere—else. Jeff had taken to picking me up in the evenings in his father's Toyota, which he borrowed once the old man returned from work. We would cruise around town, searching for one or two friends to join our nightly escapades. Around six, the town would fall silent, while we were only just beginning to wake up.

There were no cultural centers, no gyms, no playgrounds. We had to invent our own spaces for freedom, leisure, and expression—far from the suffocating world of adults. Our imagination was choking in that narrow environment. Our loud boredom was met with their indifference.

We fought to keep our cool, to preserve our mental balance; that was what mattered most. We hated feeling

like rats trapped in a tiny cage. That exhausting emotion blinded us to the beauty surrounding us.

Jeff carried a rage that his cynicism barely concealed, yet he was quick to smile. You could easily mistake him for someone kind. But he bore a deep wound, and perhaps that was why he wanted to wound the world in return. Shuttled from one boarding school to another, deprived of family warmth during the week, abandoned to the indifference of strangers responsible for his education in Alsace, he had learned early the insignificance of his people—absent from every discussion, every textbook.

Body and soul, he had endured the brutality born of envy and resentment. Keeping his cool was all that mattered. Inside him, a volcano simmered, filled with frustrations and borrowed resentments he had made his own. To release the pressure, he had to flee forward. We all did.

Jeff had been dead in my mind long before his body followed. He died spiritually the day he whispered into the ear of one of our white buddies, thinking I wouldn't hear:

"I wish I had long blond hair and blue eyes. Like you."

He died physically a few days later, around three in the morning, driving home alone after celebrating his imminent departure—his anticipated escape to his idealized mother country, France—on a cocktail of

cannabis and too much booze. None of his friends mourned his physical death. We forbade ourselves to. I chose to remain an incorrigible Negro. Assimilation had never been my thing. I tolerated that it might have been his, because he was as mad as any colonized soul trapped in a mental asylum. But I was not about to glorify aberration or further self-destructive stupidity.

We belonged to a whole generation of distressed youth slowly committing suicide. No jobs, no money, no hope, in a country possessed by greed and the worship of material possessions. A frenzied consumer society producing nothing but superfluous goods. Our misery—hidden beneath coconut trees and the glossy veneer of mortgaged abundance—resurfaced at the slightest heartfelt phrase.

I smoke; therefore, I am. We smoked to feel alive. We wrestled with death to stake a claim to a better life. It was a cry of agony. To others—the so-called normal people—we were gaping, incurable wounds their propriety sought to ward off, erase, deny. To ourselves, we were unimportant, insignificant beings drifting from day to day, sometimes attending school without the slightest conviction. We were the Negroes of this Black society which, eager for respectability, rushed to deny us—the very symptoms of its madness. I lost comrades whom no one could see or hear in this futile cultural race toward

self-annihilation. Some ended up in the asylum, others in the cemetery.

I remember a young man who had recently graduated from art school. Drawn by the wheezing coughs of two teenagers, he approached at his own peril, sniffed, and finally sat down to tell my friend Nino and me how harmful it was to consume so many poisons. We listened from somewhere above cloud nine, because although he had no obligation to care, he approached without fear, hoping to offer us a dialogue he believed might help. He spoke well, and he had intellectual riches to share with our sick world. But he too, having lost hope, eventually joined our ranks and sought refuge in our madness. The assaults of a society sick with its own color problem broke him. Despite all his degrees, he became the most cultured tramp in the Basse-Terre region.

Back in London, I felt an urgent need to take my mind off things, to do something powerful enough to distance myself from this past that caused me so much pain. Without realizing it, I had already come a long way.

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It was settled: I would go to the Brixton Mosque. I didn't know exactly where it was, but I was determined to find it. The bus crawled through neighborhoods where luxury and poverty stood side by side, each flaunting itself without shame. A ride that should have been quick stretched endlessly under the tyranny of a demagogic driver.

Vanessa had no idea. She'd noticed the stack of books on Islam accumulating at home, but she chalked it up to my incurable curiosity. Had she known the truth, she would have protested at full volume.

Brixton was overflowing with life. Yams passed from hand to hand. Color-splashed trinkets colonized every inch of sidewalk. Jehovah's Witnesses streamed back from their temples. Rastas sold incense, coconut water, and objects drenched in green, yellow, and red—yellow for the gold stolen from us, green for the land plundered, red for the blood spilled. Calypso music pulsed from every direction. Drunken homeless men flailed their arms as if trying to gather themselves for a fleeting

second. Police officers hovered, wary of a crowd whose exuberance could tip into chaos at any moment.

I knew exactly where to look for the information I needed: the Afrocentric center. Tarik, a Bermudan and the unofficial archivist of the Black world, would know. His shop on Coldharbour Lane—shared with a tiny African art gallery—smelled of Africa, just like everything about him. Before he could afford that space, he sold books from a folding table on the street. If you wanted anything on the Black world, he had either read it, owned it, or could get it faster than anyone else.

The mosque stood right across from the police station. Impossible to miss. Everyone knew where the police station was; it was the first landmark you learned to locate. The Masjid ibn Taymeeyah, the Salafist mosque, sat on Gresham Road in the heart of Brixton.

I stepped into the oldest mosque in South London—a building that, from the outside, looked more like a derelict tenement than a place of worship. Like everyone else, I headed to the room where we left our shoes. Children trailed behind their mothers into a small carpeted space where they tumbled freely. An older brother dressed in white took my hand and greeted me with a booming "Salam Aleikum." Startled, I answered,

"Thank you!"

He told me where to find the Imam. Upstairs, in a secluded room, I found him bent over a large book covered in Arabic script. The intensity of his gaze warmed me instantly. He was in his forties, present, imposing. His unblemished black skin glowed with health and meticulous care. A thin mouth, fixed in a kind of permanent grimace, somehow revealed an inner serenity. His smooth, unmistakable voice betrayed his Jamaican origins. How could the Imam be Jamaican? Then again, most of the people here were probably Caribbean as well. I spotted a few Pakistanis, Turks, English, and Africans scattered about, but the mosque was filled mainly with English-speaking Caribbean youth. They had turned away from their parents' religion in an attempt to reclaim what they believed to be their true heritage. They knew that many Africans enslaved in the Americas had long been Islamized in West Africa by the empires of Mali, Ghana, and Songhay. More than forty thousand Caribbean people had converted to Islam—soon I would be one of them.

We wanted to break from the patterns of self-hate imposed by Christianity. It wasn't a war; it was a distancing. I was searching for myself. I wasn't seeking belonging so much as something that would accept me fully. A different narrative. Extremism was incompatible with my upbringing in democracy and sensuality.

I didn't want to see the West buried; I wanted to see it opened, stripped of its lethal barbarism. I was a Westerner too. My life had only made sense within the West; I was its creation. Islam was another flight forward—a way to escape the pain of oppression, a step toward myself.

The Imam delivered a long discourse about the Prophet, slavery, and economic and racial oppression. He explained the pillars of Islam and urged me to reconsider, to be certain I was choosing freely. But there was nothing to reconsider. I wanted to break with the past. I was ready to proclaim the oneness of Allah, and that is exactly what I did once my ablutions were complete.

In the large hall, the prayer was brief. Long, firm arms embraced me. In an instant, I became the brother of a multitude of strangers. A generous hand offered me a beautiful, brand-new Qur'an adorned with gold lettering, a gift from Saudi Arabia. Much later, I would learn that this mosque had been frequented by Zacarias Moussaoui, Richard Reid—the shoe-bomber—and Abdullah El-Faisal.

***

Vanessa looked at me with suspicion—almost with fear. She no longer understood me and began anticipating my reactions through the clichés circulating about Muslims. She projected onto me ambitions of domination I did not possess. Above all, she feared I would try to convert her. From that moment on, she bought only pork. I had never eaten much of it, and giving it up entirely cost me nothing. She roasted it daily, deliberately, just to provoke me. She even began buying alcohol, insisting it was "good to have something to offer visitors." She never drank, nor did Vidia. It was obvious she was doing everything she could to undermine my new resolutions. I suspected as much.

She refused my sexual advances on the grounds that Muslims were forbidden to have sex outside marriage. She seized every opportunity to mock me. Beneath the teasing, though, her distress was real. I was willing to marry her, to be in good standing with Allah, but she needed to understand that I would no longer tolerate the disrespect she had shown me in the past. I promised to

hold myself to the same standard. She refused categorically.

"When you come to your senses," she said, "we'll talk about it again."

***

I was heading back to France on vacation—without Vanessa. Hakeem was coming with me. He too needed a break. He had never seen Paris; for him, it was a pilgrimage. *See Paris and die.* For me, the trip felt like an admission of failure.

Everything began smoothly. Businessmen elbowed their way through customs. The officer examined our passports with maddening slowness—an English passport and a French one. He flipped through the pages again and again, pausing to stare at us with growing suspicion. My irritation rose; I was on the verge of complaining when he finally waved us through.

In Créteil, my friends, brothers, and cousins welcomed Hakeem and me with explosive joy. They were right: life had to be lived fully. Hakeem visited every monument he had dreamed of. We attended all the parties thrown in our honor. He was ecstatic. Swept up in the frenzy, I decided I would not return to London. He would go back alone.

***

A week later, I felt an unexpected urge to travel to the United States. In the corridors of my old university, I ran into a friend who told me that our department was looking to send someone as a lecturer to a newly twinned private college. She had just returned from there.

"This position," she said, "would be perfect for you. You could finish your doctoral research under excellent conditions."

All I had to do was speak with my former professor, Mrs. Rivière. We had always been fond of each other. She insisted on knowing how I was doing, what I was working on, whether I was taking care of myself. The old lady was delighted to see me after so many years—and even more delighted that I was interested in the new opportunity. She promised to keep me informed. Her kindness and the good grades she had given me had shaped our relationship from the start.

Then I headed to the office of Mrs. Colombe. She had never left much of an impression on me, but her field—American trade unionism—had always intrigued me. I had followed her research back then and found it dull,

much like her. Yet there I was, three years later, walking down the hallway toward her office with an odd sense of foreboding.

As I approached, I heard raised voices—agitated, profane—words that had no place in this sanctified academic space. When we swore here, we did so under our breath. Suddenly, a young Frenchman with a booming voice burst out of her office as if shoved. The venom in his eyes was fixed on the small, rigid figure of Mrs. Colombe, who stood waiting anxiously for security. I froze. Her stern presence did nothing to stop the torrent of insults he hurled at her before he was dragged away.

What had happened? What had I just witnessed? Should I be worried? From what I gathered, after five years of doctoral work, she had screwed over this poor devil without him ever understanding why. Slowly, she turned her attention to me.

My chest tightened. I should have run. I had heard stories about her. I knew she was a radical feminist—that was partly why I had come. She was different, part of the resistance to the established order. But now, standing before her, I felt fear.

She invited me in, asked me to sit, and began questioning me about the thesis I wanted to write. Our exchange was frank, stripped of pretense. I answered directly.

Then, with a smug little smile, she asked:

"Why should I accept you as a student?"

The question blindsided me. Panic surged. I hadn't considered the possibility of rejection.

"Fine," I said. "If you don't want to supervise me, I'll change universities. That's all."

I stood to leave.

"Wait a moment, young man. I didn't say no." She looked almost offended. "You young people are so brash these days. I find your topic very interesting. Let's discuss it further."

I didn't know whether to rejoice or tremble.

Early the next morning, Mrs. Rivière called. She had negotiated my stay at the private college in the United States for a full year and wanted to know when I could come sign the contract. I thanked her profusely and began preparing. I had no money, but it didn't matter.

I was going to the United States.

***

I already knew a little about the United States. I had been there twice before, working summers through an exchange program. The first time, I was overwhelmed by the sheer scale of everything. Everything was big—the people, the cars, the buildings. The country itself seemed to expand in every direction.

This time, a small loan from the Crédit Lyonnais made the trip possible. I had no idea how I would repay it, only that somehow the money would find its way back. With a group of ten French students who had flown with me from Paris, I set out to wander New York in search of something to eat. After dropping our bags at the hotel, we headed to Grand Central Station. Above the entrance to a cowboy-hat shop hung a gigantic bison skull.

As I pointed it out, a commanding voice cut through our amazement.

"Hey, you! Come over here."

A cop, practically foaming at the mouth, strode toward me, eyes blazing. He demanded to see my ID. After a cursory glance, he tossed my passport to the ground, grabbed his handcuffs, and shoved me. In English made clumsy by anxiety, I asked why he was treating me this way. According to him, a tall Black man matching my description had just robbed tourists. He was wearing the same T-shirt as me. Mine read *Université de Paris Sorbonne.*

No one dared intervene. I was the only one resisting this arbitrary arrest. The cop added that my passport was fake. At that moment, the bravest among my companions—a short White man—lost his temper. In terrible English, he explained to the cowboy that we had all arrived together at JFK less than three hours earlier. Including me. That we came from the same university.

And that it was not unusual for some French people to have skin as dark as mine. Given the circumstances, I accepted—without protest—that I too was French.

Confused and suddenly speechless, John Wayne holstered his handcuffs and walked away without another word. I had narrowly escaped disaster. In France at the time, I would have endured six police identity checks on my way to the Pompidou Center. But there, the assumption was always that I was not at home. In New York, I was almost arrested because a cop thought the opposite. He saw me as a native.

That thought made me piss myself.

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