

TRACE ELEMENTS

by

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B.A., Wesleyan University, 1996

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Trace Elements
written by Cathy Theresa Thomas
has been approved for the Department of English

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
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ABSTRACT

Thomas, Cathy Theresa (MFA, Creative Writing, Department of English)

Trace Elements

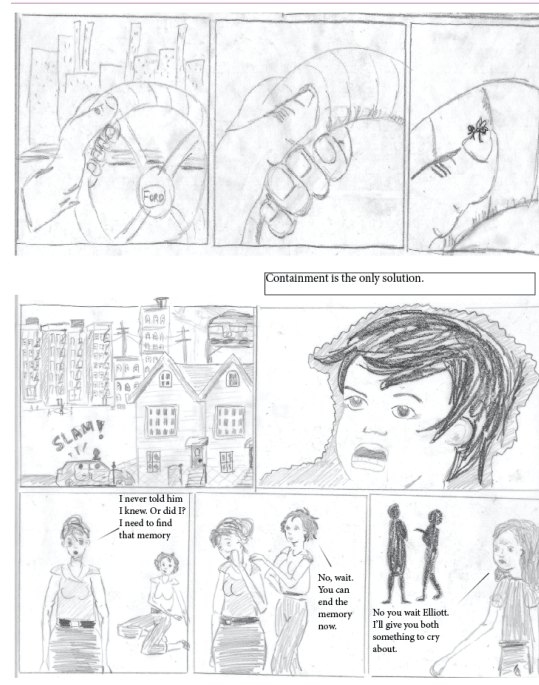
(an Automnemographia)

Thesis directed by Professor Marcia Douglas

Leona James wants to remember her life before she dies, and after others have written about her. Now in her nineties, her personal life is a negative space set around amassed praise and awards that emerge from a scientific discovery she made in her twenties. Old age compels Leona to (re)trace her life with a process called PreEmpt (Premortis Extractable Mnemonic Product & Technologies). Their motto is: “How do you want to be remembered?” This narrative woofs and warps past and future leaving the “present” ambiguous as Leona tempers demons. Her first person narration breaks down into a shared space exploited by her two daughters, her grandson, her interviewer and the genetic fly who made her famous. They each blame her for being a “bad mother”. Leona’s figure traverses real and dream landscapes. Whether she is present or absent, the elements, written or drawn, are her domain.

This work is meant to be a mnemonic scrapbook, an artifact where images and text are interdependent. I refer to this work and process as Automnemographia. I define automnemographia as a constructive process in which a subject’s story is a personal message to herself, but requires a graphical representation of that story’s memory in order to chronicle and affirm that experience. Tracing timelines around the contours of one’s non-fiction results in self-invention.

Code switching, image styles and margins disrupt the chronology of her life in 1980s Guyana, 1990s New York, and the progression of cultural estrangement for this Caribbean woman/mother/wife/scientist. To construct this automnemographia suited to my conceptual concerns, I work across styles to create a loose collage combining text, printmaking processes like linoleum cuts, photos, and sketching. This hybrid work lives in the intersection of poetry, prose and comics, specifically, the graphic novel, where memory’s reiteration, erasure and modification over the course of time point back to origin. This is entirely the case in a chapter where I recreate a panel-by-panel version of *The Incredible Hulk*, Issue #1. This 24-page comic demonstrates a kind of self-invention through latent traits: anger. Like the Hulk, Leona is both maker and subject of her world.

[illegible]

DEDICATION

for my family.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a pleasure to thank the many people who made this thesis possible.

It is difficult to overstate my gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Prof. Marcia Douglas. With her enthusiasm, curiosity, inspiration, and many common denominators working in an uncharted form was rewarding and fun. Throughout my thesis-writing period, she provided encouragement, sound advice, good teaching, good company, and many good ideas.

I would like to thank the other members of my thesis committee: William Kuskin for championing comics as scholarship; Jeffrey DeShell for calling me to task with narrative; and, Ruthellen Kocher for being sincerely invested in my attempt to represent the complexity of self through language and image. I am not an artist but my committee was particularly patient and helpful with challenges I faced encouraging me to “embrace my excess” as a thesis is not a manuscript and the manuscript is what is vital for a writer. Onwards!

Thank you to the many people who assisted me in different ways. The administrative staff in the English department of CU Boulder helped three years of graduate study run smoothly. Wayne Winsett of Time Warp Comics allowed me to ‘intern’ and so, spend more time with the Hulk. Lisa Kerns of Red Delicious Press taught me printmaking techniques and I would have been lost without her generosity. Norlin Library’s Special Collections staff deserves special mention for their kind assistance and knowledge.

I am indebted to colleagues, friends and mentors for providing a stimulating and fun environment in which to learn and grow. I am especially grateful to Vivian Liao, Amy McWhorter, and Allison Yabroff for our shared time in the Banerjee Lab, hence the *Drosophila* herein. Stephen Graham Jones, Elisabeth Sheffield, Julie Carr, Sidney Goldfarb, Albert Chong, Noah Eli Gordon, Nunzio DeFilippis, Percival Everett, William Kheel, Awon Atuire, and the bountiful Agnieszka Milchalska for their genius (in which I bask) and for their advice (of which I may or may not have taken). Thank you, anyway.

I wish to acknowledge Pixton.com for the sequential images I was able to generate and trace in order to create many of the panels.

I wish to thank my entire extended family, including Annie Ross, and my siblings Michelle, Barbara, and “Junior” for providing a loving environment for me, and a backdrop for my story. As for environment, this thesis is indebted to the Bronx and Guyana. For their stories about ‘back home’ and witticisms that rival Aesop, I thank my grandparents. For unconditional support, I thank Darianne, Maaza, Tara, Leah, Busi, Alice, Destri, Jamiah, Lena, Kali, Lia, Lee, Michael, Elisabeth, Christine, and Charmaine. For slaying dragons, thank you Matt.

Lastly, and most importantly, I wish to thank my parents, Olda and Kenneth Thomas. They bore me, raised me, supported me, taught me, and loved me. To them I dedicate this thesis and remind them: this is not about our family; it’s fiction...

ELEMENTS

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TRACE ELEMENTS

a re-collection

Leona James, PhD

a re-collection
Leona James, PhD

D

Memory Technology Solutions

Pre-EMPT™

Premortis Extractable Mnemonic Products & Technologies

PRIVACY

Regardless of your offences, our experts free you of responsibility. Your memories are just that: yours.

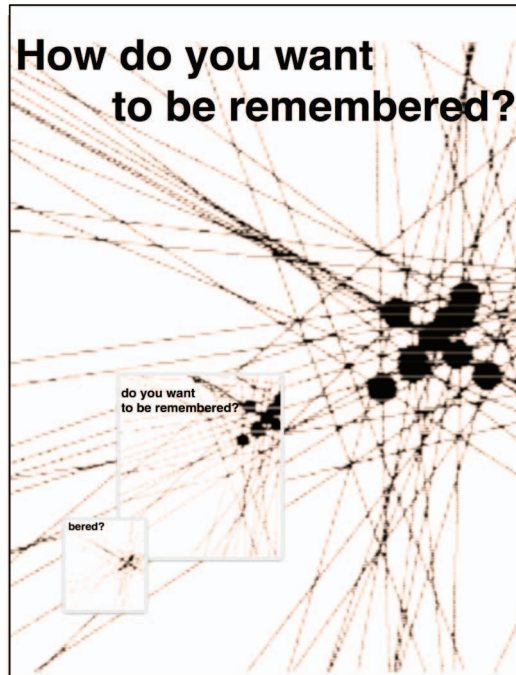
SYNAPSE TRACKING

Memory cells can be tracked, tagged, and portions held. Mal-activity will be pinpointed for erasure, muting, or Signifying®™.

GENOGRAPHIC WELLS

DNA analysis combines with latent, surface, and meta narrative to create a recoverable store of images making your family's genographic well a deeper well.

Pre-Empt is the first name in mnemonic extraction.



Our experts can export graphic and textual assets into the formats compatible with the US Census Bureau, Homeland Security, and Genographic Wells at no extra cost. Pre-EMPT™ is the no#1 recommended extraction technology. We understand that cutting-edge computational and genetic analysis alone cannot uncover a person's lived history. Our field researchers gather three components of data into rich genographic wells for you and your family to recover ad infinitum.

Do not attempt to administer Pre-EMPT on your own.

Do not have Pre-EMPT™ administered if you take nitrates, often prescribed for chest pain or the lump in your throat, as this may cause a sudden, unsafe drop in blood pressure.

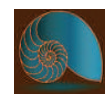
Reading your life requires a kind of artistry.

Gentle and safe, Pre-EMPT™ extracts memories and other desired mnemonic assets with the ease and comfort of an afternoon nap. Staffed with compassionate scientists, our Pre-EMPT™ team can extract mnemonic data for private and public use.

You've lived your life with dignity, now let us help you record it.

Discuss your general health status with our staff to ensure that you are happy enough to engage in memory extraction. If you experience chest pain, lumps in your throat, nausea, irritability, listlessness, or sudden remorse let your Pre-EMPT™ administrator know. Over Signifying™ should be avoided as it leads to distortions in genographic wells. In the rare event of Signifying™ lasting more than 4 hours, seek immediate medical help to avoid long-term re-writing. Re-writing is rare and can be corrected, in most cases. The most common side effects of Pre-EMPT™ is regret, facial flushing, and upsetting dreams. If you over 60 and using Longevity®, the Pre-EMPT™ administrator may start you at the lowest resistance (25 Ohms).

Difficult memories may require higher resistance for truer results.



memory
consulting

TECHNICAL SUPPORT

24 x 7 in all time zones.

ZERO DOWNTIME

In a situation where we lose a synaptic connection, we reload your assets to spur the extraction. Continuous stream

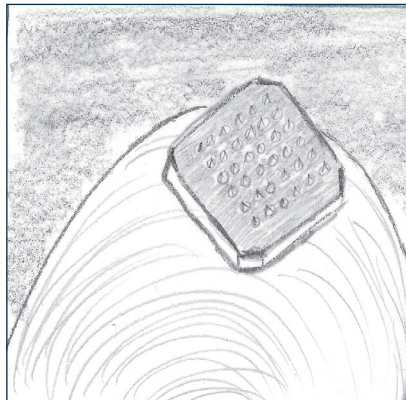
TURNKEY SOLUTIONS

Hand down your life to your future generations. It's how they'll remember you.

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Service Features and Benefits



- Remember, secure, and automatically enter the recesses of your mind for personal or business purposes.
- NEW Gangl-ION technology makes it easy for Pre-EMPT™ administrators to apply microneedle to head, spine, or arm. Our new patented technology does not leave marks.
- Memory-sharing features, INCLUDED
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- Restore declarative and procedural memory free of transitive interference from injury or age. 100% more effective than hypnosis alone.

Subject Requirements

- A normal resting heart rate ranges from 60 to 100 beats a minute. Avoid caffeine for 48 hours before administration.
- Natural sleep state for best extraction results. Do not induce sleep state with narcotics, anxiolytics, or MAIOs.
- Comatose or vegetative mental conditions, results will vary.
- Age (3) three and up. If pregnant, results will vary if fetal resting heart rate is below subject requirements.
- Release sign-off within 48 hours of pre-interview.

SERVICES AVAILABLE

Technical Support

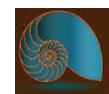
Selective Erasures

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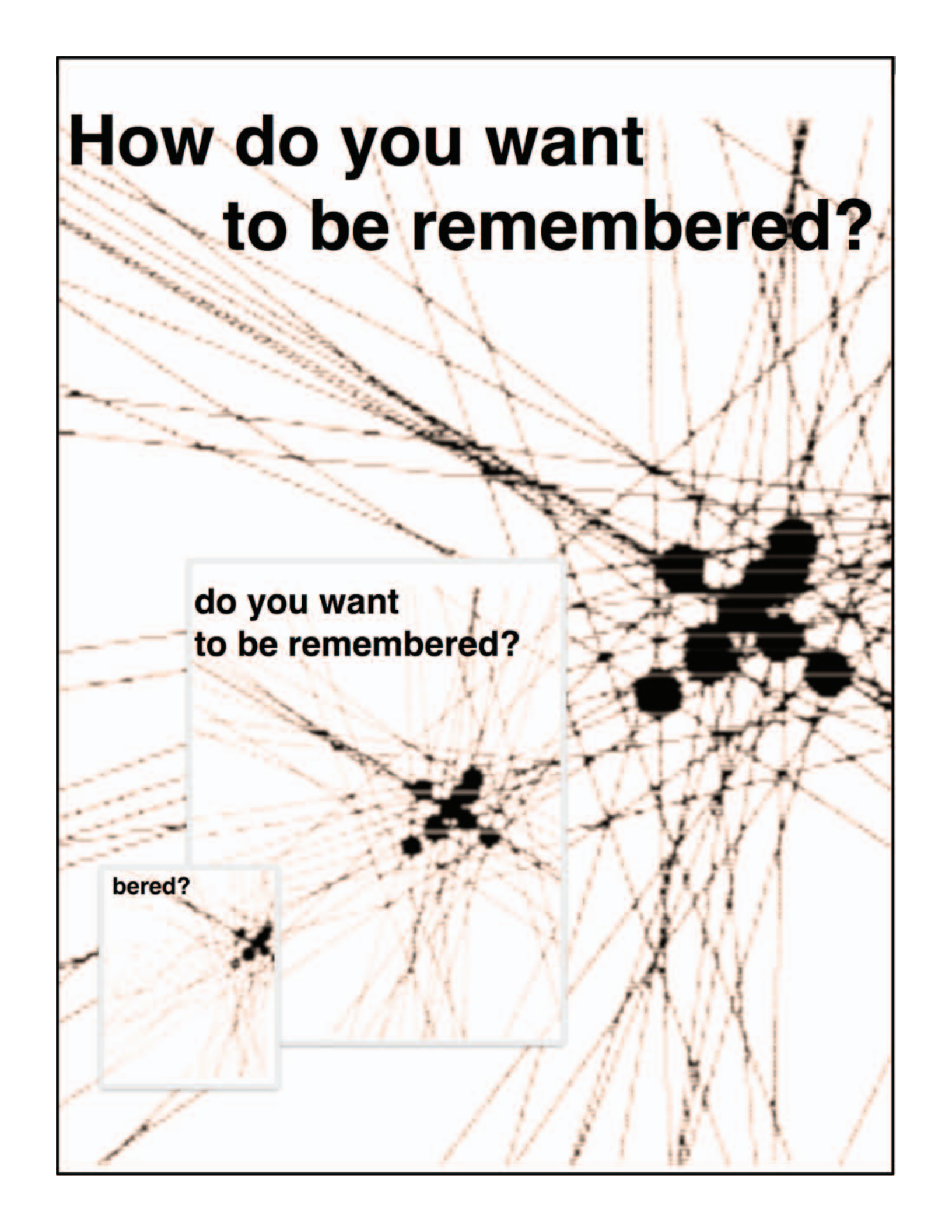
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Contact:



§Erasures must be MD approved. Re-writing is illegal under US Code Title 18,1512



How do you want to be remembered?

**do you want
to be remembered?**

bered?

Dedication

It happens sometimes. A contrary breeze de mek Crow and Eagle sit pun one line. Before de blow off like hollow bone, Eagle say, "Long time gone, short time here." So Crow ah say, "Come, le we go."



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MYTHOS





Reading your life requires a
kind of artistry. Writing it
requires none whatsoever.
When all they want to know
is epiphany this, epiphany
that you--give them
silences.



I'll admit it now. Under my
bark. If that is it, my face,
I don't like dirty tricks.

It comes back to me as



I was counting when I
should have been



asleep and party-free.

Didn't know I could com-
pare



all of these moments are
mime. The voicechanger is
dead and I am one note. A
throat hum on one note.

It comes back to me as



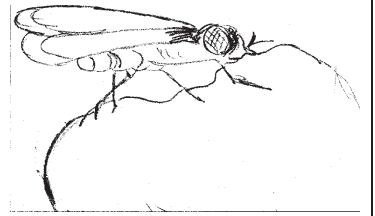
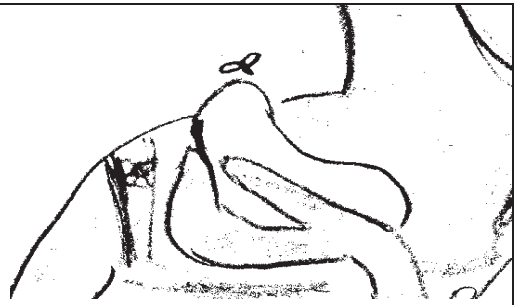
deadpan arms.



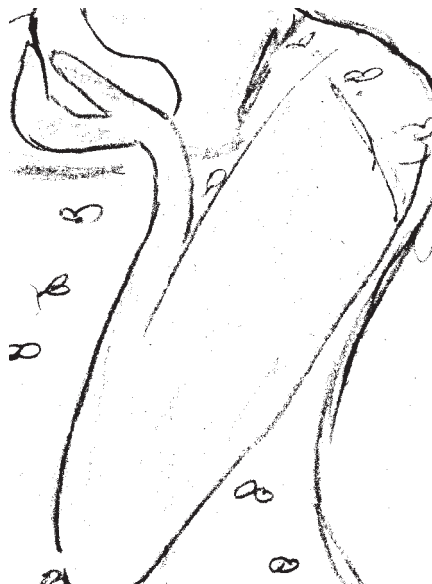
how I imagine, still, the story of when
mommy was pregnant with me and she
ate plenty mangoes. She said pregnancy
made her tongue want for what was old
and mostly bad. She could only stomach
cold food and the taste of near rot fruit.
Mango was the best. The skin so tender
you would only have to bite it and chew it
skin and all.

Arms

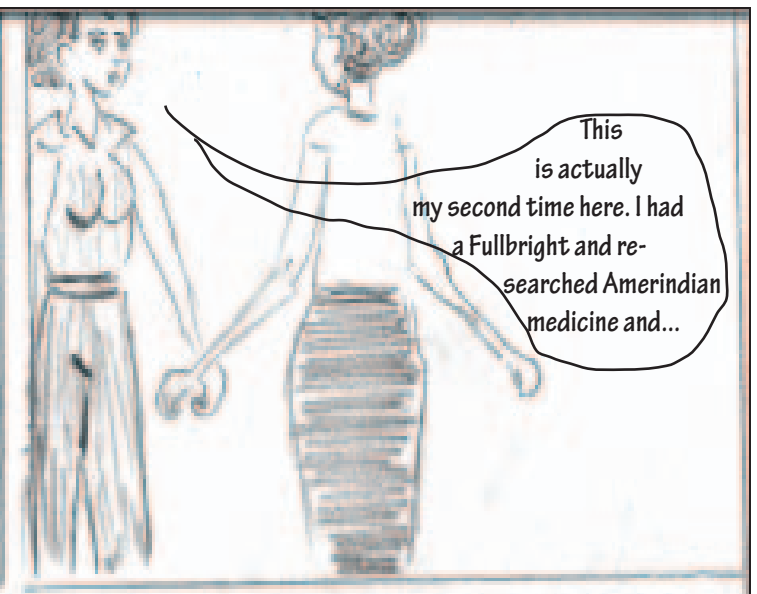
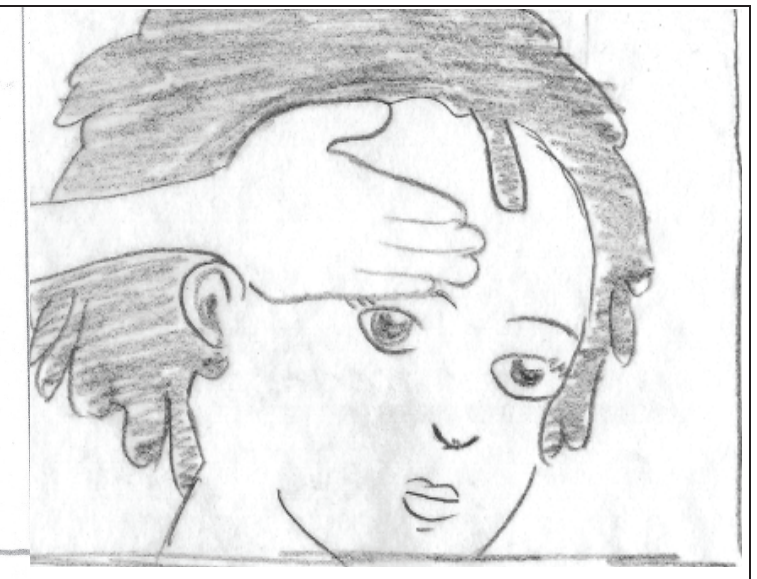
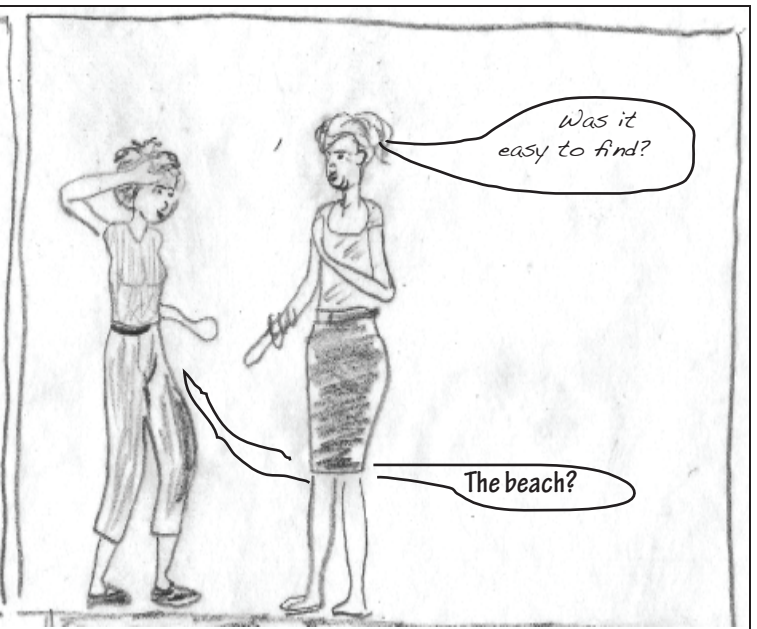
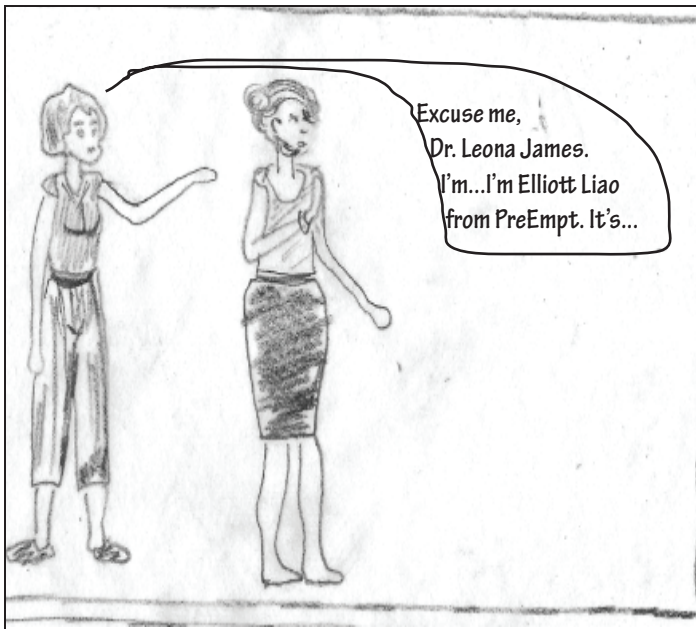
How I imagine the sweet fetid rind falling
on my head. The flies, sweet and sticking
to






a stomach full of motherhood
mythos gets carried in arms






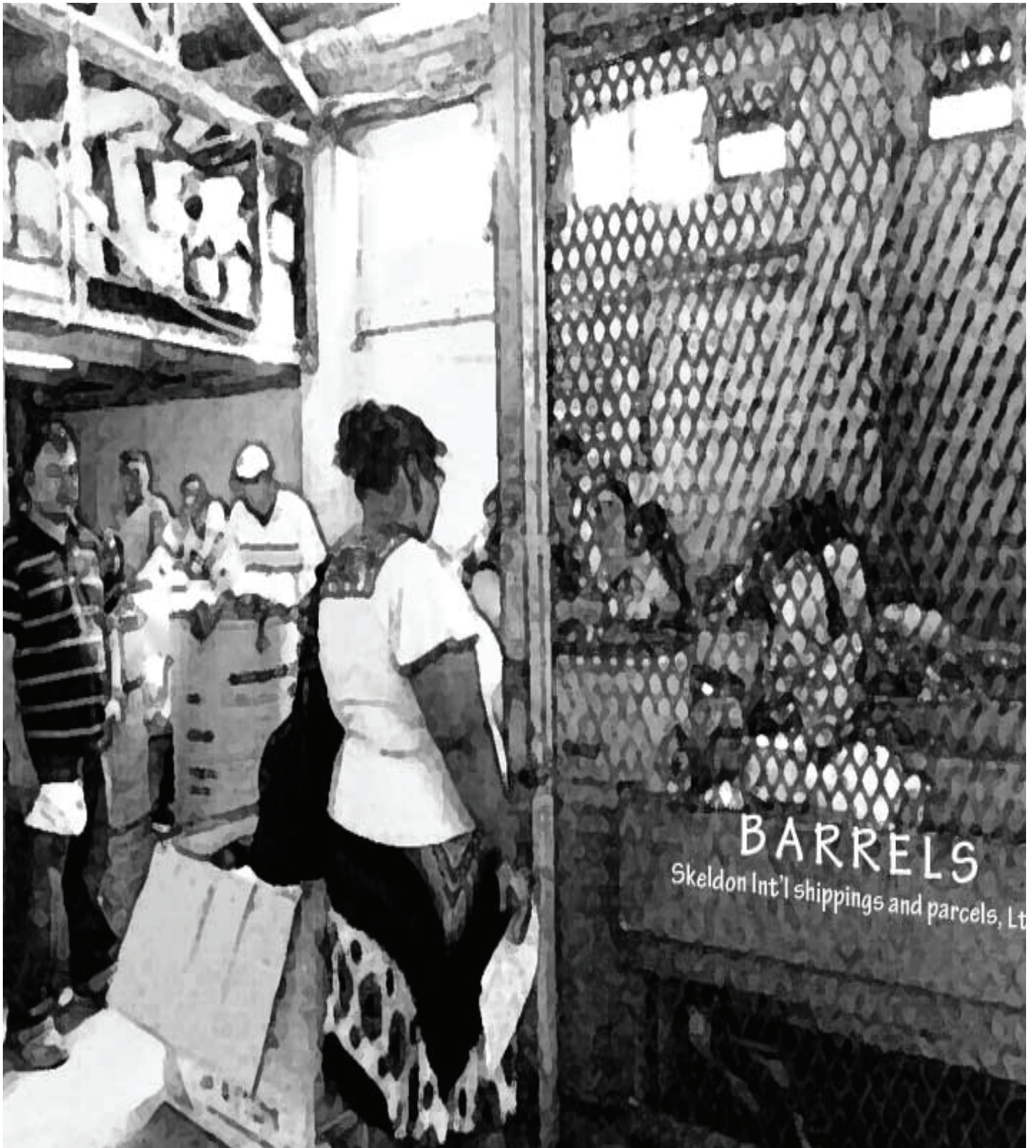


<p>...cultural and biological anthropo-</p> <p>Yes. Yes, I know. You're the Trini girl.</p>		<p>Trinidad 5.131 km² (Tobago 300 km²)</p> <p>Columbus gets lost in 1498 UK independence 1962 A Republic 1976</p> <p>Elliott NeAnn Liao born 2022</p> <p>Tsunami 2031</p> <p>Trinidad 2,695 km² (Tobago 0 km²)</p>
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 <p>We went there for our 10th. Nice beaches. Are you all right?</p>	 <p>Fine, Ms. James. Sun in my eyes.</p>
--	--

...but of course, Ms. Elliott, we can go in the order you prefer.



I can hear de truck drive away but I can't wake.

I stay up all night drawing back the periodic table from memory. Me fuhget xenon. Xenon is represent by "ex-ee". It has atomic weight fifty-two. Xenon is a schtupid ting I mix up with Neon who have atomic weight ten. I am also ten so I remember the number but Miss Seepaul would not know, though. I stew up mi teet, haf sleep. Haf angry. Then, Mommy come in to wake us efficiently since we take for granted the alarm.

I can hear dem children from Alice Ramjohn house. They some bad ones. The oldest one, Dominique, is good wit books, though. Dominique. Dem rest messup bad the Chinee restaurant last Saturday wit a watah hose. Spray watta troo a window and messup one lady plate of chowmein and plantains. Itta shame since they are haf chinee, haf blak, and haf indiyun. The chinee is Alice mudda. Alice self is half chinee, haf black. Dominique take after Alice. He's studying to be a mechanic or something betta than he wretched fadda who is haf blak, haf indiyun; I call him Rumfish because who knows if he de hide gills under he beard to drink up so much rum witout a single breat. Dominique is not like him; he quiet, like. It is a good quality to have. I also like JoanAnn. She de my age ten. I am fond of she even if she look she nose down at me for having a good fadda. It was not always so but Daddy find Jesus but JoanAnn shame is not one easy fuh hide like brudda from next woman.

Two good apples not so bad even if dem rest take after Rumfish and I can hear all dem but I can't wake. I'm so sleepy remembering Xenon.



ME



MOMMY

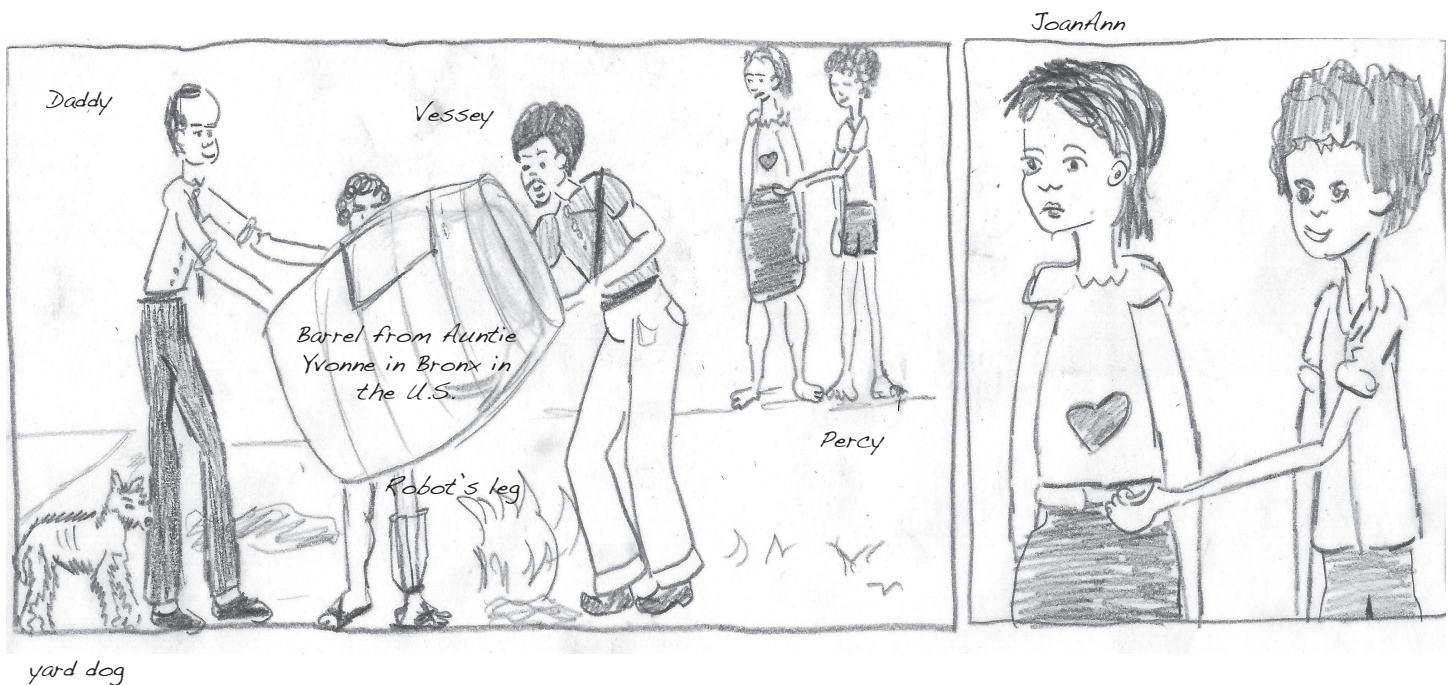


VICTORIA

Mommy say, "I am stubborn where I should be fat". I lift up the sheet and make Victoria stir. She look just like mommy with soft eyes. She have figure like mommy, too. When mommy was Victoria's age she enter a pageant and get the nickname Coca-Cola because she black sari wrap her tight like a soda bottle. Victoria try to have people call she 7Up—it make no sense since she darker than me but I can see why Vessey like she. Too bad she sleep wit she eyes open like a fish an she breathe out she mout all night making the room smell sour. If

I toss and turn and face Victoria, one smell and my body knows I haffa to turn my head away from her sourness. I tink she brush but not proper wit salt on her tongue. She is tall how I want to be and I don't even vex so when people call me giraffe instead of schtupid ting like 7Up. But mostly they does call me Clown Face, still, from when I skin my mout wide like a clown and cry bad-bad when the doctors would stick me wit needles. It is this that make me not cry so now. It is silly to be frighten of medsin when I a going to be a doctor.

People like to call too many names. Like we ah call our handyman Robot who is stricken wit polio and he walk like one robot. He is family: Mommy's cousin son. And we call Vessey's uncle Dogbite because a wild pig bite he low-ly when he was small and piece of his sack get eat out. Pigbite is more accurate. They call us FLYing High because they say we ak high and mighty. It's jealousy from dem udder people. Many people jealous ah we. First, we fadder got job when dem rest suffer wit President Burnham (I hear) even after he die. Then, we have family in London, New York and Toronto like the label on the Yardley soaps we get in barrels every year.



Still, Victoria sometimes stay so vain, so simple, and give people reason fa talk.

The thin branches of our soursap tree curl and stretch in de breeze. I curl and stretch and scratch, then stretch, then plop back down on my pillow wit one elbow up watching Percy make nasty face at me troo de window. Two apples good, two apples rot.

I can see troo de window: Daddy, Victoria's sweetheart Vessey, Vessy fadda name Oscar, and we yardhand Robot. They all help to bring the barrel over the muddy trench and into the front yard. Vessey is a crossing guard and haf of he uniform is still witout sweat stains under his armpits. He will sweat come lunch. Oscar sweats the least. He is old as Daddy, maybe farty-one. He does not sweat attall. Oscar lets poor Robot carry the load on dey

end to make he feel useful. He limps in big strides up and down from his twisted hip. De chickens scatter when his foot brace clack so. Robot haffa kick the pig bottom for it to move. It moves.

“Barrel!” Robot yell like a cock crowing like he wan fuh send report to tief man.

I remember how I run outside in my nightgown. My aunty and uncle New Yark, who are medical professionals, send us books and VCR movies. It is what they do every Christmastime.

I tell Aunty Yvonne exactly what I want. She say it is a good to want microscope. Two of the four wicked Ramjohn children have left the front yard. The other two, Percy and Joan-ann stand up like stick in mud waiting for an invitation to come in de gate.

Joanie come fa play jacks, yesterday and I tell she to come again not for barrel because who know when Skeldon Shipping will have get around to notifying folk dem to come pick up dere parcels. It is how the British left us: wit plenty office formality, plenty tea breaks, very lickle information. Joanie na haffa stand barefoot like a crow but I figga she wan fa show politeness with de barrel. The barrel come up to my shoulder and it have seven kinda stamp pun it. One for U.S. customs and plenty for de times sticky hands in Skeldon Shipping open it up to check its contents. Always ah check. Always ah keep.

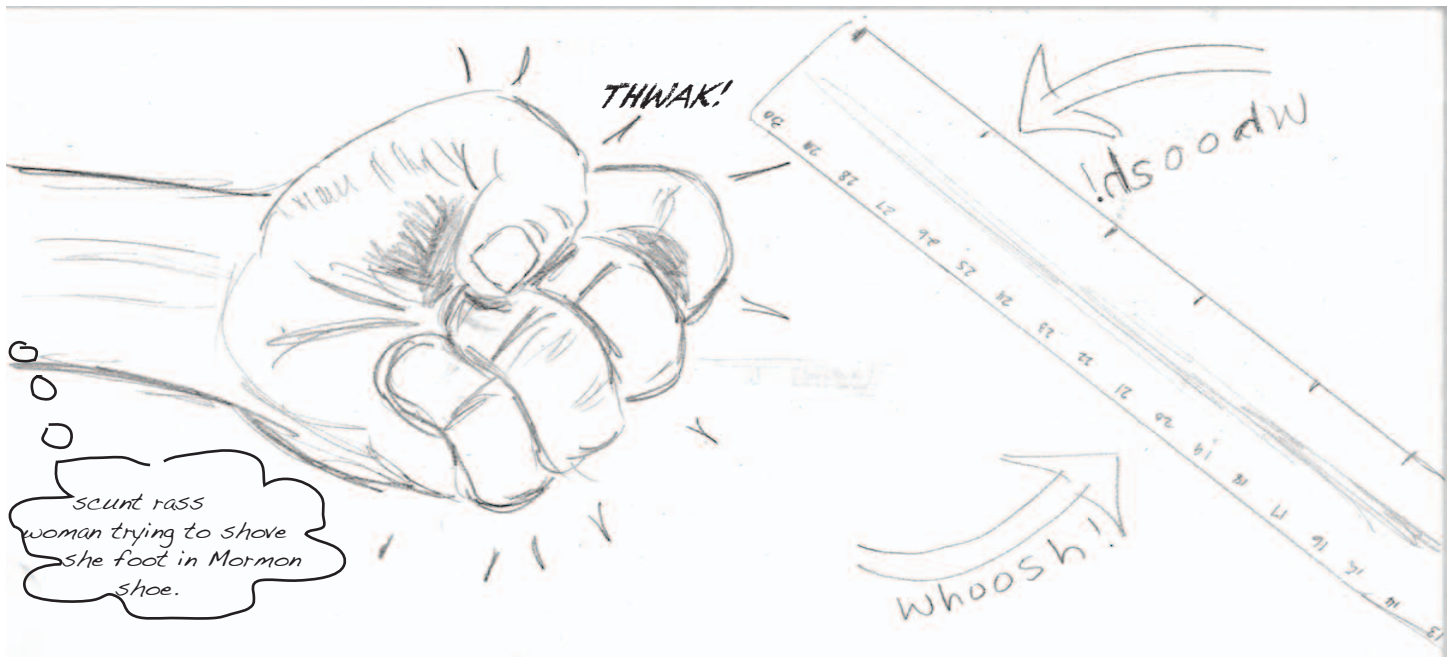
Daddy goes to the pump to wash the mud from his hands and Sunday shoes. The yard dog pass and he get swat but not usual swat that make he whimper. Gentleness. Everyone is in a good mood. Everyone laughs, I guess, because everyone was expecting better fortune from in the barrel. Vessey helped Daddy open it. Vessey fadda, Oscar, always say he has a lame arm from a cutlass cut so he just sit on de verandah sopping up his soft eggs wit day old frybake. He sit and scratch his ashy foot wit he dutty udder foot bottom because the frybake crumbs falling from he bottom lip attracting ants who de bite he ashy foot. He just scratches and drink coffee like a cowboy and say how much he hates barrels and how people does behave different when one comes. Then, I remind he he ask for walkman wit Sam Cooke tape. He remember and shame and stop tak to heself because no one under our roof act up like wet fowl when good news comes. We have composure. It is composure and church that make we James so good and so right.



In class, when I does listen to Miss Seepaul castigate the class for incorrectness, I know she na tak to me. I sit still and stare straight. Composure.

Miss Seepaul is indyun and come from New Amsterdam and she mudda cooks for the Mormons who lock theyselves away on a compound with an air condition. How you supposed to show the godness of de Lord when you hide from the heat? She says they brought an air condition from Utah and it runs on its own generator. Miss Seepaul brought one by to observe us. The Mormon man shake all ah we hand before and after class. His hand is strangeness. Like he never touch a brick or real work. He hand so wet and soft like a sweetman or a baby foot bottom.

“Ah wha work Mormon do?” Percy asks. “How yu de pay for air condition if yu travel on charity? Why we church na tell we about Mormon and how me fa earn charity like yu de?” These were all valid questions but Miss Seepaul box he ear. She get vex and say we were not bright. I am bright. Brightest of all so I raise me hand and tell she if she na the one who encourage us to ask anything. I, too, get a lash. Four lash and Daddy vex for me when I tell he so.



“What she try to do? Shove she foot in Mormon shoe?” Daddy say the first time Miss Seepaul bring she Mormon man around. When I lash, I tink how schtupid she wudda look wearing man shoe even though I know is not what it mean. It still was funny and is why she make it four and not two lash. My hand was still sore and she make me draw back the periodic table wit no punishment for Percy. It is like me and she is nemesis. I get stuck on Xenon, but I bet she na know de difference between Xenon and Neon. But I spend all night dreaming corrections.

Daddy reach into de barrel and puts aside a bag what reads, "Natalie", then we hear a scream. It is Victoria. She comes out with switch.

"You wicked. I'm going to beat all you rass. All!"

"Victoria!" Mommy catches her trying to be an adult.

"Dem wicked children come troo de window and put a chicken in de bed."

Victoria lunges at Percy but JoanAnn does not move her position because she is not guilty; it is Percy and Juanita, the little one. Victoria knows this but still raises the switch like she'll hit JoanAnn.

"It's not she. It's the other two," I say. And still JoanAnn look at Victoria she about to burn troo she.

"Different pair, same wicked," Oscar say wi he mout full of saltfish, now.

"Why ya say? Why ya say, uncle? I stand here na trouble you," says Percy.

"Percy, boy, don't uncle me. You know you wicked still."

Percy stews his teet and it was not the chicken he troo in the window that gets him slapped it is the stewing of his teeth. It is disrespect. Mommy get him. I don't feel bad. I get slap from udder adult if they hear me stew.

"Is why you look at me so? I should bus'up you face so you can feel how fa bus'up them other two," Victoria says this about JoanAnn but not in she face.

JoanAnn sucks her teeth low at Victoria's excess and my mother just rolls her eyes. No one mess wit JoanAnn. It is like she is already a women even if she is smaller than me. She is like an old woman who is always right and you never doubt she. I used to play wit' JoanAnn more when she was younger. She was cleaner then when Rumfish work driving a tapir. When it break down he use it as excuse to stay home and drink and complain. Now, he get lazy; Alice keep two job, de picknee run wild, and Joanie stop coming to play. Like she shame she clothes is tear up and small. I still like she but I don't like the way she look at me like I the one who give she mudda black-eye and worry. It is then Victoria notice Vessey and he notice she and daddy notice them.

"Victoria, go put some clothes on."

"Oo, she is sexy sexy," I say.

"Shut up, Leona."

"Sexy, sexy," JoanAnn repeats and everyone laughs.

"I want to see what did I get from farrin," Victoria say and she walks closer to Vessey than the barrel. His eyes are not on she cleavage but he can tell she does not have own a decent bra but one with lace.

"Victoria, put on some decent covering."

"Leona has on she nightie."

“ Leona has two specks and no spoon. Go on! Now!”

I laugh at she when she laugh at me because I know about my two specks before Daddy tell the whole house. I am not ashamed. I have a new microscope. I wonder if JoanAnn has intelligence to play. I think I can teach her so I ask she and she comes into the gate where she wanted to be all dis time. It's not our fault we have nice tings and she family don't. It would be good if her fadda would stop drink. JoanAnn can't help if she sleep clothes is she school clothes. I want to be a good Christian like Mommy say but when JoanAnn reach me she smell horrible. Is more horrible than Victoria hot breath, almost as horrible as the wind from the back toilet that Robot use. It is not one ting like urine or shit; it is human-mess like sour skin and soiled clothes both compete to win. *I wonder if she will tell Dominique about my microscope.*

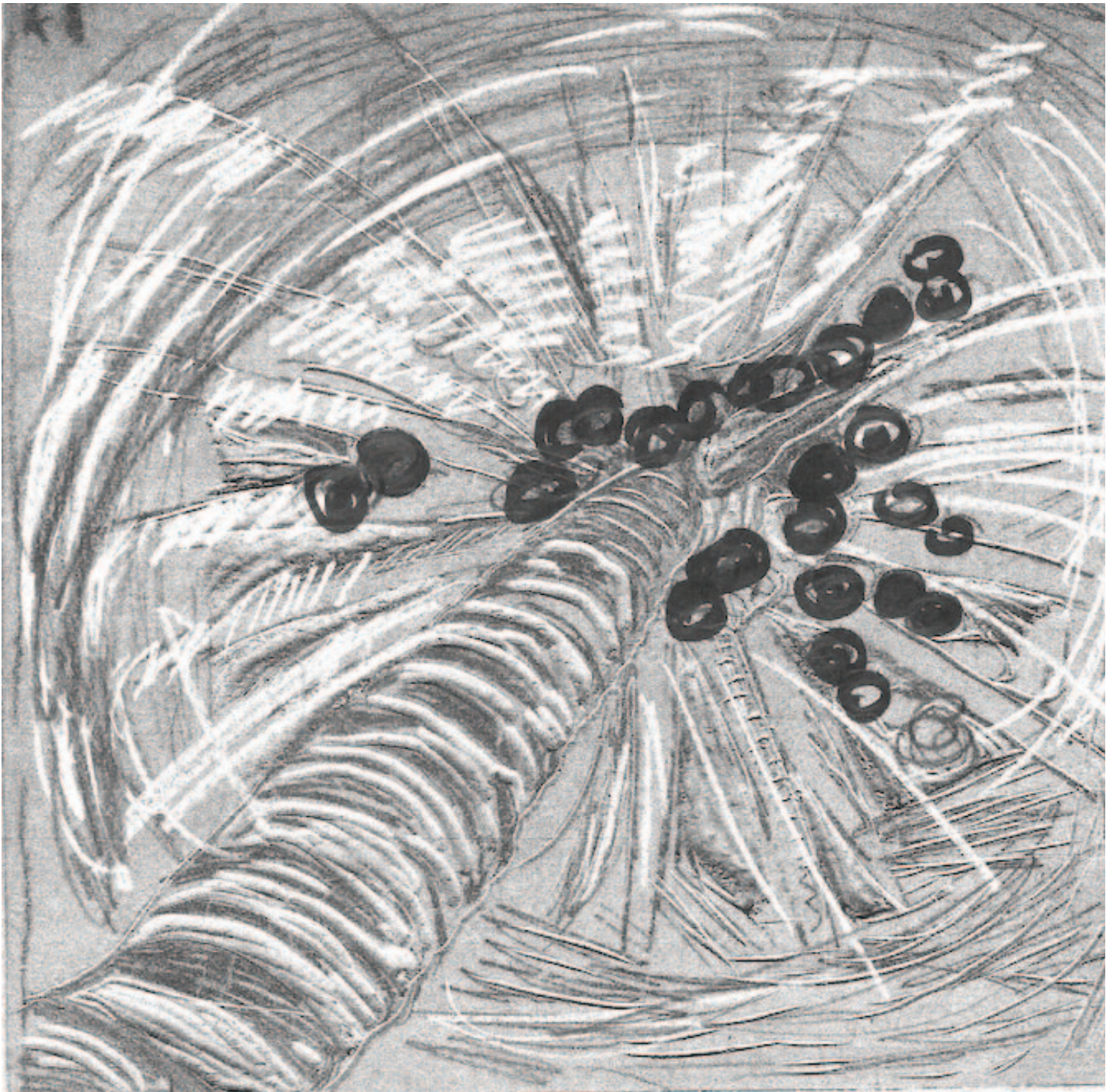
I know Oscar can smell her because he de move. Daddy reaches into the barrel and pulls out the Dove soap Mommy asked for. H ehands it to her as if it was on her shopping list. JoanAnn reaches for it and for the Nabisco cookies and nut butter: Skipppy. There is a little T-shirt and pants meant for me and I see Daddy's face. If he could he would give away all dese tings but it is not he sista who de send it. His sista only calls early early from London and sends Cadberry chocolate. He gives JoanAnn some food cans without fuss. He gives she another nut butter. Witout fuss is how she grapple dem. It is how he does do in church as deacon and is how he must do when Mommy find out she sweet soap is gone. Blame Jesus.

She takes it and thanks him. She forgets me, which is good because I cannot hold my breath. I feel sorry again, for everyone, because I have a microscope and a fadda who does not punch; I don't have a limp arm or a father with a limp arm; I don't have to lie to Mommy about her Dove that fly out the gate and troo de mud back to the Ramjohn lot where they still bade from one bucket.

At night I finally take my microscope out of the box. Daddy says to put it back in the box same. He gives me a plastic bag to tie it up from water and insects. He say I can only watch one slide at a time so I look at roach leg. It's not special but I write in the lab journal anyway.

Under 10x magnification you may observe blatta orientalis for the Arthropod phylum. You may observe it is brown and clear-like. You will observe is has many tiny hairs for which it is discovered assist its smell and touch. You may not want to smell or touch them but you will conclude small things are most important to understanding.

RASTA TREE



In quick time, all of de cousins came over to see the microscope. I became very good at making my own slides but it is planaria that is most exciting. You cut it and it *regenerate*; it grow back same.

Is what?

Planaria.

Plan'tin

No, planaria. Ting dere. It is a worm.

Oh, I see it! I See it! I see it!

I cut he in half and he is grow back

You cut he?

Let me see.

Under 10x magnification you may observe flatworms of the biological family Planariidae, belonging to the order Seriata. You will observe they are not parasites and will not make you pass diarrhea. In the experiment, the researcher has, you will observe, cut in half the planaria two days hence. You may observe that it is growing as hypothesized. The researcher has been satisfied with the experiment and will repeat in new environment.



I want she to come close but I can see that these cousins will not settle down until they leave so we go for a walk the next morning.

We walk single file as to not get hit by car, tapirs, or donkey. JoanAnn leads and I can smell she wash up wit de Dove today. She is wearing the same orange shirt and blue shirt uniform for school. Her petticoat hem is longer than she skirt and sends a pink tread down to she ankle like a vein. Her sandals kick up mud but not one speck get on she leg, like dirt and dirty have an understanding. We share guinep. We pop the green leathery skin in our front teet and pinch the orange fruit in out mout. I am sure it look worse than goat chewing around the big seed to suck off all the flesh. Like we eating our own flesh is how glutton we chewing. We walk and spit the skins and seeds in the fetid green trenches where the pink lotus grows.

And, what about Dominique?

He's going to be a barrister.

No, I mean how old is he?

Fourteen. You know, he de like you.

What schtupidness you say? (And I suck my teet.)

It not lie.

How your mommy have so many picknee?

What schtupidness you say? Sex. Is sex. Skin up she legs sex. (And she suck she teet)

I hear my parents dem have sex and we don't have so many. I tink they want a bwoy.

Every one want bwoy. Bwoys dem make good money. We need to marry one with good money.

We can make good money for ourselves.

Do what? Office girl or skin up our legs like a whore. (JoanAnn begins to dry hump a post and a tapir driver honks.)

Yu nasty scunt!! I am eleven.

(I am laughing so hard.) You are bad.

I am going to be worse bad when I go to New Yark.

When are you going?

When Dominique goes. When he finish school and get bog job in New Yark. (This when I see she dreaming not planning so I keep my news quiet.)

We reach a clearing on the road and JoanAnn runs ahead of me. I chase as fast as I can but I have on clean socks and don't want to get mud on the lace.

The tree is tall. There mussee twenty green coconuts in de tree. No one but a bwoy can get up that high. I did not want to be the one to bust up me head and have to go to home with a bandage up head. JoanAnn kicks off she sandals and grip the tree with she barefoot and hands like a monkey. I do not think she will make it but I do not want she to fail because I am hungry still and the guinep did not fill me because it is mostly seed and I let she get more.

Leona, You haffa try if I fall.

If you fall me deh run for doctor.

I make she laugh and she fall. She fall not to far from the bottom and the pain is not so much that she

cannot laugh more when she stand.

It is you turn.

No!

Get up. Get up.

I do not know why I do so but I grip the tree with my hands and feet like a monkey. Like I haffa second set of hands on me foot. I only climb little mango trees and lime trees. This one stretch all the way to the sky with a Rasta head blowing in the wind.

It look like a Rasta man.

Climb na Rasta gurl.

Me na Rasta. You de Rasta.



I don't why but I climb to the top. It was fast and same same all the way. But when I look down to show she I reach, a lickle pee come out in me panty. I was so frighten I swallow all me air and I grip in the Rasta branch. Four so coconut come down. Crash. Crash. Crash. Crash.

Is who you tak to Rasta gal? (JoanAnn scream up to me.)

I am praying out loud and hoping will deliver me down safe. I do not tink so I hug the tree and scrap up my knees. and some more in me panty because I still pass a hash mark from a cutlass. I stick in until I catch my breath. JoanAnn is crack-she na mind me fa dead or lost. I tink if I finish eat one coconut and carry the other



Rasta tree is like sweet Jesus and he the same motion will get me down Inside bones. I drip down de tree frighten bad. I get haf way down, my foot in de hash mark and wait ing one coconut on the other and bash up against the ground she will with me dragging in she free arms.

I am down.

You glutton. You can't wait.

You drop four. When last you wait for me?

She make me tink about her position and family and not eating more sweetie or cent ice. I would not

want to wait for her. I would want to carry her wit me. I pick up my two and bash dem until get one open.

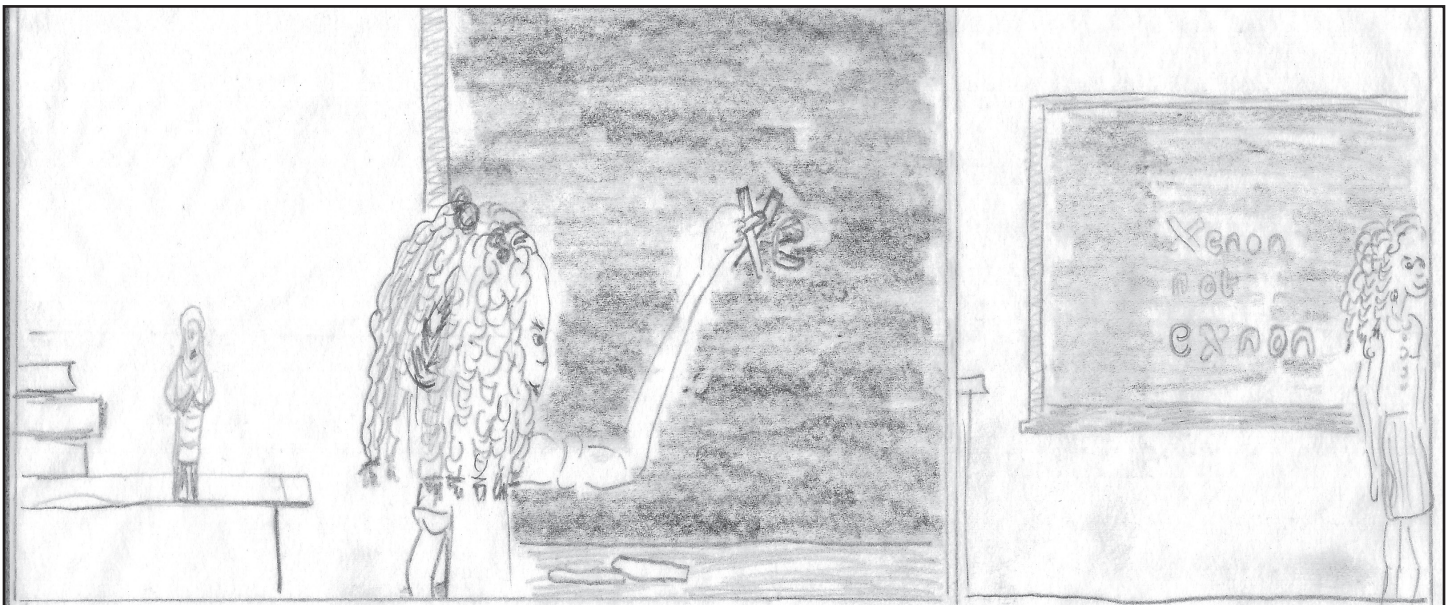
I remember how JoanAnn and me were close close. Before she father drink up like fish, we would spend long time playing dollie and eating cent ice. I tink she will end up leaving Berbice and I tell she so as she scraps up the jelly from the young coconut.

Sweetness, man. And she lick all she fingers twice.

I tell she plenty good news but I don't tell she that I am leaving. I do not want to change the taste in she mout.

I walk with Joan-ann until we reach her house where posts are rotting because no one from farrin paid to paint. I do not know how she can live in such a wooden place that look like wet matchsticks. *I will send back some clothes and books.* She walks in her yard past where Percy lingers in a hammock with his fat toe spread out on the rotted fence post. I do not see the fadda and I do not want to. Percy asks for my coconut but JoanAnn has to explain how I climbed up the big tree now she is calling Rasta tree and me Rasta Gal. Percy asks for my coconut again even when JoanAnn has one in she hand. I give it and he bust it up right away. From my eye corner, I see Dominique. Is like he run in de house and hide when I come. I scrape some jelly then leave because I hear the fadda calling him with a sober buzz.

XENON





but when I tell she my Aunt Yvonne and Uncle Rudolph send for me in New Yark, she make up she face like so. But she still is compelled to let me carry on and tek five so minutes to explain all de wonderfulness I would see to the other children. She interrupts me.

“It is Coca Cola boh-tell not bokle. Rotten English.”

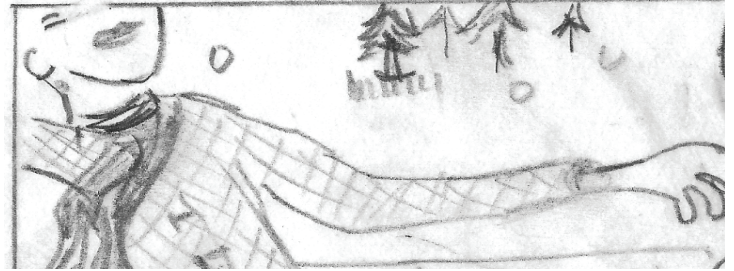
Her accent is too British. She made a classroom lesson out of my pronunciations and laughs. I let she because when last me go fa hear her schtupid cackle. I tink it is not going to be long for me to forget she schtupid cackle.



I feel this is no excuse for adults to poke fun of students. The room gets tense and quiet when I tak, so. It is not the first time I speak my mind but it may well be my last because she lash me in de mout. I can taste the rust on my tongue where my teet split it. I swallow the bloody spit. *When I come back, I will be headmistress and*

she will be reduced to teaching fourth form. I did not want to be rude but she does not behave right. She must always be right. It is not enough to sit above us and lash us, she must be right even if it is not in the name of schooling.

I begin to tear up. I shudder. I do not want tears to fall down but I do not tink I have a choice so I imagine what snow is like and how I will feel it before she.



I look up at the corner of my eyes and see her writing words fast, fast on the board.

“It is orange not har’range juice.”

“It is not Cadberry choc’lat it is Cad-bu-ree.

“They call it kind: Snickers.” She turns from the board to find JoanAnn.

“I hope it kind rot out both your teet.”

She says she has made she point but she nah erase the board. She says that everyone must now stand and line up and shake my hand and tell me good luck. JoanAnn is second in line and she does not shake my hand. She make so like she will cry. Percy is the last and he says that I should send back a barrel with tings for the class. But Miss Seepaul corrects him.

“You know how dare postage is?” JoanAnn pinches her brother.

“I’ll send back letters.”

Now everyone has forgotten well-wishes and they ask me for letters, then boxes, then promises. I am not the first eveh to leave Berbice Grammar for school abroad but it is not a normal acurrance.

I shake Miss Seepaul hands at the end of class wit some spit I rub in and tell her I would not be attending next week. Next week I need to get tings dem in order. The bell rings an I leave. Miss Seepaul like to watch her handwriting on the board so she leave up them words that make no sense and today she was supposed to tak about planets.

I walk outside with Jelly and Smiley. I am sad to leave even if it is the last day of school. The yard is full of all forms screaming out and singing. Some girls are playing skiprope and I will miss this most. JoanAnn walks to me.

“Joanie, why you didn’t come fa shake my hand?”

“You vex? You need me to shake your hand to know I does like you? You full up, Miss Leona. Le we go.”

“Wait,” I say.

I see Miss Seepaul hitch up on the back of she Mormon-man bike. She sit sideways and proper with her purse in her bony lap. I tink even the dust na like she because none does settle on she wuk clothes. I go back in and erase the board. I write: “It name ZEE-NON not EX-EE-NON.”



BRITISH GUAYANA

MOTHER
BRITAIN
→

along the river

irregular tides claim home

by births; in your name

GEORGETOWN

DUTCH
GUAYANA

INTERIOR

NEW AMSTERDAM

RICHES

PAPERS

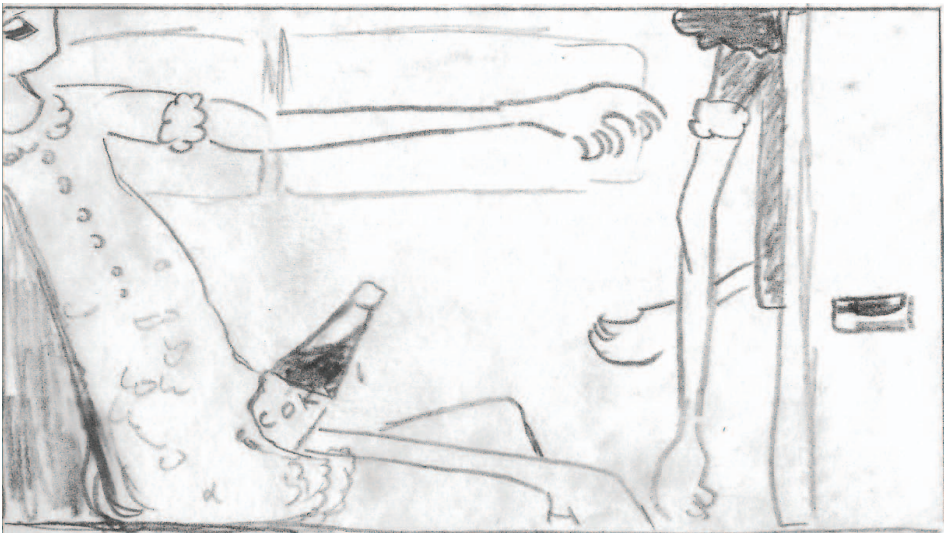


Mommy decide to travel with me instead of daddy. It's okay. It's she Aunt, after all. Victoria say it is because Daddy never left Guyana is why he frighten to fly. No matta; it is better to say good-bye to he in a clean way because I might be still cry now if he were de one to leave me in New Yark when I was ten. No matta; he take me and Victoria to Town to get my papers to travel and I know he will stop and buy we two Brown Betty ice cream each.

Inside the tapir is hot. We arrange for a ride with Oscar's brudda, Nigel, but he go by Spice. Spice's tapir was decorate wit "Hot Lead" painted on the window, Saint Christopher and an angel prayinf over she big bid breasts. Eleven of we cran into the tapir wit nine seats. All de windows is roll down because once afternoon reach, the ride to Town will be more dreadful than long. I had fuh squeeze on a lady lap and she sweat like rain. Daddy got to sit up front because he a big man and Victoria come because she want fuh buy new shoes in Town.

At the patoon crossover in Rosignol, we get a bag of guinep. Our tapir is in a line of motorcars waiting to get on the patoon. We make it by driving fast past a little Nova. The little Nova get vexed and plant he fist on the horn. He work pay off because he get on for all the worry and only one passenger: a man who look like a new American. Daddy say we should not walk to far from the tapir van but he and Victoria get out and walk to the other side as soon as the pattoon take off. How they ah fit all dese vans and cars pun on boat is magic and money.

It is hot and when the fat sweaty lady walk off, too. I stay on to stretch out and read my microscope journal. My leg is over two seat back and a little breeze dance up my dress. The river is brown and dutty but it is such a brown that look like land like you can fall pun and roll to the udder side. I fall asleep and wake when I hear a gruff voice say, "I gwan kidnap you," and I feel a cold hard shock to my crotch.



Victoria shoves me and laughs.

“That is not funny, you schtupid scunt.”

“Here,” and she puts the bockle of Coca Cola in my face.

“Leona, we are in Georgetown. Get up or some man gwan kidnap you,” is what Daddy say.

“I know. I told her.” Victoria is so clever.

But it is true. A little girl from Brickdam was kidnapped and she was found dead. It was all Miss Seepaul tak bout when she come back from Town like she was the one who take the gal and rip out she hair and rape she and leave she fuh dead in a ditch. Evryting she ah do she must do big and be part. If one fish a fry she a fry two. I wan fuh write to she first thing when I get to America to smite she. I will send she a picture of me on the Statue of Liberty. I will write to her about all the important museums and libraries and put in words she nah know how fuh use. All the time we drive and reach Town, I continue dese thoughts and I walk close behind Victoria because I tink maybe one dead girl is enough.

The way we zigzagging. I now agree wit Victoria that daddy does not know Town but he pretend real good. We follow him in circles then I see a white Victorian building with chip paint that say “Immigration”. The guardsman know daddy from when they attend Berbice Grammar and he get us in a fast queue with some coolie girl who talk real slow.

“Lee-ona Sunday James.”

“Yes.”

“Ah what a lovely name. God is good.” And she and Daddy confide in each udder who good He does be for five minute while one Surinamee woman get vex waiting behind wit she two loud sons. One is albino and she stick out he pink tongue at me.

“How old are you?” the coolie gal ask.

“Ten. I turn eleven last month.”

“Ookay. Good. Good. February. Me own datta is Quarius, too.”

She types in my response.

“That is so young to go farrin.”

“My wide will go wit’ she, first.”

“Ookay. Good. Good.”

I smile at her because I don’t want to slow turtle woman any more.

“Ookay. Take dis form to the counter and have it stamp. Ookay. And, when you get it stamp, come back and I will take your photograph. Okay.

“Good. Good.” Is what Daddy reply and I laugh. Daddy goes to smoke outside with he friend and I stay stand up for the stamp. AuntY Yvonne sent \$500 US to sponsor me. I will bring my microscope becasue they are medical professionals and they would appreciate that I am so dedicated.

Victoria is supposed to watch me but she leaves to sit outside and fan herself with my science book I bring to read. AuntY Yvonne, Mommy and Daddy de want she to come too because she old enough to go wuk and school but Victoria not want fuh go. She is waiting on Vessey. He has plans to marry she and move to Cana-da to wuk in a cousin’s machine shop.

The Surinamee woman is back in line behind me wit she three stamps: vaccination, payment, visitor visa. Her two boys dem boys play wit toys from America. They are all dress in American T-shirts and they scream like an American, too.

“Jamesy get up and don’t soil your pants, bwoy!”

“By the power of Grayskull. I have power.” The albino bwoy points to his brudda who is down on all fours and barks.

“When He-man change from weakling to strong is loud. Is not like that. Like this.”



Mommy makes a dinner and plenty people come over with food: fry channa, roti and frybake, some old saltfish and okro from Zalina, grannie make peppa pot—and so did Auntie Olive, Chinese rice, cook-up rice, and plain rice. Alice Ramjohn, JoanAnn's mudda bring over a covered plate of someting, roti must be. She is a slender woman mixed with Amerindian and East Indian, but looks more East Indian than not. Her plate bends she bird wrist until she reach the table. She mussee make a mountain of roti. It is the dense kind when you nah put enough ghee or butter. No one will eat it. It may be good for breakfast to sop up eggs. I know it is what Mommy will give to Oscar. She is fine like a tree branch. Her pleated skirt is flouncy and loose around she waist. It is something from Christmas gifting de church mission ah do. So skinny but she feet are tick and broad. She wears her Sunday pleat skirt with roses and the only ting that fits she broad feet: worn up men's rubber slipper. She lift the cloth from she plate and it is a pile of coconut sweetsies. Hmmph. This is why JoanAnn make fuss to take all de coconuts. Behind she is JoanAnn, dem bad ones and Dominique.

"Good night. You-na. It's Alice," Alice say in she highpitch way.

"Hi-hi. Alice, come nah gal."

Mommy put Alice ting on de table next to Black cake and pine tart. It look okay but I do not see nuff people eat it so I make sure I do and I make so like it is the last piece of shuga on de Eart. Dominique smile and I hand he one. Mommy brings out a chair for she and Dominique. I guess he is being forced to be grown tonight. Victoria and Vessey are already there being grown and clinking glasses like dey see in the pictures. Who dey ah toast. Is it not me party?

Dominique sits quiet. Dem adults ask him about studies and wuk. Dem tink it's encouraging to a young man to insult he fadda by comparing the son to all the better qualities the fadda does not have. Them laugh about it. Alice plays good wife and squeaks some good news about Rumfish but no one will listen over loud cackles. I call he and JoanAnn fuh look at fly wing in me microscope.

"Is how fuh do dis ting?" JoanAnn asks.

"Bend and look with your two eyes dem. Use this to make the picture sharper."

"Oh, look. Look, Nicky!"

She turns, he turns, then I turn. When he bends down his hair smells like Dove soap. I get too close to smell and he bumps my lip when he get up from de microscope. I feel schtupid and me lip swell one side. Mommy ask if I want some food but my stomach is too full of wings to eat metemgee.

I sit.

I sit alone.

Mommy is cleaning. Daddy is smoking with dem loud men, mostly Oscar. Victoria whispers and squeals in some schtupid private ting with Vessey on de front porch. Mostly, all dem people leave already. They was mostly from church and people wit small children to put to bed. I sit scrunch up on four cement bags meant to pour a new foundation for building up de house. Daddy wants to put in a generator so we can buy a washer machine. I can hear all of dem but they don't know that next Sunday will be different.

“Did it hurt?”

I see Dominique feet and I get up quick but fall back on de bag because I sit too low. He walks to the side where our bicycles lean up. This open area is where Daddy see fuh put the washer machine. The pretty-chicken—the one that looks like St. Paul parrot wit some green—walks out and stops like it too wants an answer. He bends down and I can see he Weird Al Yankeelick tee-shirt daddy send over to Alice in a bundle last year. A crazy white man with thick glasses and a mad smile is all I see or wan fuh see but he is looking at me with my head bend down and mucous dropping from my top lip to lap like a string. My forehead burns where I imagine his eyes are set.

“Oh,” he says like he make one old discovery like Columbus. “You crying because you are sad to leave.”

“I’m not crying.”

I say nothing else, just keep stringing along. He puts one knee on the dirty ground where all dem chicken shit and walk but I can't tell because he is a big shadow over me. He puts his knee down to reach in he back pocket for a handkerchief. It is probably white with slight rows of brown where he folds it to wipe his neck, his brow, his mouth, his hands. He hands it to me

smelling of wash soap and him

not saying too much

is as good as de last banana we ah share

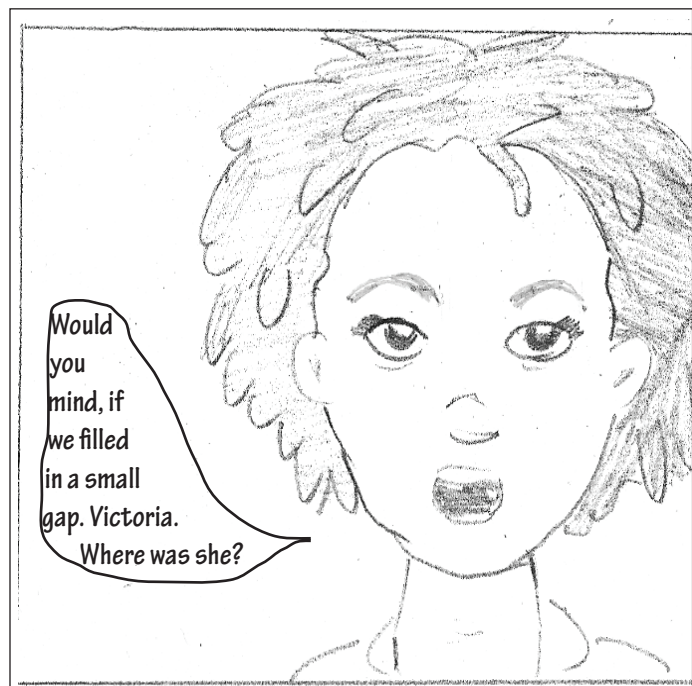
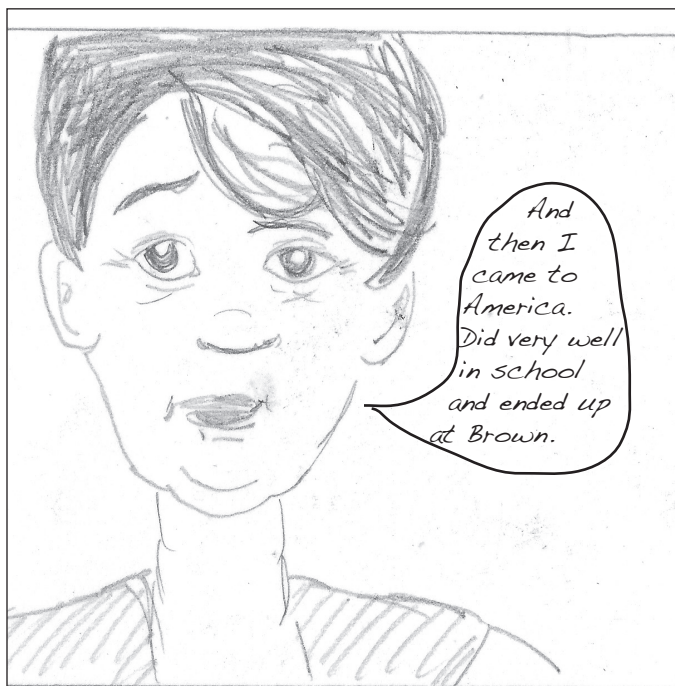
wit de chicken who is satisfy to peck at this sweet

pretty color when it circles de Eart.



"I cry, too."

We sit.



SISTER



Timerhi Airport is full of dusk departures waving and dragging long bags packed with the smell of salt shrimp and achar. My bag is such. These things are for family who are homesick and hungry, who I imagine cook rationing the things they had brought to America when it was them who were here looking over a shoulder through crowds for sisters.

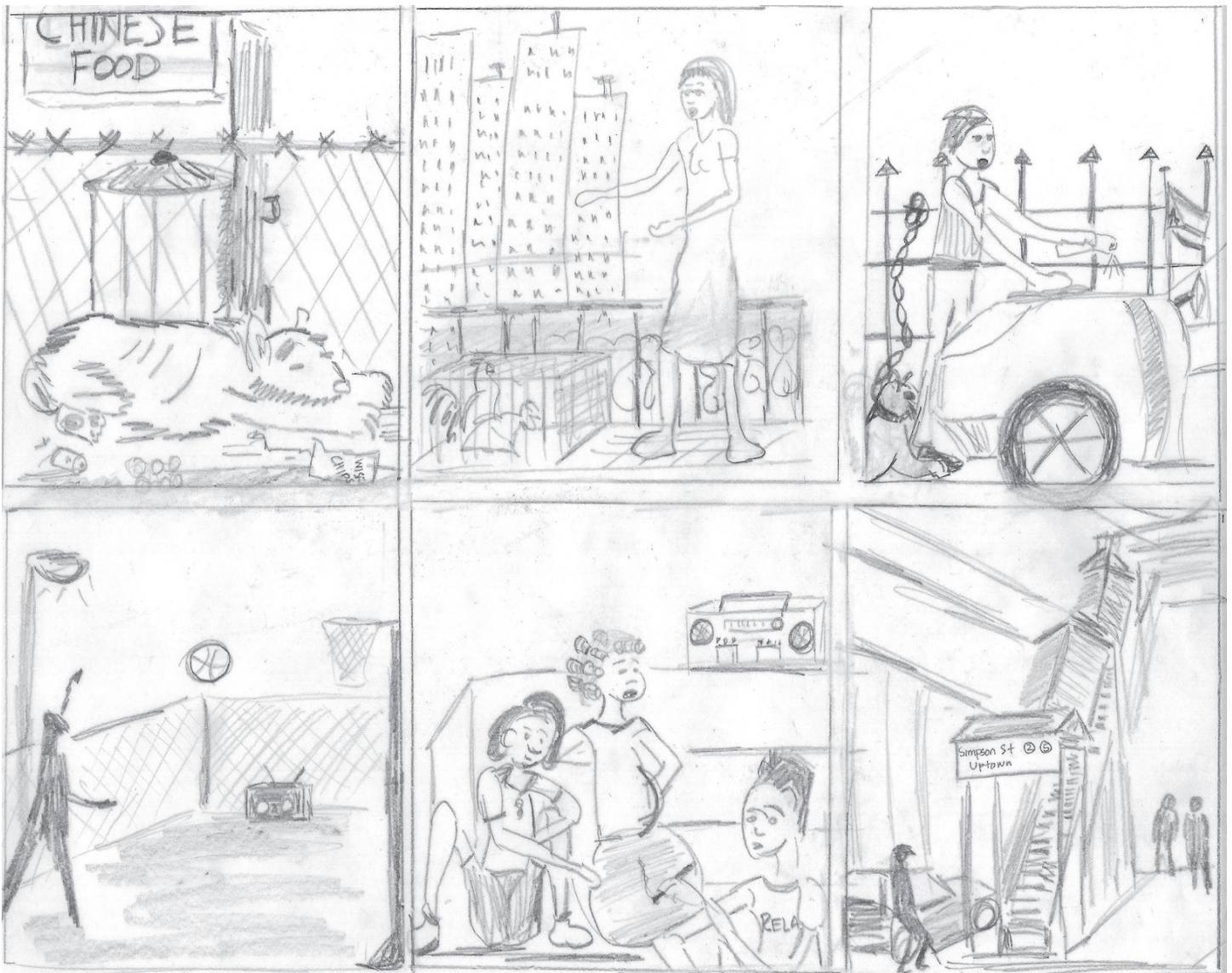
I see Victoria now and she is unhappy. I think she is unhappy to be the only child, to wake up tomorrow and stretch out, to find tomorrow morning that I am not on her side when her foot wants a reason to fuss for more bed space. Victoria waves. I see her leaning over the rail; and, daddy nested behind is looking the same way back at me. I inhale something sharp with every breath and remember that mommy is flying with me so I shall save tears for later.

Now, standing in line on the tarmac to board, mommy is fussing to wipe clean my nose and eyes that have all wormed together on my cheek and into the crease of my palms. It is a handkerchief. She didn't bring it to clean. It is from a package of three with the letter "u", for Una, embroidered. I do not think she wants to bring out the second one so I take my time to breath and form an apology and climb each step. A woman who is nicely attired has paper tissues and I am on the plane, foolish and sagging in my chair. I did not even admire the plane, or wave one last time like them do in the pictures, wave to everyone from the last step like a perch, a task to which it is suited.

I sit and have closed my eyes to sleep or to see that everything will be fine. Mommy is quiet. We sit like everyone on the plane, pressed and ready for church or work but smelling of our suitcases. *Pray the wiri wiri pepper won't spill from someone's bag because we all will surely cry.* The well attired woman comes to us and tells us no one really leaves Guyana then she stands in the aisle with her black heels and pantyhose that glint of rust and begins to pantomime belts, exits, and oxygen from the speakers. Mommy leans over to me and advises that this is a good job. Victoria would be good at this. It is silly and beautiful. I agree. I look out the window. I imagine how Victoria face would appear in this aisle waving she arms like mantis. Skinning her teeth in an honest laugh to see me behave like a chicken picked for dinner.

LANDING take tea, now, here is some ginger, suck, put your head down, breathe, you mess up your shoes, wipe, mommy say this in the late late night as we fly over the Atlantic. i fill the vomit bag with the last things i remember the smell of the last banana from the basket on the counter safe from Victoria's st. vincent parrot and the hum of bees that love sweet more than he. frybake with sweet pellets of cornmeal now hide in my jowls. i use my tongue tip to move them to my teeth and to spit them, too, with spit that taste like saltfish and pumpkin stew. the tea is no good. it is too dark like the taste of silver like i suck on metal which i have but never silver. i imagine silver. Dominique's eyes. mommy wake me to eat. the flavor is not good, this plane food. i do not want any more. i want to complain and fill my belly at home and lay straight like a plank on my bed and make this feel of screwing in my ear vanish. the swallows. the spits. the rot of sweet between my knee, at my heel. wiping away last banana i catch the scent of the doublebloom flower bulb growing in the café yuban tin. its pistols wipe my ankle while i wait with joan-ann for the tapir driver. i remember. we watch footless lizard drinking water from dog bowl then Dominique come sit, too, jeering he sister for crying. all his teeth, them bright. a doublebloom. i remember. it is almost sweet then another bellyful empty out into the bag the tea has wretched everything outside of my belly through my mouth and with one ear pop after the other more bellyfuls cannot be stopped. pops are troublemakers for my body that wants to sleep to children's storytime of once upon a time when daddy reads from picture book or make up jumbie tales when he has no book. i fall underwater again. it is not sweet and warm but dark and so so. i smell nothing now the bag is gone passed from mommy to the flight woman in rust tinged stockings rubs my back so mommy will not feel embarrass i have turned into a goat with sounds from my throat. one sickness is not worse than the other this lady say. home is all i hear underwater is home and she pass two sticks of wrigleys to chew for my ear and for my sour rot breath then leaves with my bellyfulls and i cry so mommy pinch me. you are just nervous, mommy say. just be glad to be here. lights trace forward on the ground. plenty bulbs in America. i feel lucky to have family from foreign who send for me. who send for me first and i begin to count the bulbs and see that plenty money must be use to send me foreign, too, so i sit up proper and clap like them rest when we land.

AUNTY YVONNE



Under 10x magnification you may observe the hair of Grammostola rosea, the Chilean rose tarantula of the Arthropod phylum. You may observe tiny urticating hairs that are shot in a defensive mist. You will observe hair is in preserving fluid and not in naturally secreted musk that is a mix of feces, urine, and other fluids that would naturally be released before urticating. There is no threat but you may imagine it alive and understand that it is a naturally skittish spider therefore the hairs it kicks off in defense must be a good design even if it is hard to see.

In de morning, it is bright and loud. It was how I imagine it is like in town if we lived in town and not #63 Village in Berbice. There is freeness here in New Yark...York: how dem Chineese food can be delivered at anytime; how Spanish de speak Spanish all in de streets loud, loud; how too some of dem look like white and some de look buck like Alice Ramjohn or black like Daddy; how everyone de drive but still more car is parked on the street than moving down it. No cow ah walk or donkey shit on the road but sometimes it does smell so. And a yard dog is called pitbull and are fat and must be held back by heavy chains. Mostly, it smells like meat cooking and sweets. Hot dogs. It smells good in New York.

It is strange to wake in a new bed with walls all the way to de ceiling. Dere are no pigs waking too early, but chickens, some. Still, I wake jumpy because I had a dream one of dem Ramjohns was waking me but it was only this new bed and how it smell like wash soap. No breaks in the wall to let air pass so it smell was strong.



I see a sliver of light at the window above de bed me an Mommy will share until she leaves. The blinds are Venetian. One slat is twisted the wrong way and when I try to fix it I make it worse and dust smear pun my fingers so I go stand in de hall and dance to hold in my urine because someone else is bading. I want to walk outside to an outhouse but I know them tings is long over. I imagine the batshroom back home. I imagine Victoria in there, "Stop bang up the door." I imagine how many steps I must take walking to de outhouse when she get to wash before me. The smell gets stronger. I hold my breath, open the wood door, bunch up my skirt,

squat and pee-pee. I know that I always forget toilet paper an I refuse to use Robot's newspaper so I shake and run to the pump to rinse off drops that roll down my leg. I do not think dese are tings I can share with my new school friends who will not understand what I say.

I dance up and down the hallway with its brown linoleum patchy. Auntie Yvonne apartment is a front door and a back door to a porch, a hallway connect de kitchen on one end with a living room on de udder side, and along de way, batshroom and closet face two bedrooms. It is not de biggest apartment. She rent the big one. She say when Daddy and Mommy come to stay for good she will put us in teh big one but she will put us in the next one but we will end up in de basement first. It is a small place Auntie Yvonne say. She charge \$400 for the big one on the third floor. She say the ceiling is vaulted and decorated like Victorian style with a fireplace and original wood floors because dem Black who she buy from was too unhealthy for walk up. It was use for storage after dere granmudda die. Dat apartment on the third floor used to belong to a famous jazz singer then she get sick. De Bronx change hands, and she greedy picknee seal she away until she die—Americans nah know what to do wit old people. Mommy turn to me all of a sudden and pinch my arm.

“You two devils betta not try to trow me in old people home.” Yvonne sucks her teet.

“You wait, Una. Is what dem picknee do here. Is who ass you tink get wipe by nurse's aide? Merican.”

I nah fuss wit Mommy's schtupidness. I continue to think: the apartment sound like a fantasy with a fireplace but it will not be the one Auntie Yvonne put us in when we are all in America as I had hoped. I still imagine that apartment because I never see it. When last I hear de people who own buy Auntie Yvonne house when I get my PhD was two white men. They fix it up so bad it look like a shiny spaceship wit no more vaulting.

This apartment is quiet. Mommy and Auntie Yvonne talk out on de back porch so I continue to wait on Uncle Rudolph to finish shit which I can smell troo de door now. I do not hear a flush but a hacking and then a spit then a dragging of a chair foot above me. There is a neighbor upstairs but she is usually quiet Auntie Yvonne says. Again, she promises the second floor to us when everyone is over until we buy our own home. Plenty West Indian own home before rest of dese Blacks she reiterates. This is her house she bought with savings from work, from inheritance from her first husband, an American electrician—one of dese Blacks—and from chip-in from Uncle Rudolph. I get de feeling Uncle Rudolph chip-in is small since she never say “our house” only “my house”. He stays quiet.

Uncle Rudolph did not marry Auntie Yvonne; he separate from his wife since long time gone. They did not have children an when I see all dere abundant tings, I feel they are happier this way.

Uncle Rudolph flushes and sprays air freshener in de pink batshroom. I hold my breath and brush my

teeth with a new toothbrush. There are pink towels and a pink washcloth for me on the lip of the bathtub. It is big like a bed. The toilet is big, too. It has a peacock embroidery on the lid and when I sit to pee, the pink seat is like a cushion so soft. It lets out air.

First thing I eat this Wednesday, August 19, 1986 is a bhagel with creamed cheese. It was nice nice. It had cinnamon swirl with raisin. Uncle Rudolph slap on the creamed cheese and chews with his mouth open making a show of the paste he making with spit and chew. I want to call him a cow maw in jest the way I call out Daddy for he sneeze that sound like a monkey yell that St. Peter can imitate but this is the first time I eat with Rudolph so I am not rude or funny.

We share the Daily News with everyone. It is ticker than Staebroek Times.

I read: The U. S. is still investigating Lockheed crash...newspaper strike in France...Japan's new astronauts meet their president...Japan Airlines Flight 123 crash is being investigated—I wonder if the astronauts can fly better than a regular pilot. (I am happy we did not crash). I turn the pages, then, Auntie Yvonne, reading from yesterday's paper, stews her teeth.

"What get you vex?" Mommy asks.

"Yesterday's paper. They finally get this schtupid rass to court?"

She points to a picture of white man in a suit with his head down. Mommy stews her teeth, next.

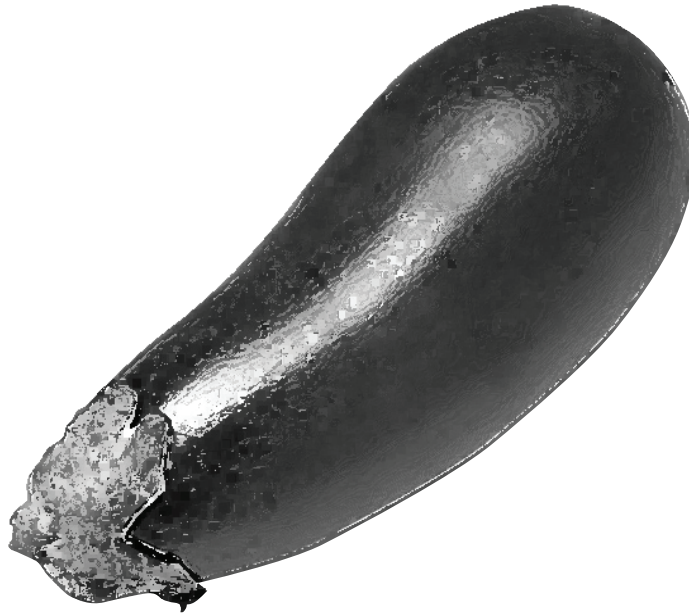
"Price of everything in Guyana goes up and all Americans care about is how Jim Jones kill people seven years back." Auntie Yvonne stews her teeth like a flattening balloon and Mommy follows like the dull pin that did it.

"What?" I jump onto one knee into the conversation because I feel connected that we are all sharing the same newspaper. I read: This day four years ago, Larry Layton, accused of involvement in the murder of Rep. Leo Ryan three years ago at Jonestown, Guyana, went on trial in San Francisco. He is petitioning for parole —Oh! Oh! It says Guyana!"

"Jonestown is all dem schtupid rass nurse's talk about. They look down dere noses at me and Pinky like is we who set up community and kill we picknee and when you start say anything about Jamaica or the Phillipines they can't hear it."

This time they are on cue and stew teeth together. Mommy is the one who start it and Auntie Yvonne finish but it is like they practice together to get the sound so loud. Yvonne is really Mommy cousin

but Mommy raise with she since she was three. She parent dem die of pnemonia. It is nice to have one sister, at least, I think. Someone to get vex with you. I think about me and Victoria and how we both get vex when it is boulangier stew for dinner. We vex how it sting our tongue, how it look slimey and how it is bitter even with dal.



“You better eat it. This is not restaurant,” Mommy does say.

“We should go to restaurant. Vessey take me to restaurant and the food is nice.”

“Victoria, he is not your husband. You should not have man spend money on you.”

Daddy adds, “Book first, man later.” Then, Victoria stew she teet. And when he adds, “A woman need she brain to keep a good home.”

I say, “If a women is so smart, she nah need mind house. Let she man do it.” This is when I stew my teet. We are never together stewing about men. Always one behind the other unless it is a thing of taste, bitter and sweet tings, we agree and sometime fight over.

In Yvonne’s apartment at the table Rudolph buy, I put a finger over an inset photo of two children: one black, one white. Next to that is an inset of the dead, face down. I continue to read but Uncle Rudolph grabs the paper.

“This is what happen when you listen to sweet tak. You get dead up. I need to check my Lotto. You know, I won \$64 last month. Hit four number.” Coupons slide out of the center of the newspaper and I grab the glossy leafs of fancy soaps, chunky soups, and bologna meat.

“What name Playtex?” No one listen but I see instructions to “scratch n sniff” new clean fresh meadow with a Lock-In Core.™ Rudolph purse he lip and laugh like.

“Dem ting is not for for. Is for grown women wit children.” And Auntie Yvone scramble it up wit disappointment and Mommy’s eyes concur.

The next day, I read about elections: The latest results for the Borough Council is the lowest voter turn out— Burr Row, I repeat. The candidates’ positions on issues are irrelevant to the people living in the Bronx, complained Mercedes Rios, mother of two of Gun Hill Road— The. The, thee candy dates. Analysis is too early to tell

:but the incumbent District Councilwoman is likely to face a run-off. I read it again, slowly.

The next week I read my paper and eat my cornmeal porridge and I listen to Auntie Yvonne complain about work. It’s understandable. People who are ignorant are impossible to know. I think about Miss Seepaul and how I will come back talking better than she. I will come back with books to donate to the school library and I will give a speech at assembly and thank Mr. Jessie and Miss Olive and leave she--her name last. I will watch her be nice to me then I will forgive her in my head and we can be friends, finally, because she will see that we are both wanting the same things. I think this often, as often as Auntie Yvonne complains about work. The more she talks, the quicker I figure out she is not a nurse. Nurses and dem are not her colleague; they are her superior. I look around her house and see all the trueness: romance novels and crossword puzzles.

Still, Auntie Yvonne owns her own home in America. She is wanting me here to go on to become a doctor. A thing I do, not on her terms. I do not become a medical doctor and she stews her teeth at all my accomplishments until I win a MacArthur and another Filipino Nurse at work, when she is finally an RN, tells her it’s a big deal. All these things she is wanting and she holds them up inside of me like hope, like Uncle Rudolph’s lotto, like my promise to JoanAnn.

Rudolph is disappointed he did not win, not even four numbers, and he looks like I can imagine what winning \$64 was like: the greatest.

The first person I met was Adisa Nicholette Maxwell. She went by

RALPHIE after her father Ralph or maybe it's her great-grandfather. Me, mommy and Auntie Yvonne walk to these gray buildings called projects. Marion Pritchard Housing Development.

"Dis building used to be a family place when I first come", she said.

This building was the biggest thing I'd been in since JFK. We stand outside and Auntie Yvonne presses the button to an apartment that reads "Ms. Millie Dougherty". The buzz is like static.

"Don't use the elevator alone. Get in and out with women," and Mommy agrees by shifting away from the door like it smells or something. And, it does. The heavy brown security door is painted like sagging skin with its heavy shiny undulations. The smell of cigarettes perfumes the urine tinged air.

"Dis door never used to be so scratch up when I lived here."

A man wearing a blue feathered hat opens the door for us.

"Long time no visit Yvonne. You look goooood," he says.

"Oh, Frank. You remember me?" She blushes.

"Of course, girl. And who is this?"

"My sister and my niece. Una James and she daughter, Leona."

"Ya'll moving in here?"

"No," Mommy says with instinct.

My mother sticks out her hand to shake his but he makes like he can't because his hands are soiled with something that he blames on work. Dressed like that, I don't know.

"No. They living with me in my house for the time being. They just came from Guyana. Leona is bright. She's going to be a doctor. Una is me oldest cousin, like a sister, She older daughter is coming, too." And I look at Mommy as the diarrhea keeps pouring out of Yvonne's mouth and she finally gets to the part about what we had for breakfast. An older woman sticks her head out the window and cackles.

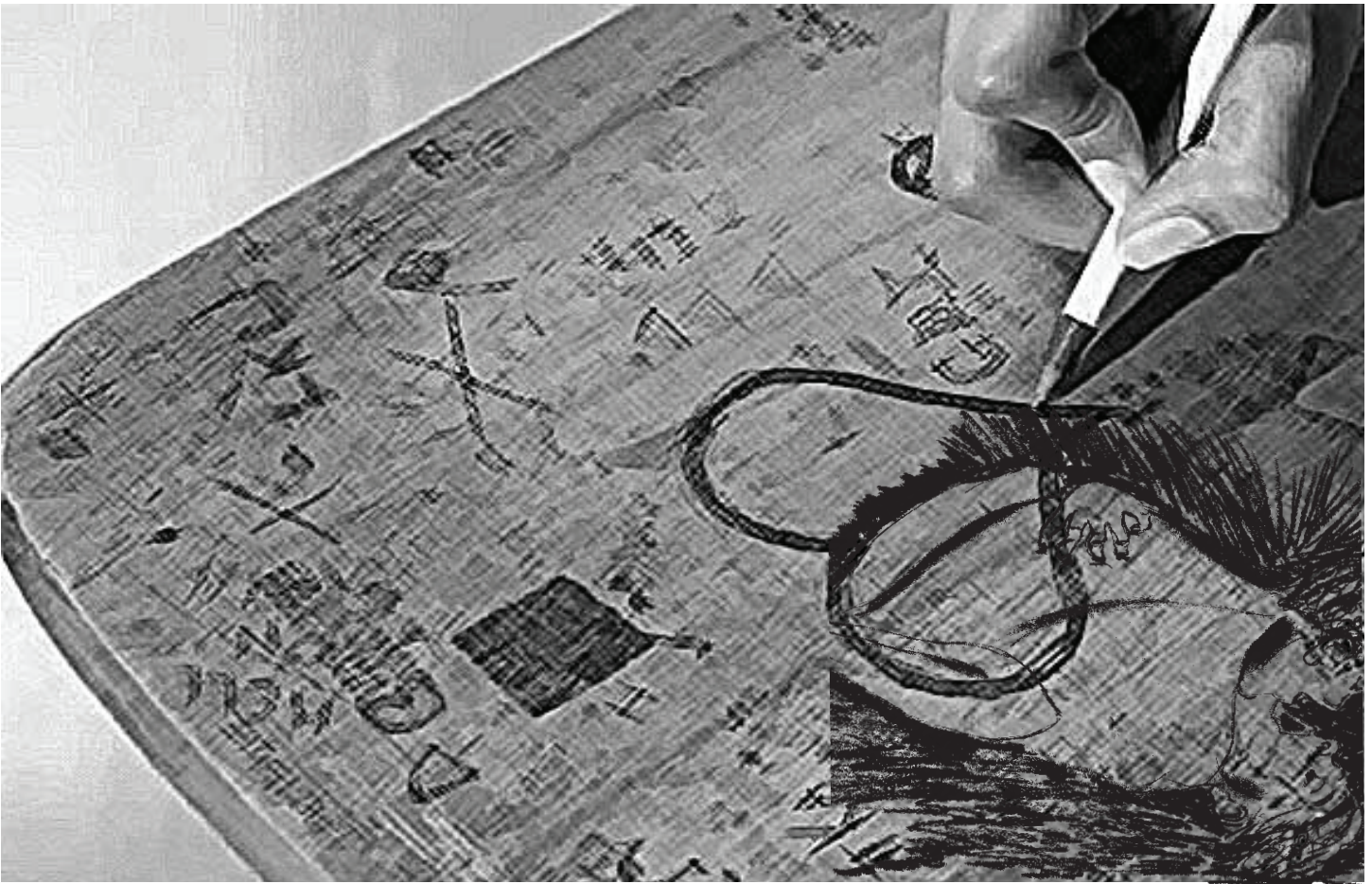
"Yvonne! Come on up girl." A razor screech is the doors 'welcome in'.

"Lil Mama," Yvonne says.

"All right, now. I got the door, ladies," Frank says moving just enough so we graze his front to pass.

"Oh, all right Frankie," Yvonne ends it.

"Don't hold them up." And this Lil' Mama disappears back into her apartment...



...Dr. James? Shall we stop for a rest?

No. I'm fine. Just thinking about school. So, school starts and I'm a little homesick missing my friends back home: Joann and Dominique. But I have to be a big girl.

School starts. Mommy stays until December when her visa expired.

But, school starts in September. Ralphie, Auntie Yvonne's neighbor's only granddaughter who lives with her in the projects that are two blocks away from I.S. 158 where I start the 6th grade and get put in S.P.—Special Progress— mostly Puerto Ricans , oh and one girl named Pearl from St. Kitts who's six-two making her the only girl bigger than Ralphie. She is way sweeter than Ralphie, but she's a family friend and I think we can get along.

Ralphie shows me around and introduces me to people. I'm not really interested in her friends who are not in my S.P. class because now I'm in the fifth grade—like primary back home—but I'm taking ninth grade level math. The principal recommends me for this organization in Manhattan called BrainChild™ They send blackbrownyellow and wartornEuro-grants to private school on scholarship. I'm in Ralphie's class for just a month then I leave to go to the gifted class. Ralphie gets a little jealous. This is how things progress across the

street (for just two years. Thankfully.)

It's July 4th, '86 or '87, and me, Ralphie, Lisa and Pearl are outside Auntie Yvonne's house. There is a small chain link fence around the front yard. Lisa, a neighbor, holds one end of a rope. In the background, waves of flattop fades and people I can't remember socialize at a cook-out.

"You don't have to snatch the rope."

"You want to play or you goin to sit there staring at people."

"I'll play but you didn't..."

"'El play' You sound so funny, yo. You Spanish, right?"

"Guyanese."

"Where that at, again?"

"South America."

"Right. So you not a real Black girl. You Spanish."

"No. It was a British colo..."

"Yo, I call Pearl."

"Anyway, I said 'aisle'."

"What you say Birkmark?"

"Nothing."

"I thought so. I got Pearl and you and Lisa can partner. Spanish against Black."



The game is short-lived because Ralphie is losing. We go inside for Icee's and a fan. Firecrackers go off and the sulphur and ribs smell so good. The scent floats into the afternoon air so Auntie Yvonne keeps the windows shut preserving her red velvet curtains from the soak of fire and meat. Pearl and I are stretched out on two different couches sucking down Icees under the oscillating fan. Our sweat glues us to the plastic covers. Her tongue is blue, mine is green. Auntie Yvonne and Ms. Isaacs, Pearl's mother who became fast friends with Yvonne at the last parent-teacher night, carry more food out the door. We laugh when they call us sows. We laugh up a storm and oink. Ralphie catalogs this from the living room doorway.

"When are your family coming?" Pearl asks.

"They were supposed to her next month."

"It take long time to sponsor my grandmother from St. Lucia."

"Maybe January before I go to school."

"You go to boarding school? Man I wish I was. My moms is getting on my nerves."

Yea, I can't wait. My parents are so happy, especially since..."

"Bitch. You not going nowhere. You know we going to Gompers together. Why you need to go to school with all them white people anyway?"

"Gompers?"

"Our zone school," says Lisa who is spraying the Money Blessing air freshener down the hallway behind her.

"Damn, what you ate?" asks Ralphie

"I said I had to take a dump not plant a flower. What you expect? It's that potatoe salad, yo."

"Morrisania is our zone school but Gompers has a pool."

"Okay. We better go back out before they come back and get us." I say this to change subjects.

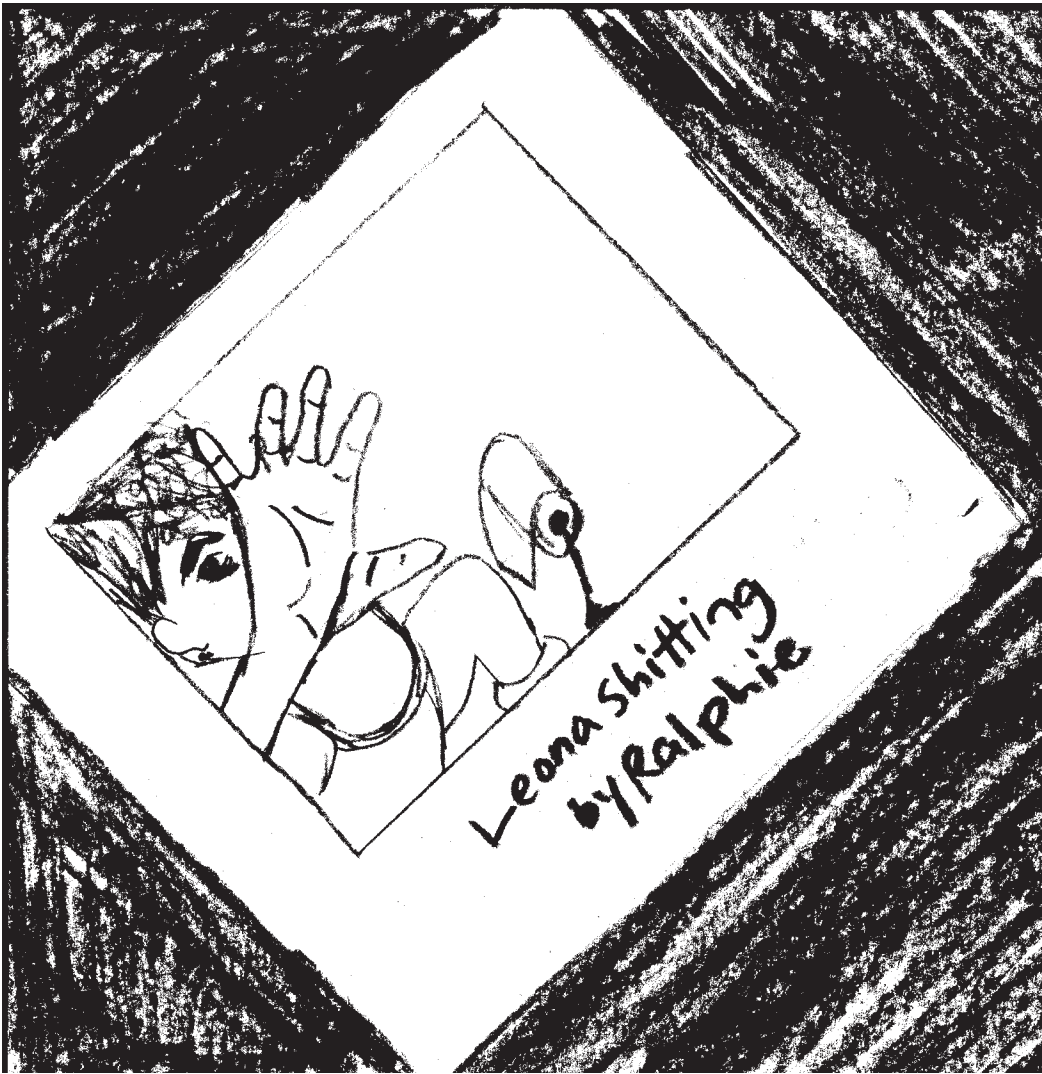
"They have a pool and Imma be like 'Cannonball!'"

"So, you swim?"

"No. They just have a pool."

"I'm not going to Gompers." I say Gompers with a pitch. I say it like a real Black girl. I say it with severity. I say it with a smile. I say it to make the whole room laugh. I say it to undo her. I say it knowing that Ralphie said it the same way but I do it better because now I watch.

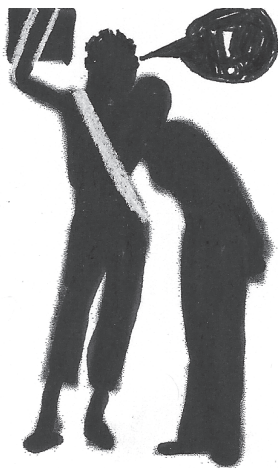
We avoided each other kinda sorta for the summer then, when school started up again, our senior year, she



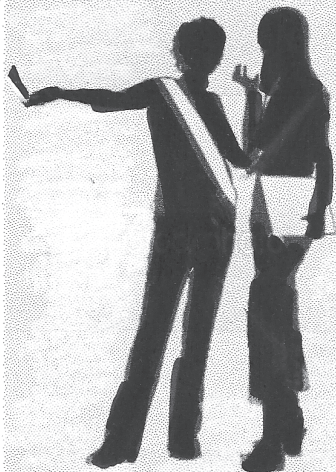
and tapes it to her notebook, passes it around, shows it to everyone.

...but I do it better because now I watch.

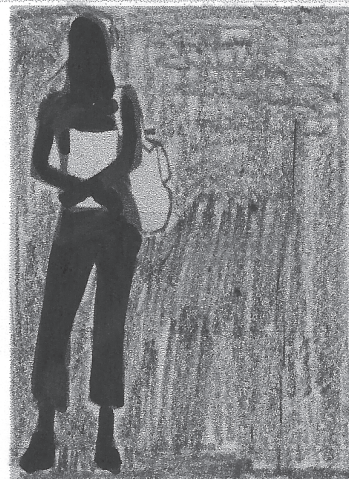
Lemon or lime



got to be on time cuz
the school bus leaves at
a quarter to nine



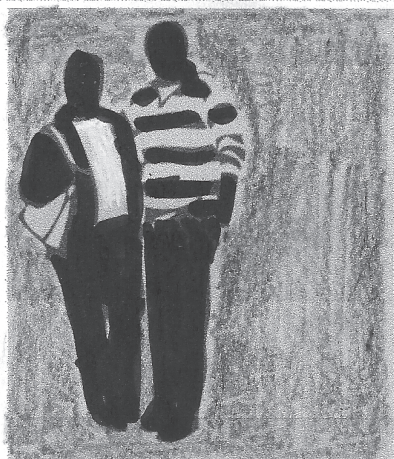
take a five



four



three

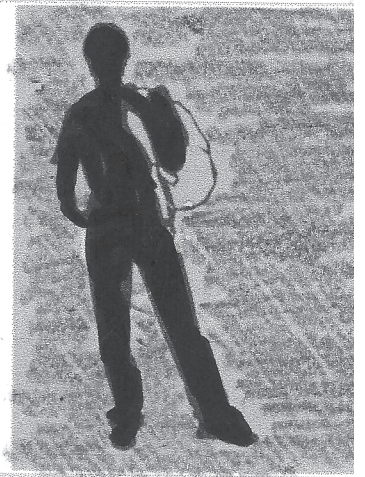


twenty-one





three twenty-one



a twenty-one



one



one

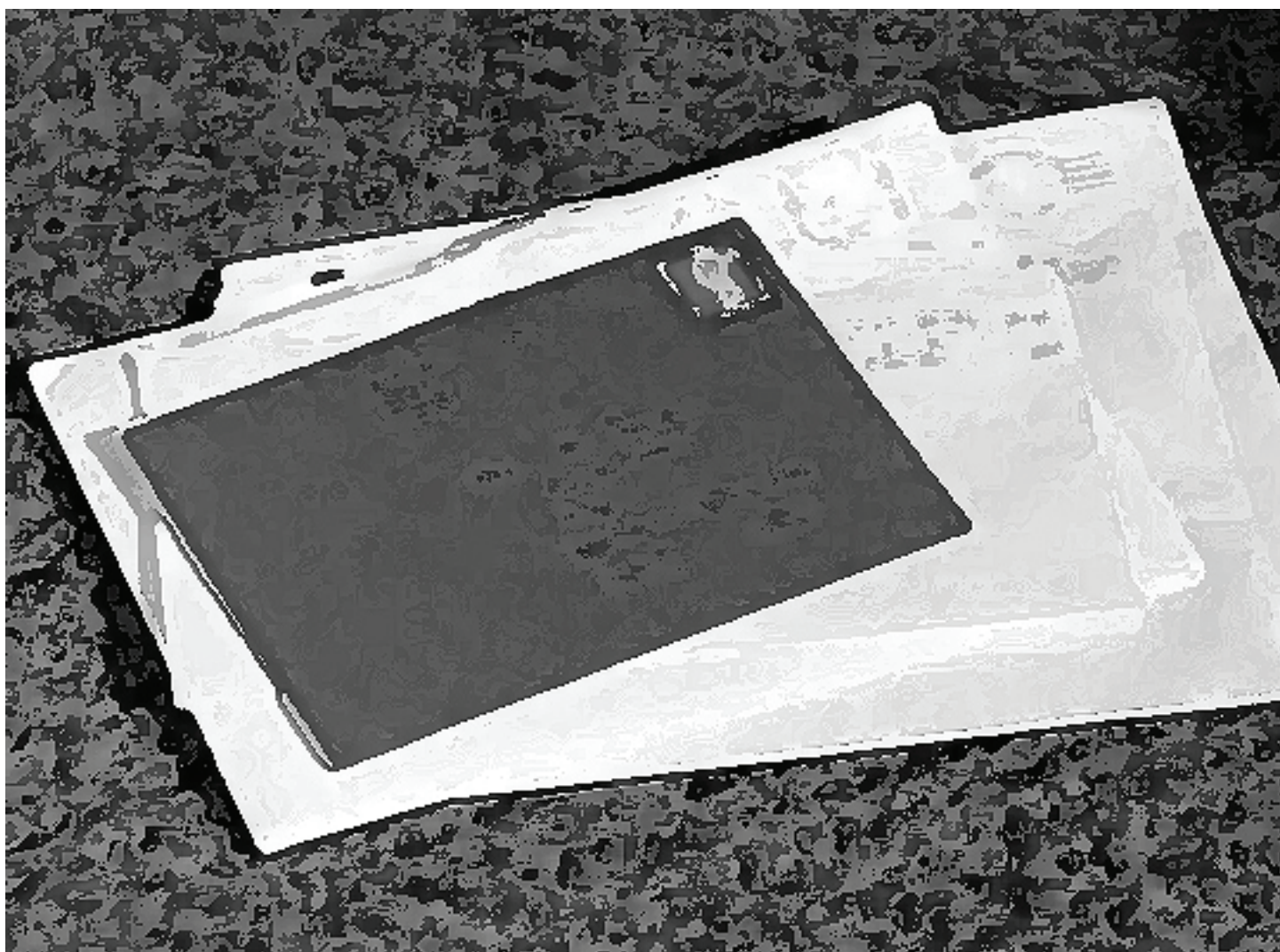


one



Alone...

PENPALS



Joan-Ann Ramjohn
Lot G-42 ½, Barbice
17 September 1986

Dear Leona,

How are you doing? How is life in New York City? Are your lessons going fine?

The weather here is fine. It has rained only four times this week. It has rained more the week before now and all the mud catch a dog. I pray for it to come free but it get suck in and die.

I have been to lessons this week and Jelly and Smiley send their best to you. They are writing letters to you as well. Miss Seepaul will marry in the New Year and has dismiss class early to make preparations. I see, too, her belly is big so I think she is pregnant. Maybe you will see her your side soon. She is marrying the Mormon man. Dominique is helping me with my lesson how you used to help me. He is attending University in two weeks. He will be an engineer. He has many books to buy and we are having to buy them. Do you have to buy your schooling books?

I have not climbed Rasta Tree since you left but Percy climbed it and fall and bust he lip. I laugh at him but he is doing well now and does not climb Rasta Tree. I can't wait to hear from you. My family sends their love.

Sincerely,
Joan-Ann

Leona James
Bronx, NY
Dear Joan-Ann

October 1986

How are you? I am well. New York is very good. In the mornings, it is bright and loud. It is how I imagine life if we lived in town if we lived in town and not #63 Village in Berbice. There is freeness here in New York. Chinese food can be delivered at anytime. Spanish people speak Spanish in the streets very loudly. Some of them look like white and some look Buck like your mother. There are a multitude of cars driven on the roads and still there are more cars parked on the street.

In New York, There are no cows walking or donkey droppings on the road but some people keep chickens. Mostly, it smells like meat cooking and sweets. It smells good in New York. You would like it.

I have started lessons. I am anxious to exceed in studies here as I have done back home. I laughed when you wrote about Percy falling. There are no rasta trees here, but there is a place my uncle and my aunt took me during Labor Day holiday that is called Coney Island. It is Brooklyn, New York. I bought a scratch and sniff sticker of cotton candy and put on the letter. I hope it will still smell when the letter reaches you. I have seen pictures in the encyclopedia in the library. The library is very vast. It is bigger than school.

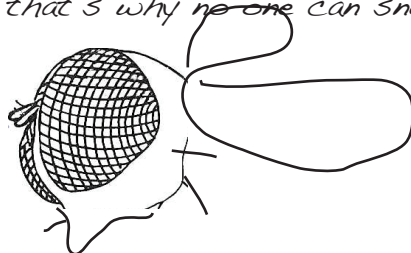
I will write to you soon. I look forward to your letter. Give my regards to everyone in your family: mother, father, Dominique, Mark, Juanita, Delon, even Percy.

Sincerely,

scratch-->

Leona

p.s.: I have fixed my own slides for my microscope. I have fixed a housefly. I drew you the eye. They can see behind their own backs that's why ~~no one~~ can sneak up and attack them.



Leona James
Bronx, NY

October 1986

Dear Victoria

How are you you? I am well. New York is very good. In the mornings, it is bright and loud. It is how I imagine life if we lived in town if we lived in town and not #63 Village in Berbice. There is freeness here in New York. Chinese food can be delivered at anytime. Spanish people speak Spanish in the streets very loudly. Some of them look like white and some look Buck like your mother. There are a multitude of cars driven on the roads and still there are more cars parked on the street.

In New York, There are no cows walking or donkey droppings on the road but sometimes it does smell so. Mostly, it smells like meat cooking and sweets. It smells good in New York. You would like it.

I have started lessons. I am anxious to exceed in studies here as I have done back home. Auntie Yvonne and Uncle Rudolph took Mommy and I to Coney Island during Labor Day holiday. It is in Brooklyn, New York. I have seen pictures in the encyclopedia in the library. There are big shops here where poeple spray you with perfume when you walk in. You would like it. They have bought me new shoes and some clothes. You would like them. How are your studies? How is St. Peter and Robot? Mommy says we will call home soon.

I will write to you soon. I look forward to your letter.

Sincerely,
Leona

p.s.: I enclosed three photographs of me in New York.

(scratch--->

Victoria James

October

1986

#63 Village

Leona,

I am well. I have received the photos. You must be sure to send home the sneakers you have for me, too. Make sure Mommy does not forget that I want black eyeliner from Avon. Also, she should bring the DarkLovely cream relax for my hair. She said she will let me straightener my hair. It rains too much and my hair is always nappy. The Ramjohn father was drunk yesterday and he was singing coolie songs all night. Daddy had to take him home. He is ashamed. The mother make them little ones come over and sleep here because he was cursing up bad. Remember to send things back. My birthday is December 17.

Sincere

Victoria

Joan-Ann Ramjohn
Lot G-42 ½, Berbice

November 1986

Dear Leona,

It's nice to hear you are enjoying New York. Coney Island is indeed fun. I found a photo of it in a book Miss Seepaul brought to class. I am curious about your first day of school and of the teachers and of the level of difficulty in the homework. It must be harder than Miss SeePaul. Let me know what your lessons are like. Your sister says that she spoke with you on the phone last weekend. It would be nice to talk to you. I will arrange it with your father.

I enclose the letters from everyone in the class. We miss you. We are proud of you and know you are excelling in school.

Love your friend,

Joan-Ann

PS: Joan-Ann made me write this for her – Dominique

Leona James
Bronx, NY
Joan-Ann,

Nov. 1986

Thank you for your letter. It has encouraged me. I have had challenges at school but I have met these challenges. Auntie Yvonne has introduced me to her old neighbor Ms. Dougherty. She is from South Carolina and her granddaughter Ralphie lives with her. She is called Ralphie because she is named after her father Ray Ralph but her real name is Adisa Nicolette Maxwell. She is 13, two years older than me and is one grade above me. She is very friendly and I hope to be a better acquaintance with her.

I hope all is well at home with everyone in your family.
Love,
Leona

Leona James
Bronx, NY

Nov 1986

Victoria:

I hope you enjoy the perfume and I hope the shoes fit. Mommy is leaving next week and I am very sad. You must write to me every week like Joan-Ann and Dominique.

Joan-Ann Ramjohn
Lot G-42 ½, Berbice

Dec 1986

Leona,

Your mother arrived. Thank you for the text books, calculator and architecture kit. It is most helpful for Dominique. I also enjoyed the books and clothing that you sent back for me and the girls. Percy is wearing his Mr. T shirt right now.

Your mother said you cried and wanted to come back to Guyana. It is okay to cry, remember. You must feel very sad but you should not.
Love, your friend,

Joan-Ann and Dominique

Leona James

2/87

Hey Guys!

Your birthday card was very lovely. It cheered me up. I am selected for the spelling bee. I am feeling much better. I see snow for the first time!

XOXO, Leona

PS: I got this postcard in Manhattan!

Victoria James

Feb 1987

#63 Village

Leona:

Mommy forget the jeans. She say she is not going to ask Auntie Yvone to send it. You have money so I am asking you to send them for me. I am stuck here in Guyana and you are in America. It is not your money. Mommy was suppose to bring them. You will need to put them in the barrel. Please for send them.

Vessy is taking me to a restaurant in Georgetown. I will spend a night with cousin Anita. She is getting married in Barbados. Daddy said he will pay for me because I say it's not fair you are in the US. Anita is going to the States, too. I told her the house in New York is big. It look big in the photo. I hope school is good for you.

With love,

victoria

PS: Why didn't you send me chocolates like Joanie.

Leona James
Bronx, NY

April 1987

Dear Joan-Ann

I am glad you and Dominique enjoy the chocolates. I still have candy left over. Auntie Yvonne says that there is more candy at Halloween time and that she will let me go trick or treating this year. There are only four houses for me to go to but I will be happy to have the candy.

My Spelling Bee was successful and I have advanced to city-wide competition. The instructor is making me work on my pronunciation. I will sound like Sidney Poitier. When you come to the states you'll start to talk different, too. I don't know how I sound and can only know when Ralphie tells me. She is sometimes too playful and I don't know if she is serious. I have begun to focus more on other friends as Ralphie is older and heading to a different high school soon. I am headed to a boarding school like English boys! It is part of a prestigious program I am part of for minorities (blacks, spanish, some chinese, and one boy from Czechoslovakia). I wish you were here. I think you and Dominique would fit in well in New York. When you come, I can teach you this new skip-rope game I am learning called Lemon or Lime. You do it with double dutch.

Yesterday the babysitter took me to a beauty parlor. They wanted to straighten my hair but Mommy said I should never let strangers play in my hair. My hair is longer now and I would like to cut bangs but I will not until Mommy gets here.

Give my best to your family.

Love,
Leona

ps: Please let Dominique know that he will succeed in school. I have my fingers crossed for him to make it to America. We can hang out!

Joan-Ann Ramjohn
Lot G-42 ½, Berbice

April 1987

Leona,

We are grateful for all the school supplies you send. It is good that the young ones have good example to look upon. Studies here are very challenging but the challenge is good. Everyone in the family is embracing challenge with God's good grace. Our father has a new job at the Guysuco plant. He is an attendant in the engine room. He is hoping to do well and excel to foreman. Percy, Sally and Mark have passed his exams to go on to the next form. Dominique is an apprentice leader in University. We are hopeful that he will go abroad to England, Canada or America. There are many opportunities for engineers in America. Miss Seepaul has her baby. Victoria find out Vessey has a son with a girl in Town and she break a bottle on his arm. Your Daddy had to drive him to hospital. Please send us a class photo if you have an extra to spare.

Love, your friends,

Dominique and Joan-Ann

PS: will you come back to Guyana before your parents leave? It will be nice to see you again.

Victoria James

#63 Village

Dear Leona:

Thank you for the birthday gift. I like the dresses and shoes. I am sorry I forget to write you on your birthday. I hope it was good.

I am no longer with Vessey. He is a liar. He has a baby with some coolie girl in Town. I bust up his ass good. I think Rumfish son like me now. He is looking handsome now. Are you with any boys in school. Send me a picture of the boys and girls. I want to know how they dress. Soon I will have new things and when I am finished with them you can have it.

Your sister, Victoria

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Victoria', with a large, stylized loop and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.



Wow. Your
adjustment to the US
is wonderful



Are
you actual-
ly listening or
just letting the
chip inscribe?



I am listening...



Because if you
were, you'd have seen it
as plain...

AS SEEN ON TV

Frank knocks on the door during her Sally-Jesse—some sweet man likes wearing his wife’s panties—and Lil Mama does not like her Sally Jesse interrupted even if it’s a Thanksgiving week rerun. Even the commercials are repeats: Meineke and the drill sergeant whose not gonna pay; Isotoner slippers; Crazy Eddy; Carvel whale cake; a commercial reminding us to watch more TV after TV and Jean Nate perfume that cost more than a pair of jeans. Frank knocks like twelve times then kicks—he has on slippers because it’s not loud just toe—but she doesn’t get up until she gets down the 800 number from the ITT Tech commercial, what she is really wanting. She collects numbers for her granddaughter hoping she’ll call because high school is running out. She is writing it down on the back of a losing Lotto card. The TV station cuts it off half-way and we’re back to sweet man and wife and her transgendered sister. *She look too fat for lacey tings, things.*

“Sheet...Leona. You deaf? Get the door.”

I have twenty minutes left on my SSAT verbal self-quiz but I don’t stop my stopwatch because I’m two pages ahead of last week’s pace. I open the door. Frank smells. Frank smells like the Salvation Army and cigarette smoke. A slant of fluorescence light comes in but Frank stays out.

“Leona, where she at?”

He’s craning over me, too close to my ear, too many eyes looking about and in. Always watching: on the stoop, out of windows, in his pajama pants. Watchman a biges’ tief.

“What do you want? Fa-Rank? I have to study.”

“Oh. Oh, my bad. It’s Ralphie. They say she down at the station, again.”

“I missed the godblank number. Did you get it, Leona?” Lil’ Mama asks.

I memorized it last week. I’m good with numbers. I memorized the entire geometry equation sheet in two days. “No, Ms. Annie.” I say holding back teeth.

“What you want Frankie banging up my door like that?”

“Ralphie.” I’m giggling, now. “It’s Ralphie. Frank said she’s down at the station, again.” I say. Again.

Frank hadn’t stolen anything, per se, but, back then, Aunt Yvonne said she never liked him when they were neighbors and she didn’t see a reason to like him now. She firmly believed a man wore his character and Frankie wore out the front stoop with gossip and whisky on sale.

“Dis building used to be a family place when I first come”, she said.

This building was the biggest thing I’d been in since JFK. We stood outside and Aunt Yvonne pressed

the button to an apartment that read “M. Dougherty”. The buzz was static but the ringing inside jangled in quick succession. It seemed to ring for no one in particular but got reverberated from the upper right.

“Don’t use the elevator alone. Get in and out with women.” Aunty warned.

This is where we drove, to the project facing Crotona Park. This is where I would go after school and wait for her to pick me up. This is where she used to live when she sent us barrels full of things that furnished our house and my imagination. I looked up and thought about the heavy brown security door. The heavy brown security door had a small square window for adults and tiptoed kids on crates to check who it was coming in. Who it was coming in could probably look back through the grid etched double pane window. The grid etched double pane window was probably bullet proof. Proof of forced entry ran up and down its length and cracks. Its length and cracks were fresher than its brown paint.

“Dis door never used to be so scratch up.”

Frank wore a blue feather beaded earring then when he held the door open for us.

“Long time no visit Yvonne. You look goooood.” Frank complimented her looking at me. I thought *only sweet man wear jewelry*.

“Oh, Frank. This is my sister”

And just like that, outside of her whisper she became American and defensive. Lil’ Mama sticks her head out the window and cackled the kindest sounds. I smiled.

“Yvonne! Come on up girl.” A razor screech was the doors sound.

“I got the door.”

“Oh, all right Frankie. Don’t hold them up.” And, she disappeared back in. Frank moved a little to the side. His movements were like a runner’s at the starting line shaking out their legs.

“Nice to meet you.” I put out my hand and just like that Frank returned slime.

“I was good at spelling back in school. What you studying? Spelling? I bet I can spell a word. Give me a word. Come on, give me a word.” Frank moves from leg to leg, itching. “Give me something.

“Bone.”

“Oh, that easy. B-O-N-E.”

“Irony.”

“Iron knee. That’s two words.”

“It’s a compound word.”

“Iron and knee.” I look down and shake my head.

“No, wait. I know it.”

Lil’ Mama wrestles the knob from me. “Get. We going.”

“I’m studying.”

“Girl, your auntie will not want you up in here alone. She funny like that.” Fire trap. Rapists. Keep out of Lil’ Mama’s bureau drawers.

Lil’ Mama tells me to leave my books because we’re coming back. She grabs the Sunday wig because she still has rollers in her walkin’ ‘round one, the one with highlights like Miami Beach Barbie, the Barbie collecting dust in Ralphie’s room. The Sunday wig is a Suzette Charles wig with bumped ends. It’s too small for her head but too expensive to replace. Her roots are showing. Grey wires.

“How this one look? I need a touch up.” Mirrors are always on her mind and when Aunt Yvonne pays her this Tuesday for watching me, she’ll get her hair done before she does anything else.

Lil’ Mama took us to Gloria’s the weekend the snow melted. Me and Ralphie were to wait while she got her wash and set but a weave walked in while Lil’ Mama was under the dryer and so we had to wait for three more hours.

“Let’s go outside.”

“But, Ms. Dougherty said we have wait here.”

“Yo, granma. Can we go outside?”

“No. You gotta stay...”

“We just going to be right there. You can see us.”

“Ralphie...”

And she yanked me out with gorilla arm, unnaturally strong like her body was working against the clock, like some beautifully engineered time machine was testing separation and let her body advance five years ahead of her mind.

I didn’t object. I didn’t object when we were friends, then. Play sisters. There were some girls with a rope playing double dutch with a white clothesline wire. Pitat-Pitat. A one, a one-two rhythm.

“Lemon or lime, got to be on time, ‘cause the school bus leaves and a quarter to nine. Take a five, four, three, twenty, one.”

“Ah, one. Ah, one. Ah, one.” T’Nora Ruiz, this Dominican girl, on one end and this other girl I don’t

remember on the other end; and, this other one jumped.

One syllable to get you in the rope and one to get you out. Legs moving like hopscotch between two ropes. They ducked in and out of the rope like it was a revolving door. Perfect timing. You had to be agile.

“We wanna play.”

“When we’re done,” T’Nora said.

“We don’t have time. Our grandmother is almost done with her hair.” Ralphie unhooked her gold name chain and shoved the heavy thing in her back pocket. The game stopped and waited for her.

“You jump?” She barked at me this time.

“Me nah see this ting before.”

“Oh, snap you Jamaican? You sound like my stepfavah.” T’nora walked over.

“Guyana.”

“Noonegiveafuck. Let’s play.” *It came out nicer than it sounds.*

She gave me one end and T’nora took the other.

By the time we got to the “ones” of the “Lemon or Lime” game, all the crap and debris from the pavement had been whipped out of bounds. Ralphie and these two girls hopped through in perfect time. Ralphie’s movements were like a horse over a steeple, heavy with grace. One girl gets out and now it is just two for the possibility of winner. Lisa. That was the name of the girl on the other end. She was small and safe. I didn’t think the rope knew she was there. I learned how to play watching her moving slowly into the middle when one rope goes up and jumping quickly out when the other rope goes down. I don’t remember who won but something about the doubled rope clumping and tangling gave Ralphie an extra turn.

Lucky it is Tuesday because Lil’ Mama doesn’t have to come out of pocket to pay my bus fare. It is Tuesday but Lil’ Mama has on her Sunday wig when we go out on the stoop. Traveling down her block in the chilly afternoon, I can see Gloria’s salon is full. Everyone has to look good when family stops by to eat what’s been smothered for Thanksgiving. We walk on the other side of Westchester Avenue, the side that is directly under the Brooklyn bound 2 and 5 train. We pass the bodega that stays open 24 hours, but not the one that closes at ten; we pass La Clinica Maternidad with two metal doors and one window, but not Southern Boulevard Clinic that *se habla espanol* with fresh yellow paint; we pass the Dominicana who does hair for twenty if you look for real Black, but not Xiomara’s who does is for fifteen no matter what; we pass people who have real afternoon chores, not people whose afternoon chores include picking up grandchildren from the police precinct.

I think Ralphie was born bad and her life was brought into the Bronx with dire effects: to hate me. I look at Lil' Mama's Sunday wig as we wait for the #4 bus and wonder how many prayers its heard, prayers for a cherub gone psychopath. Ralphie once unhooked Lil' Mama's bra when we were in C-Town waiting in line to pay. She wore a lowback sundress. Sweat kept the cups in place until we were two blocks from home. Anticipation was better than the realization that I was an accomplice for saying nothing, not even laughing which Ralphie saw as an affrontery in her book. If I so much as change the channel or explain why what she says or does is wrong, Lil' Mama will wait until Aunty picks me up at eight and tell her I'm acting uppity. So, it's best that I keep my mouth shut like I'm doing right now. When he reached the stoop that summer, Lil' Mama's breasts had sagged below the wire cup that pressed four segments into her chest making her look like bettle mesothorax. It was too hot for even Frank to be outside. No one noticed.

We show up at the precinct.

"What?" The policeman with the vitiligo arm colored white people pink looks down and slides a foot clockwise or counterclockwise—either way, he turned slow and pissed toward us. They recognize each other.

"Where she at?"

"Really, Ms. Dougherty?"

"Yea, really." Lil' Mama does not like back talk.

Officer Vitiligo turns to Officer Tanning Bed: another officer more red than brown or pink but definitely magazine tan. They whisper to each other and flip through a clipboard.

"Hello?" Lil' Mama switches the pocketbook straps on her shoulders.

I really don't want to be associated with her but every time I move away she gets up next to me to talk shit about Vitiligo, not Tanning Bed.

"See what I mean."

"Come on."

I tell her I want to wait in the waiting area and study. She says no. Click-clak-clak on her heels and we follow Vitiligo down the waxy brown linoleum. The extra "clak" is on account of her broken heel strap. Made in China--made in a hurry. Lil' Mama turns the corner to the holding cells. She knows this walk.

"What she steal this time?"

"Goldfish food." Vitiligo flips up a form.

"But we don't have no goldfish. How much was it? Wasn't a million pounds. I'll pay for it."

"Tell that to Woolworths, not me."

“She’s barely fifteen. She’s a minor.”

Officer Vitiligo has something to say behind his teeth and a flared up nostrils. He’s not beastin’ like an angry dog, just chewing down like one. Lil’ Mama sees this and shuts up. Finally. He walks ahead.

“See what I mean. Ignorant.”

I don’t see nothing but his pink ass arm because I’m afraid to look in his eyes, afraid he’s going to associate me with Ralphie. I’m almost thirteen. I know better. I stopped boosting two years ago after me and T’Nora got caught at Pretty Girl with two pairs of jeans on. I think her picture is still up on the store wall near the layaway counter. I bought the pair I tried taking.

Lil’ Mama goes ahead to the left and I’m following like she knows better.

“This way.”

“Booking’s back there?” I giggle for no reason. *Stop*. We follow him to the right. We follow a little more and the hall loses heat fast. He turns a door handle. The back of his pink hand is partially brown like me, like milk tea. He pushes open the door. We are outside.

We get in a plain car but everything inside is police business. He shuts our door and backs out with little sounds cooing from his radio.

We don’t go so far, just to Pelham by Jacobi Hospital but when we don’t stop at the hospital entrance Lil’Mama gets the notion to grab my hand. I don’t hold her hand right away. She’s not family, but I do like her.

“She get hurt? You didn’t say that before. I woulda just come here.” And she lets out a tremble that’s like more a foreshadow than a speculation.

“She’s not hurt, Ms. Dougherty. Now, they tried everything...”

When we park, I squeeze her hand but it comes too late because she is running out the car to the front of the Coroner’s Office. It is the first time I forgot about studying since we left the house.

I was afraid of Ralphie. Not because she grew two inches in a year or could wear the boy Timberlands, or pass pitbulls on chains inches from her leg, or curse out the principal. It was the things she didn’t do. When she stayed at home doing nothing but burping Sunkist on the couch and changing Lil’Mama’s stories to the Dukes of Hazzard you should be afraid of a tongue too calm.

At the apartment one afternoon, when I wasn’t supposed to be there except that Auntie Yvonne wanted to work a double shift, Ralphie sat on the couch with a plastic cap on her head.

“I’m doing a hot oil. Want me to do you?”

In hindsight, I may have been too humble. "No thank you."

"Ima do you when I'm done."

Lil' Mama was asleep. She slept after she cleaned up after Ralphie. The living room was her trophy room with framed photos of all her sister's and brother's kids on the wall and ceramic black angels on doilies. She got the notion to move from South Carolina to New York in the 60s. She was the progressive sister with her own job in New York City. The other seven followed one by one and two went back down south. Sometimes she would spin her own wheels about how her nieces and nephews were raising their kids wrong. She said she would never let a man tell her what to do but then she had no use for a man who just followed what she said. *This was how I remembered the definition of paradox for the SSAT.* She left Ralphie's mother down south when her daughter, Danetta, moved to the Bronx. It wasn't until she was about my age that she sent for Danetta. When she got north, she was a firecracker. Lil' Mama shakes her head about these stories. Danetta had Ralphie sixteen years ago and for the fifteen after, she took all that fire and gave it to Jehovah.

HELLFIRE

IS IT PART OF DIVINE JUSTICE?



clesiastes 9:5) It is impossible for the dead, "conscious of nothing at all," to experience the agonies of hellfire.

A Harmful Doctrine

Some maintain that the teaching of hellfire is useful, true or not. Why? They say it serves as a deterrent to wrongdoing. Is that true? Well, is the crime rate in regions where people believe in hellfire lower than in other places? Hardly! In fact, the doctrine of hellfire is very harmful. Will a person who believes that God torments people view torture as something abhorrent? Why should he? Those believing in a cruel god often become cruel like their god.

In whatever way a reasonable person may look at the matter, he cannot accept the existence of a hell of torment. Logic rebels against it. Human nature is repelled by it. More important, God's Word does not say that such a place exists. When a person dies, "he goes back to his ground; in that day his thoughts do perish."—Psalm 146:4.

What Punishment for Sin?

Does that mean that we are not punished for our sins? No, that is not the case. Our holy God punishes sinners, but he does not torture them. And when sinners repent, he forgives them. What is the punishment for sin? The Bible gives a forthright answer: "The wages sin pays is death." (Romans 6:23) Life is a gift from God. When we sin we no longer deserve that gift, and we die.

You may ask: 'How is that just? Why, everyone dies!' That is true because we are all sinners. In effect, no one deserves life. "Through one man sin entered into the world and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men because they had all sinned."—Romans 5:12.

At this point you may be thinking: 'If we all sin and so

I was half reading, half watching Sheriff Rosco flirt with Daisy while Luke slipped out of jail. Ralphie licked her bottom lip for a minute. We're eating chicken from the Chinese spot across the street, so it could have been that that got to my stomach. Like clockwork, all that grease wanted to come out of me. I sat on the toilet while a long rope ran its course through me. Then she busted in.

"Say cheese!"

Morgue, and even the windows are decorated with cornucopia cut-outs for Thanksgiving.

From the entrance of the Coroner's Office to the hallway we turn into, the air loses heat. The smell is Pine-Sol and decomposition, I imagine, and something stronger, like the scent of a doll's strawberry plastic scalp. It moves through me. I smile because I've never seen a dead body and I hear you see them in medical school. Vitiligo stops at a door B234. The basement is the ground floor just like at the Kaplan center. He pushes open B324 and Lil' Mama slips under his black arm and goes straight to the middle table. Homing pigeon. I'm looking up at Officer Vitiligo. I'm waiting for him to say "sorry" but he stews his teeth and I wonder if he's West Indian, too.

"I'll be outside when you're ready."

The café door swings like kitchen doors in sitcoms. We walk in and there's this light skinned sista in a white lab coat. She's not a doctor, though. I'm going to be a doctor. She drops her pen on the metal counter. She's speaks real proper like Sandra Huxtable. I'm sort of jealous. I'm shocked. I'm sad. But, I'm more jealous of her than sad about Ralphie but it doesn't matter because I'm not going to end up working in a morgue. I smile about that. Lil' Mama is really quiet at first, then screams giving the echoes echoes.

I don't want to hug Lil' Mama or say it'll be okay but, Sandra Huxtable says it first so then I say it, again. When she calms down and Sandra and Vitiligo peel her off the linoleum she stands next to Ralphie whose eyes are mostly shut.

"She' looks like an angel." Lil' Mama touches Ralphie's cheeks. She says it again, but to me she still looks like a dude. I'm grinning like I don't know why but no one's paying attention. Ralphie's legs are twisted, maybe even detached. I don't want to ask right away. The Timberlands in a bag on the floor. I'm trying to be sad but she's been nasty to me and so I list my grievances, in chronological order for the week, to keep my tears inside. I feel sorry for Lil' Mama, though. This was her only grandchild.

"She's with Jesus now" is what Sandra Huxtable says. I'm too shy to keep up with God talk. I'm not family. I'm not phony.

“Is this your other granddaughter?”

“No”. My ‘no’ was kind of stank so I say something sweet and leave.

From behind the door Lil’ Mama is talking in tongues from a season in purgatory, the pamphlet she read, yesterday. Sandra Cosby talks over her or maybe they’re praying, but Lil’ Mama is louder. She won’t be out done.

“But, we don’t got no goldfish.” Over and over.

Officer Vitiligo, who is really named Jeffers, badge number 10499, stews his teeth, again. I ask him if he’s West Indian and I don’t think he hears me. Or, he ignores me. *I would.*

“Goldfish food. That’s crazy.”

“Is that all you people have to say?”

“You people” is the language of erosion. That’s what I wrote in this essay for Black history month. Erosion. I’m not ‘you people’. Maybe he hasn’t looked in a mirror or Maybe his pink arm has taken over his psyche like pod people.

He continues. “This isn’t a hospital bed. That little girl is dead in there. Ran into a street when the clerk went after her. “ And I pictured it. Shrimp flakes running in blood trails down the East Tremont.

“Oh my god.”

“Yea, ‘oh my god’. Why are you grinning?”

I grin when I’m nervous but I guess I was grinning because I trying not to be ‘you people’.

“I’m not grinning. I’m shocked.”

“Shocked? Your sister is here every month.”

“She’s not my sister. Ms. Dougherty is my babysitter.”

“Your parents send you to her. Huh.”

This last thing is worse than ‘you people’. It’s punctuated with disgust.

“My Aunt.”

“Aunt.” He’s incredulous for another passed along child.

“Don’t you people have parents?”

“I study when I’m there. I’m taking the SSAT.” Specificity, because it matters what this asshole thinks of me.

“Well, I’m sorry.” And, I don’t know how he means it, but I hate his sorry ass and I hope Officer Jeffers shoots himself in the foot.

I go back to the waiting area and sit by a window to heat up. Somebody's car stops at a red light outside and blasts Special Ed. The window throbs from the bass. I got my book open on my knees like I'm studying but I'm singing when my part comes on, "I got land in the sand on an island of the West Indies. I even got an island of my very own. I got a frog, a dog with a solid gold bone. Got a treaty with Tahiti because I own a percent. I got gear, I wear every day..." The car is gone before I can sing, "I got it made" so I don't. The other people are looking at the ceiling, the linoleum and their dirty finger nails. I start counting tiles then say 'fuck it' and leave. Jeffers pissed me off.

Frank is outside on the stoop.

"...and she was like damn, the bus hit her and I don't know if she saw the bus but she bounced and shit. The cashier shouldn't be chasing nobody. I'm like, no. You don't chase nobody out no store. It ain't your store. And for what? Cat food?"

I want to correct him but Ralphie's cousin is there. The nasty one who pinched my ass that one time and said I was stuck up because I told on him. He pretends not to see me but I see him. Then, he says—trying to get me involved:

"Lil' Mama should get Sharpton. You need litigation."

"She's still at the precinct. Go." Please go, all of you.

"Yo, Leona. I got it"

"Got what?"

"I-R-O-N-Y. I'm right. Right?" I open the security door with a kick and let it shut behind me.

I walked into the cafeteria after she took my picture and people were still laughing their asses off.

I'm like fuck you all, you'll be working for me one day. T'Nora agreed and we rolled our eyes at Ralphie's table careful not to make eye contact. It would be enough to show offence. A simple, unsoggy fry sat on the table and I flicked it in he direction. I wished it were lodged in her throat, blue-faced and bug-eyed.

Inside, I stare at Ralphie's class photos on the wall by the fake pink flowers. She's got her hands crossed in front a fake bookcase and a globe. She has greased down curls on her temple and cheeks. It is a version of femininity that needs more than lipstick to be convincing. For a second we are smiling at each other then I catch myself and I am ashamed of my face muscles for their involuntray movement. I tried to be friends with her but she opened the bathroom door on me and took my picture. I covered my face. Whatever.

I sit down and start the verbal self-test again. Soma is to Psyche as Body is to A) Mind, B) Thoughts, C) Soul D) None of the above. I'm thinking thoughts when Frank knocks on the door. I ignore him and he calls me the "b" word. I see him through the peephole and I sit when he's gone.

I get bored waiting for eight. I get bored with studying and bored with TV. I am hungry but every Saturday when I call back home to Guyana, my parents tell me not eat dinner at Lil' Mama's. Unhealthy. *Only eat what your Ant'y cook.* I finish a plate of food and I think about Jeffers and how I'm 'you people' and when they finally get to America, my parents will be more 'people'. Why is it okay for Lil Mama to watch me but not okay for me to eat here? And, who will know what's really even inside me? I crack open a Sunkist. I pee with the door open. I find Lil' Mama's good chocolate in her top drawer. I take one, then decide not to.

The ITT Tech commercial comes on fives times between "Charles in Charge" and "Family Ties". I buzz Auntie Yvonne up. She's heard the gossip and yells at me to hurry up and pack my bag telling me to "just leave" my sandwich in the fridge like the house is contagious and a bus is going to run me over if I doddle.

"Leona, come fast nah girl!"

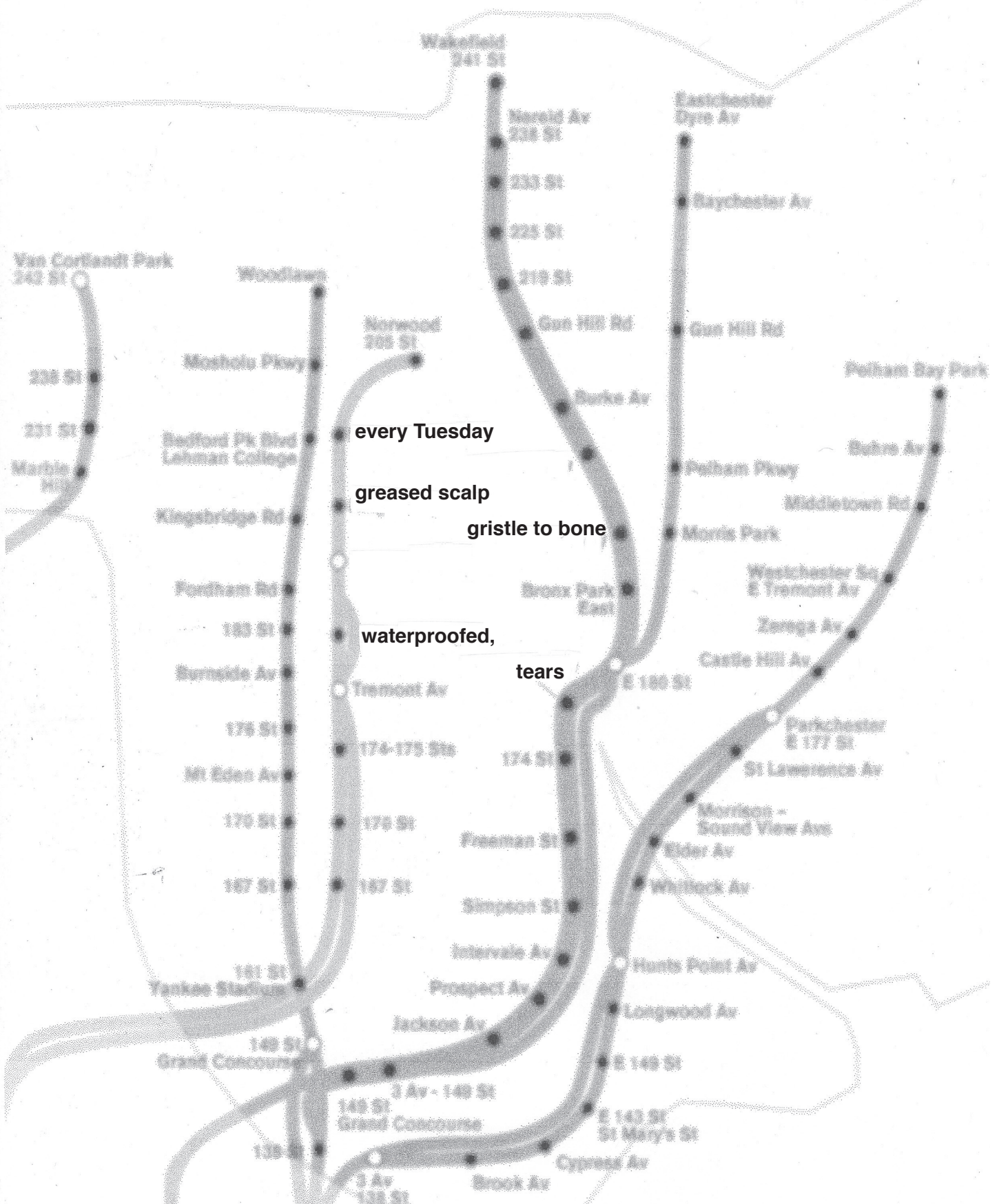
I go in Ralphie's room—why I'm thinking about it only now—and take the Polaroid of me on the toilet from her jewelry box. I put it next to the coroner Poloroid I took off Sandra Huxtable's clipboard and slip them in my backpack. Before I leave, I write down the number to ITT Tech for Lil' Mama. I put it on Ralphie's class photo.

"Hurry up, Leona," and Auntie Yvonne is already pressing the numbers on the elevator.

Downstairs but before the security door, I wonder now if I should have put it on the fridge.

Schtupid.

Bronx MTA



Baggage Claim



The woman sitting beside him was going to Queens. Her dying parents were still alive in Linden; that is why she was on the plane. (Daddy's dying parents lived in Rosehall.) Her son was a sophomore at SUNY something, that is why she kept her assigned seat between Mommy and Daddy instead of switching with Victoria who had a good window seat. She was a braggart and liked her audience of fresh ignorance. Her husband was a Brit-borm Bajan; that was why he picked her up from JFK in an Acura Legend blasting chutney versions of Dolly Parton classics. He was shorter than Daddy so he needed to flash his gold chains, initials "CH" for Clive Henry. His chest was an armpit of hair, bally and thickish. His two-finger rings went out of style in 1986 but old people never know when that happens. He was an accountant at a travel firm that booked flights and arranged for barrels transport to the West Indies. Aunt Yvonne, standing in her new heels, once called that firm a band of crooks but in present company Clive Henry had a good, good job. The braggart, Vivien or Vivian, had a wide but pretty smile with gold trim around her front four and I could see how Mommy might think she was attractive but then Mommy does not tell all with her smiles.

nothing hurts more than

soft knees hardened by amens

ripe rot, best pickney



Vivian or Vivien was a paralegal and none of this would be important if it didn't turn out we stayed in touch with them many years later. This was of no significance than this: the airline lost one of Mommy's luggage, the one with all the food stuffs like achar and castrup. Vivien or Vivian used her legal prowess to get a baggage claim manager. Clive Henry used his English english sway with the airline folk throwing out a zed every now and again just so some dimwit could be like "huh" or "wow" or "you're British." Of deeper significance was this: as soon as Daddy found what a paralegal was, he kept pushing a career. He insisted I see about classes. Apparently, he had not read the materials I sent about boarding school. He pushed it on Victoria. With Mommy, she just told him out flat that if she was going to school it would be for nursing and they traded facts and figures on American salaries and this is how it was for the entire ride to Auntie Yvonne's. I suppose my letters were too informing, too complete because no one cared about me making the Daily News Spelling Bee again, going to the regional science fair, being picked co-captain of debate, being a pep squad dancer with girls who got into the Performing Arts High School. Nope. Victoria didn't even notice I had bangs or that my Quartz watch had glow-in-the-dark arms and the band matched my blue sweater vest. I could see she had on the Jordache jeans she asked for three Christmases, ago. Fading jeans. Levi's were the new thing and I had on pair.

We sat in the back seat together and I wanted to know all about Vessey and kissing him because I planned on kissing Patrick Morales at the Sadie Hawkins. Victoria sat in the back with me but pushed her torso forward to point to every which thing that we passed when we had three perfectly good windows to ourselves. We passed over the Tri-Borough bridge into the Bronx and nothing changed.

We moved into the basement apartment and, at first, Victoria made the case for separate bedrooms, that I could still live upstairs, that she was almost 18 and needed privacy. I'd already arranged our room and gave her the top bunk where the window mattered. But, it didn't.

There was bad air and hard to cut. That was how it was until years later when Vessey arrived. Until then, she presumed herself angry with me for their separation even though she managed very well in his absence. Some guy named Darryl from D.C., and another named Gregorio from Cyprus who transferred to her high school and Petey from her job at C-Town. I wanted a sister so I wrote to JoanAnn promising her that when I was 21 and working I would sponsor her and Dominique. These were our well-laid plans.

On days when the bad air would shift, Victoria and I would become occasional friends who used modernity to gang up on Mommy...



One year, barely one year, wasn't enough and I wished, sometimes, I wished they hadn't skipped me a grade. One year would have cut that bad air; I bet. But, time say "today for me, tomorrow for you."

It is my graduation day and I pound on the door again and Mommy made good on her promise to slap me. She missed my head but my neck stings. I thought about the Victoria's floating baby in the toilet or in the lab or waiting in her belly and I think he's better off waiting for better parents. I can't believe she got away with



that nonsense. I mentioned Patrick Morales once and they had a canption

I can't wait to get out of there. I'm ready. I think Victoria may have be jealous, again and always. I can't help it. She didn't want to be here. I think it's because didn't want to go college or find a job. She wanted a man to take care of her. I don't know what she was so upset. When you love money, you pay for problems.

I stand next to the fan and mommy said, "Leona, it's your fault for not waking."

But it's wasn't my fault. I was up late practicing with daddy. It's my day, not hers. Why do I have to take a cold bath when I'm valedictorian? And that's when Victoria came out.

"There's no hot water, anyway."

Victoria brushed past us, her belly a hard muscle

"Girl, don't take your eyes past me."

"She rolled her eyes, again, mommy."

Victoria turned around and pinches my arm. I don't wince because she got my tee shirt. I just looked at her like a wrestler and she leaves me alone. I should body slam her in like five months.

I only had time to hit the hotspots and change my underwear. I fan my armpits dry and I put two dots of Avon Mesmerize under my armpits and over my crotch. Elsie said she was going to stuff her bra for graduation but I don't have one and I forgot to take one from Victoria's drawer last night. I slipped on my petticoat. It had two safety pins in position so the straps wouldn't ride up over my dress. Mommy made my dress. She saw the same style at Alexander's Department Store but it was \$39.99. \$39.99 buys groceries or things for the car. The cloth and lace to make the dress only rang up to \$13 at Woolworth's. A little big but nice. I liked it, I remember.

I'd give it to JoanAnn a few years later.

I had my stack of index cards in one hand and I try to mumble from memory something from memory. A key unlocks the deadbolt on the front door. Daddy comes in and puts the Lotto ticket on top the fridge. It is 8:30 but graduation started at ten. He sits on the couch and I practice for him.

“Good morning ladies, gentleman, distinguished guests and fellow graduates. I am honored to have been chosen to speak before you today, on this fortuitous day...’ Daddy can I just say fortunate?”

“No.”

“Well Elsie said that she doesn’t know how to say that word in Spanish.”

“Spanish?”

“Yeah, all the speeches are translated. The salutatorian is already bilingual, so this girl, Elsie, has to do mine.

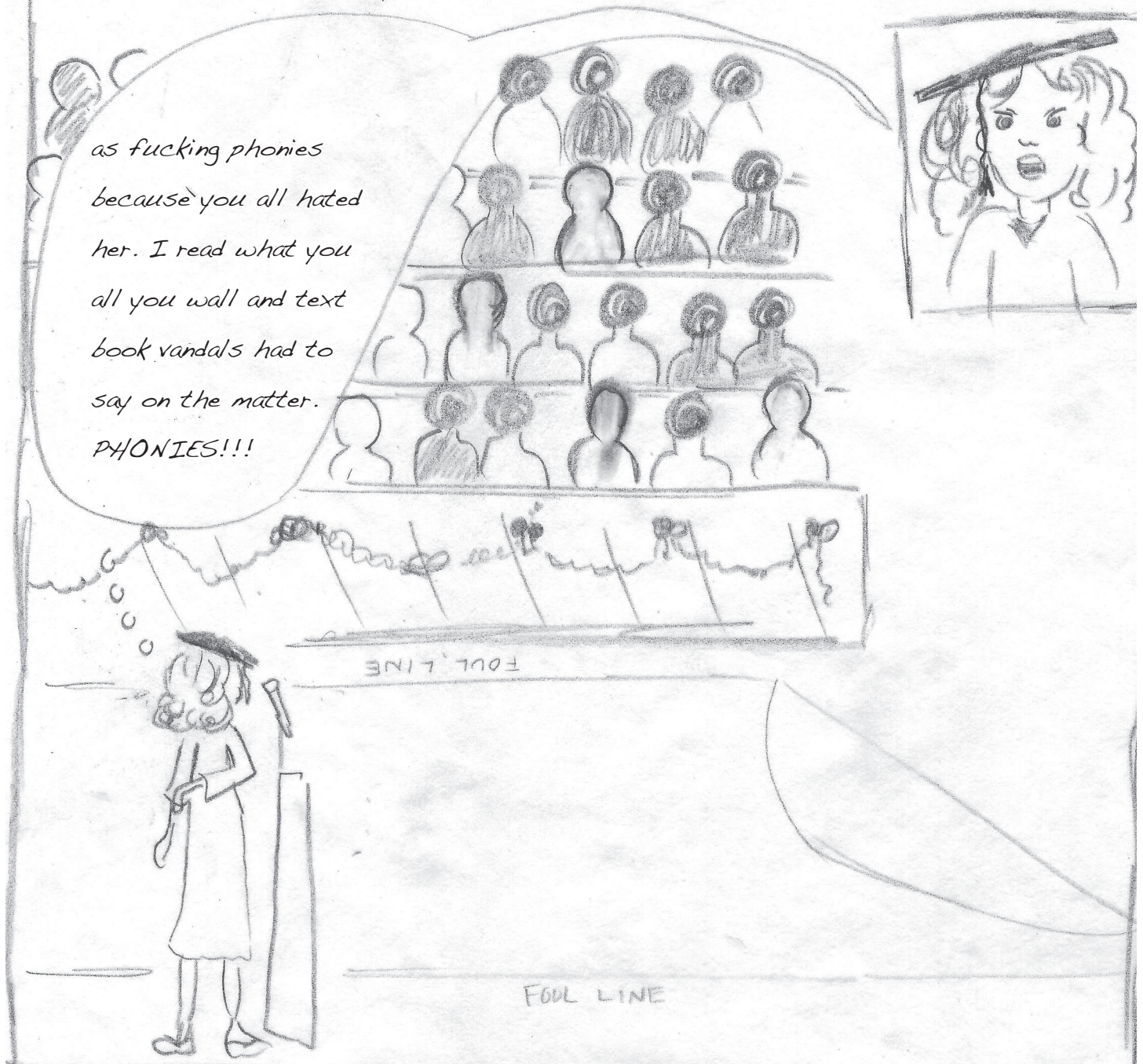
“Bi-lingual my ass. This is America. What’s the matter? No one understands English?”

“Not everyone in America is “American”. You’re not.”

He pulls out his wallet and points to his Naturalization I.D. “Citizen” he says and I continue.

“We embark on a journey with many paths, and one goal:success. It is up to us to exceed expectations because life is full... possibilities...here, hard, but...we can’t change the circumstances...”

I blank out. I thought I was prepared. I was really prepared but then everyone is quiet and staring in the auditorium with the accordion wall opened to the lunchroom. I smell lunchroom meat and see banners. I see smirking faces. Patrick and Booker are quiet. Monica and Collette are quiet. Everyone is quiet and I can’t remember what to say. So I say something nice about Ralphie; I suppose I should feel something.



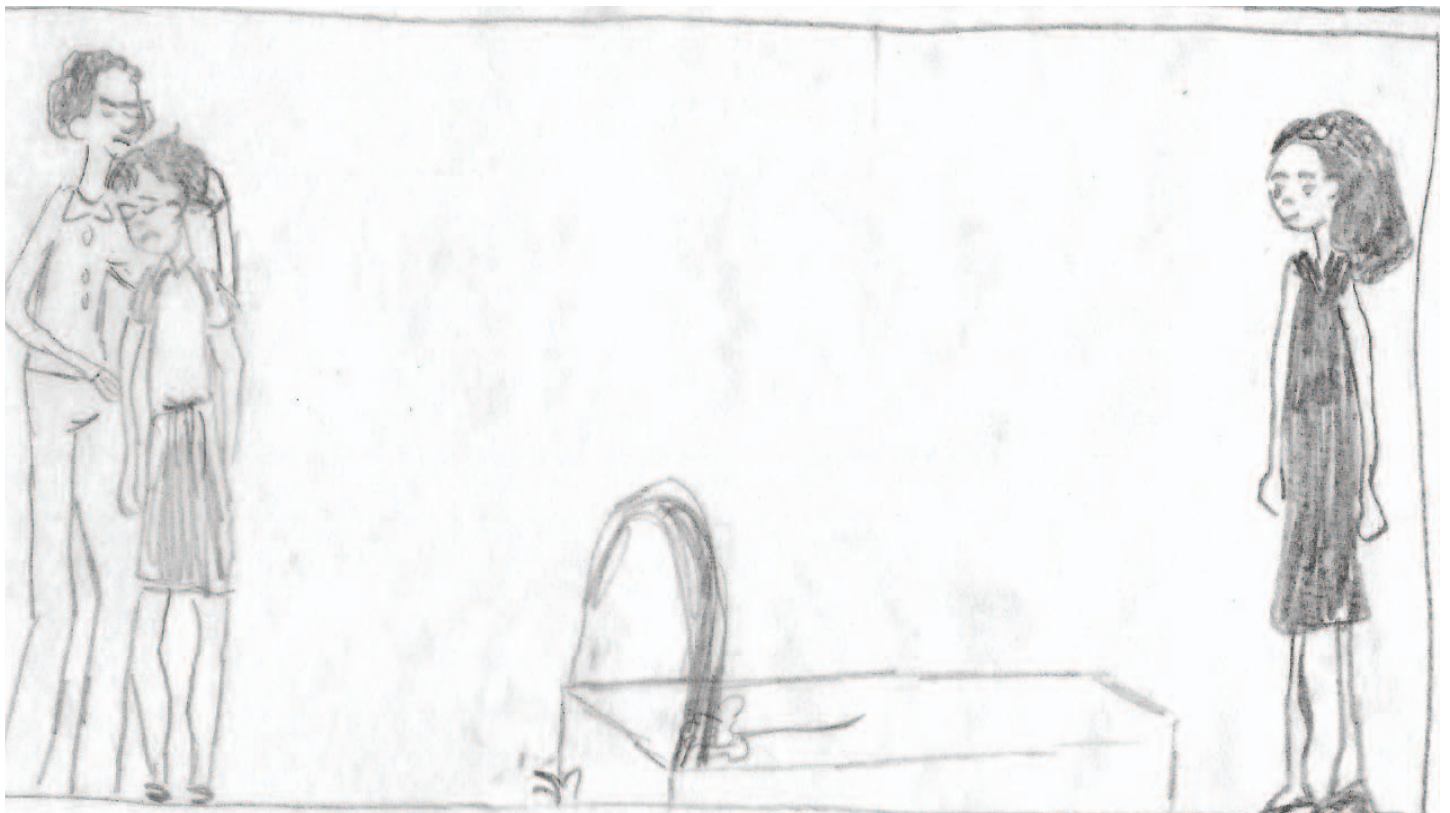
Everyone claps. Then I say something about this being the first day of our lives and what I should have added was "as fucking phonies because you all hated her. I read what you all you wall and text book vandals had to say on the matter." But, I remember the right words and finish in a whisper.

"Our futures are immeasurable!"



Until someone measures you.

PRE-EMPT panels



“Okay, Dr. Elliott. Let’s break. I need to check histone levels.”

“So, what’s significant are probably just others graduations. Other ones are recorded elsewhere. I think Time Magazine did a peice on me in the forties. I know that’s all any potential grandchild or historian would want know. Not rambles.”

“Grandchildren would want rambles.”

“They’d want to know about the “Hulk gene”. I know I would.”

“Every high school text book has that story.”

“Do they? Then your job is done, no?”

“What I mean, I mean I’d like to fill in some gaps. It’s just you started to say Victoria was...



VICTORIA made the largest fuss since she heard she wasn't going to America. She wanted new shoes so Mommy let her come along to Town. Of course, he spoiled us and we were full on Brown Betty ice cream before we boarded the ferry at Risgnol landing.

The ride to Town was long but beautiful. The three of us squeezed into the second row. Victoria pushed her way to the front seat on the second leg of the trip, however. She said she was too big to sit in cramped quarters. When we arrived at the Immigration office, Daddy went outside to smoke with a friend and I stayed in line for the requisite stamps on my papers. He sat at one end of a low bench outside the Immigration House because it had shade. Victoria was supposed to stand next to me and wait because was young but she insisted on pursing her lips and standing elsewhere against a white wall with dirty marks. She stands far away as if people can't tell we are sisters by our eye though my face is round and hers long. She was more like our mother in that way,



I tink. Fuh true.

A motor bike run over Victoria foot when she was small and so the pinky toe juk out over she sandal and drag on the ground. It's a small thing no one does see. No one does see much lower than she knee because she is more like Mommy with curves and hips and a bottom. I am lighter than she but she allow to have make-up and that is what dem two guards is coming for now, to talk to she in the center of the wall. Two uniform workers walk up to she and smile, one with his big open face the other with unfortunate teet. Teet Bwoy only stay a short while. It is not because she fearing Daddy to walk back in or that I mightin laugh. No. She send him away and Open Face to follow with only a glance the way Mommy send away them beggars who come to the porch after Sunday.

I practice my look. I glance at the little boys in front me in the line. They are still playing with their toys from America and not minding me but their Surinamee mother look back.

“Gal, who left you so alone.”

I say, “My father de outside.”

“You look sick. You sick? Where he leave you?”

I smile and shake my head so I can erase my sexy look and she can see I am not sick. Victoria comes over and the way she comes over make open face look up from he chair.

“You bracelets are nice,” she says to the Surinamee mother.

“I get these in Nickerie.”

“We have family in Nickerie.”

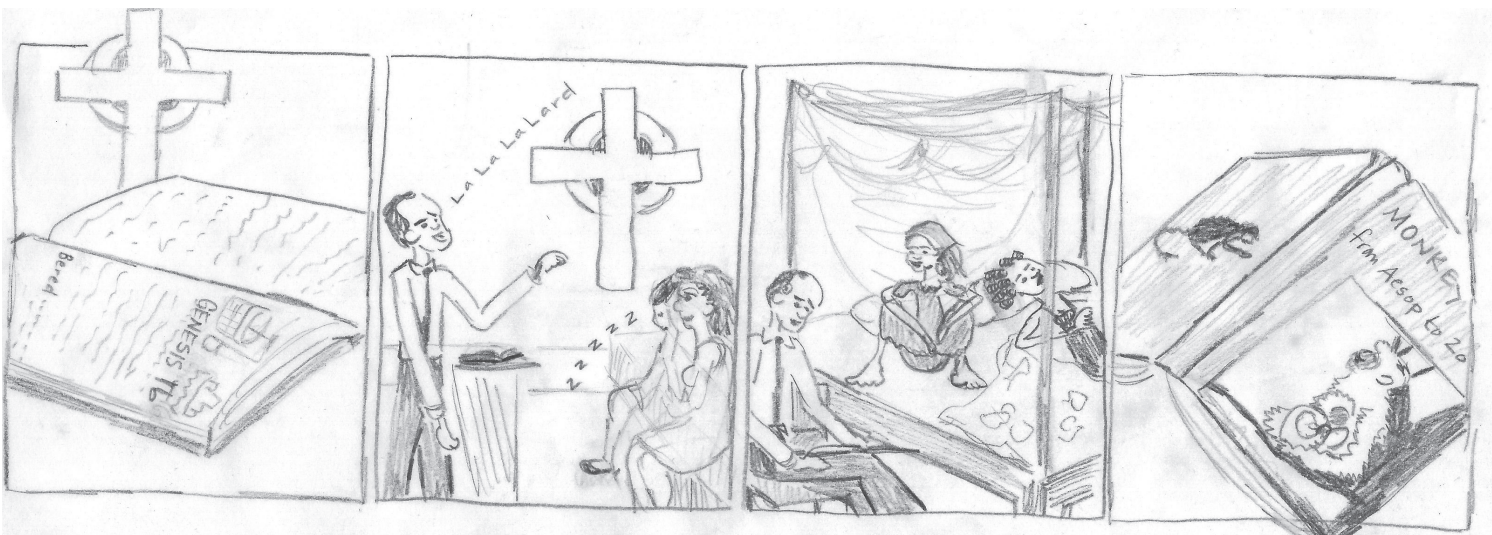
“Yes. A who?”

“Them Vantholl.”

“I know some VanTholl. VanTholl who work in the hospital?”

“Yes. We have an uncle who work there.” And, this is not true anymore. Uncle Marcus works as a croupier in a hotel. He spins a table and people bet money. Mommy will not let us go visit them because it is not proper to deal with gambling. He used to work in a hospital moving them dead from the morgue to the cemetery. We visited then and Daddy come up wit jumbie story.

‘He were Ameridian. Ameriridian have they own way fuh bury. He wife wahn he bury Christian but he mudder tell she, “No. How Berry dead is not how live.” The man’s widow was from town. Town people and Ameridians start to marry long time. Berry was only marry for short time when he die and his mudder feel it is the wife fault for making he live in house with electricity. Electricity she say run through him every day and poison he. She warn her son, “You must turn out the lights at night or else.”’



When he tell us this we would be scared and tun off the light and go fast to sleep scared for electricity to put energy through the ground and bring jumbies to the room.

“How ridiculous Daddy, electricity can’t do that.”

Victoria continues to talk to the Surinamee woman about Uncle Marcus.

“He is a medical technician.”

“How wonderful? When are you going to the States?”

“Soon.”

“That’s good. There are plenty jobs for smart young ladies. I have dual citizenship. They father is American. Brooklyn. But this one born here so we haf to change his papers.”

“Our Aunt is in Brooklyn or Bronx.”

“Bronx”, I correct her. I am always having to correct her because she does not listen well.

‘Victoria, how do you know jumbie don’t come with electricity. It must be so because the grave them don’t have light.’ She stew her teeth every time I make observation. The Ameridian man name Berry die in he home with the light on sitting in a chair. When they take him to the hospital in Nickerie, his legs were cock up from sitting so long. When they crack he knee for make it straight it was the loudis sound Uncle Marcus say. Berry mudder and wife wait for see the body. But then it was a blackout and the generator come on. When the generator come on one lamp light in the dead room and they see Berry sit up on the bed. Bah! I jump under the cover but Victoria is listening not having the same look.

She has a sifferent look to use to attract Teet and Open Face near she but it is a look that makes her get along well with this Surinamee woman and other people in general. It is a small look, one like Mommy, too. I practice my small look and raise my voice.

“I am going to New York. My auntie send for me.”

The teacher in front of the Surinamee woman turn he head and scratch his scalp, not from wonder but of heat. Still, he is turn when I speak and turn back away so I have gotten the right attention.

“I am going to school there. I want to be a doctor.”

“That is good,” she says and he look seem more interested so I continue and continue.

“I am going first then Victoria is going, later.”

“You are screaming Leona,” say Victoria.

“I am just saying that you are going later.”

Open Face looks up and smiles like he figure something out; maybe he is just satisfied to hear Victoria name.

“She nah like science and she mats is poor, too.”

“Math doesn’t matter,” the Surinamee mother is placating, “I wasn’t good neither and I get work in nursing home. Good money.”

“It is what I will do. I am just excited for all the fancy shops and shoes,” Victoria says.

‘In America, I am not going to worry about sick people dem. They sick and people does be schtupid to think jumbie for real. Jumbie is not cause by electricity. I am tired hearing story that make no sense. Tell us something fuh trut.’

“This is why Leona is going and not you. You will waste up the opportunity with quick jobs.” Nobody answers Daddy. The Surinamee woman smiles and turns around minding she kids who have sprawled out on the ground playing with their American toys.

By the time the line has moved one person, I can see it will be Teet who will serve us.

For trut, your uncle say that when he see jumbie Berry sit up on the bed the only one who stay was the mudder. Marcus say she walk up to he and lay her hand down on his chest and put him back to sleep and turn out the lamp..

‘Just like that that?’

‘He telling tales Leona. No mother will touch a jumbie even if it is she child. There are certain things a mother does do—and she count them out on she hands: feedim picknee, badem picknee, do wash and cook, explain church, when they marry and go off she try appreciate the new family, when picknee get sick before she she deh pray, when picknee die before she she take deh blame that is why the jumbie tale is wrong. The Ameridian woman would not blame she daughter-in-law or electricity. If the jumbie come back, it is because she is not feeling she love strong enough.’

‘That is true’ Daddy concur.

‘That make no sense. How can jumbie know this? Electricity is a singularity of static. It have a sine wave. I read so. Electricity is not love.’

‘It is.’ An Daddy and Veronica who was old enough to know big people things, laugh at me and tickle me

and turn out the light.

I see Victoria stand up against the wall in the IMmigration officie. She small look is focused on something I cannot see. She is looking outside: flustered, or perfect, or plotting, or at me thinking about jumbies trying to understand sines, singularities and the how love can capture static



BITTERS SETTLE THE STOMACH



the stars, the moon. draw farther away from the shore and my body is in many directions when i hear the news: joanie dead. how she fuh dead an me nah know? i recede while the stars through the plane window land in the middle of my throat and it swallows. if i fill another bag with vomit and tears i can keep the stars in my heart.

how she fuh dead and me nah know? is what i say on the phone in rhode island between dissection and poetry in my head, now, refrain for ambient airport music timehri is trying out to tranquilize visitors. becalmed. welcome home, drink milo, play cricket, stay at pegasus but it draw with one wing not to scale on the wall heated by pinking sun.

baby's on fire or babies on fire; i hear, explicitly something blank. just like that i am walking in gray pantsuit with victoria. we are sent back for the family, theirs and ours, to bring the dress joan-ann will bury in. we are sent back to the beginning so others can talk about our escape velocity and luck and ask for small piece until all the pieces are counted out from ten dollar increments in to pocket lint. small piece for all the ones besides but a bigger gesture for the one alive. dominique. my dominique heart is full of stars ascending. this is luck or fate and selfish, too. death authorizes romance. we hold hands.

how she fuh dead in a coffin that opens to show bone and rind and a yank of hair that flames licked clean. she fink fadder come home. i hear. she fink fadder come home fret over work and wine and wife complain. alice. i miss auntie alice lovely frybake and saltfish that wicked lickle percy catch. i recede, salty. shrink and melt like fish in frypan. i hear. fink fadder with inefficient laborer hands smack and punch he wife right and left she bruised and banged the door shut with all the picknee to drift to sleep. safe. blood is not a new stain and locking children in one room is not a new performance. all mother's call this service. i hear. in the rooms fink fadder spill kerosene with repetition. the neighbors hear bodies overlapping in pain. i hear. how he fa cook up he picknees then try fa run crying and emoting in deh yard.

outdoors: the air smells of dominique while inside i burn. he stays with us in our old house run over by daddy's rosehall people. we three who never sleep. in one bed i daydream and nightmare. i hear. crinolining roof of an ash house that looks cleaner in black. in this bed i look out the window and count stars. i remember joan-ann and i would count stars in our own beds and whosoever had more would win nothing in the morning. new game: if one goes missing from the sky tomorrow, i will do it and i kiss my secret promise onto the tiny budded keloid on his

bottom lip because grief never stays in one place: sometimes head, sometime heart, sometimes human.

i sleep wanting a dream of rhapsodies but i can see me playing between tar and tile. i hear. "joanie" and fink fadder run back in the screaming house because she is strong and smart and should have been sponsor to come to America long time gone. she break free to the asphalt roof where he call himself repairing it from water. i hear. she toes stopped walking and stand in statuary pause as she flesh pours through like sky. "joanie", i hear. he run back with the ladder and try to pull she but belief does not make heroes.

how she fuh dead and me nah know? is what i say to aunties and uncles and Victoria who tears through the week, sometimes real then like crocodile. in this place of grief there is only one child alive and we hug, embrace, holding because grief moves fast and i am 17 and holding is not enough. sisters smile like compact like mirrors but victoria curves where i line up and grief moves. he holds our face but holding is not enough in one bed when i am not there.

how she fuh dead and me nah know? was dominique there? i hear. he was in school, in Town, in safety. i remember the call and how my dominique heart crushed my joan-ann heart but that scale is almost wrong because how can something so exponential spoil in the practice place in my head we would kiss and then we would be and we would rescue each other from waiting but grief moves fast and victoria curves where i line up to bury this sadness, this sight, this anger, this stinking tar. everything burns. i call this thing a service.

i take my in-flight tea with bitters and ex circles in ink on my vomit bag as i can now also hold back tears. dead rocks are obvious outside my window. no game, no count, no constellation consolation. these dead rocks land in the middle of my throat and i swallow to keep them whole. the landing is gentle and there is no need to clap.

***WE ARE TAMPERING WITH
POWERFUL FORCES...***

5 March 2010 | \$10

Science

THE INCREDIBLE HULK-51 GENE

This Issue:

- Analyzing wound repair
- A review of transposons
- *Drosophila*'s new "it" girl
- Quantifying morphogenesis

 AAAS

PART ONE

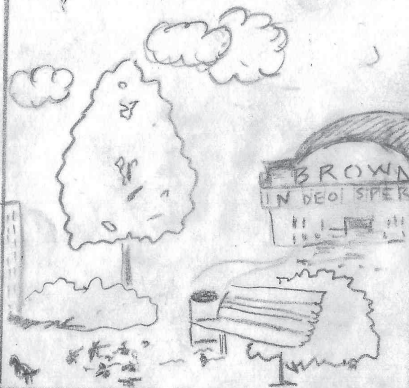
“The Coming of Leona”



ALONE IN ITS ACADEMIC PROWESS, THIS MOST
AWESOME TESTAMENT TO PROGENY AND
PEDIGREE : THE BOARDING SCHOOL



FOUR YEARS LATER, BEHIND SOLID OAK
DESKS THE DEDICATED STUDENT AS
AN MCB LAB TECH AWAITING HER
FIRST RESULTS WHERE



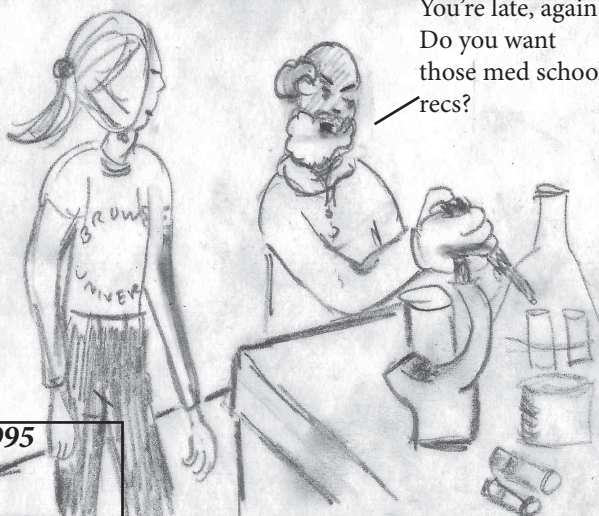
TWENTY YEARS EARLIER, AN
EMIGRE OF INDIA HAD WAITED
AND WAITED UNTIL YOUNG
LEONA JAMES, ANXIOUS AND
BRIGHT, WOULD END THE WAIT



This is your
mentor. Dr.
Mukerjee.

Year:1975

You're late, again.
Do you want
those med school
recs?



Year:1995

Well?



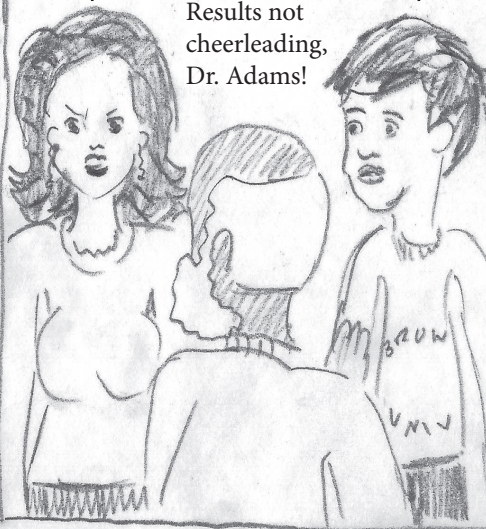
You are aware flies live for
23 days. You know how
much can change in a
short period of time?



She's a hard
worker

I was here until 3. I always
keep my timer with me.

Results not
cheerleading,
Dr. Adams!



Any postdoc
would kill to
have your place
and you're just
an undergrad.

I'm sorry.
Don't
apologize



He's just angry they call us the black lab because there're 2 sistahs and his brown ass blacker than both of us. Chips in the cookie.

I want to be like you
O when I grow up.

Just do it!

So, Leona. How's your experiment going?

Fine, Rigo. Shouldn't you be in the other lab?

I need to see your protocol.

Why?

Forget it.

No one does. So when are you going to let me cook for you?

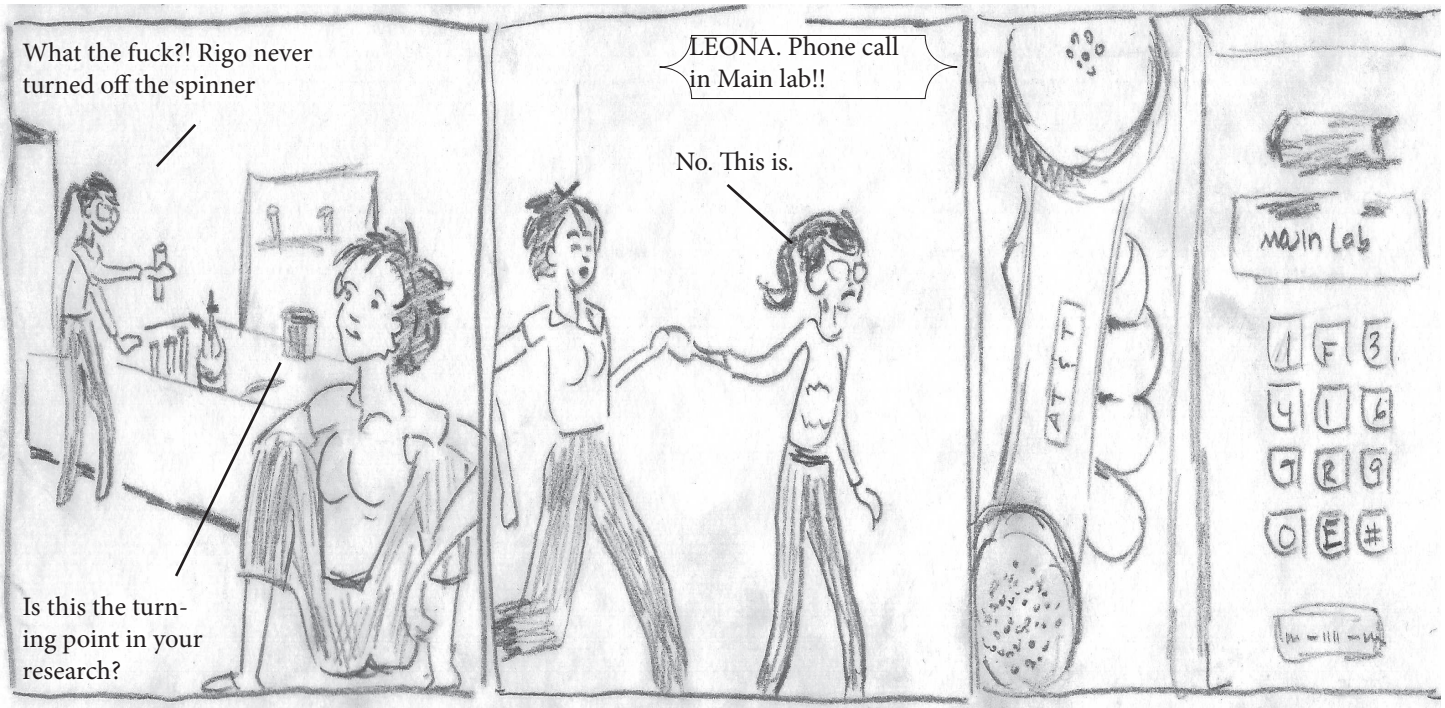
I don't trust her, Nolan

Awesome. In a few hours I'll see if my wounding technique produces the right markers. I might even be able to publish. This will ook great on med school apps.

I can't fail.

Maybe tonight. You can cook me a victory P B and J!

You c'yan hide from tief, but you c'yant hide from liar.

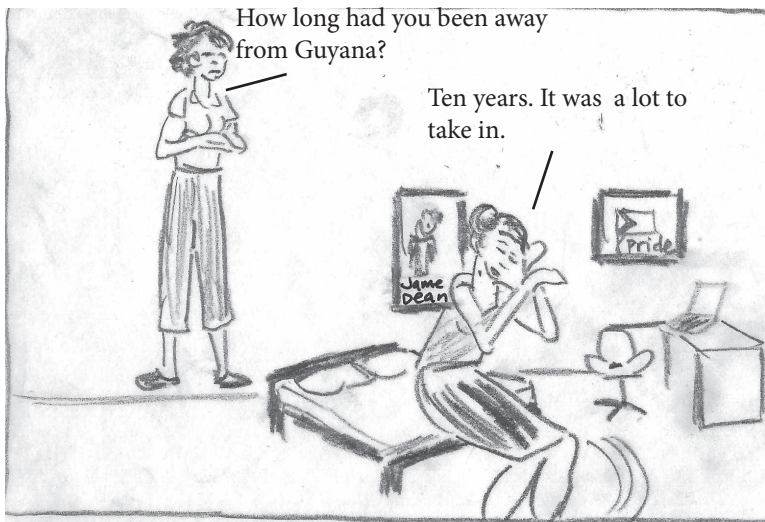


There was a fire. many miles away. Back home. They are all dead.

The world seems to stand still, singed and burning fills the air !!

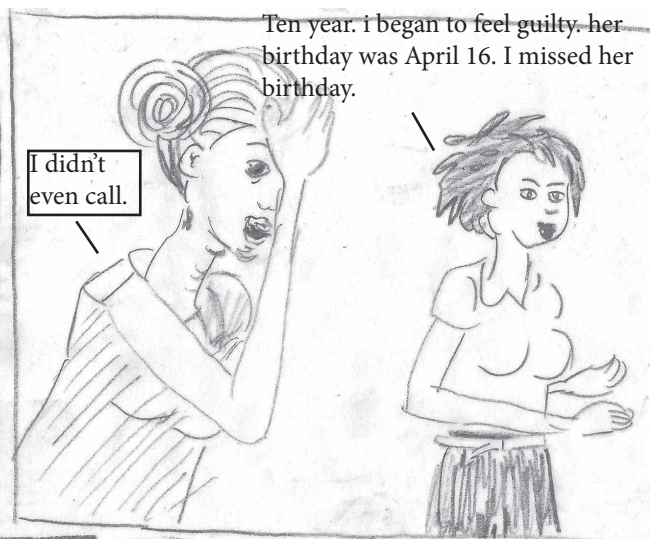


Black folk and therapy. Ultimately, it was Dr. Adams who made me go when she found me at the bottom of the vial closet. 10 Free visits each year. Leona James never follows up.



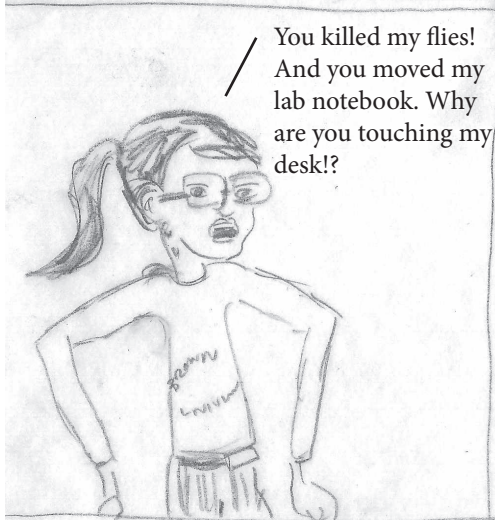
How long had you been away from Guyana?

Ten years. It was a lot to take in.

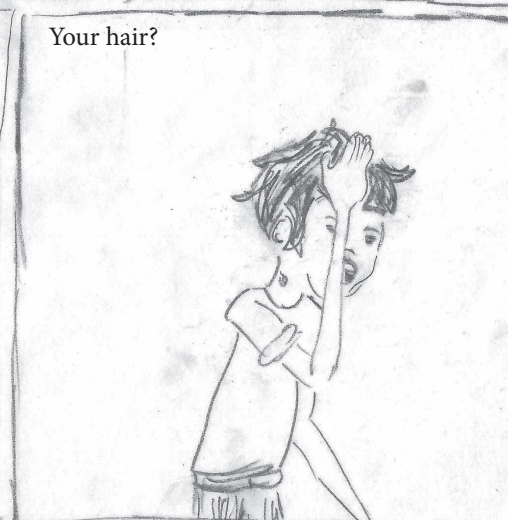


Ten year. i began to feel guilty. her birthday was April 16. I missed her birthday.

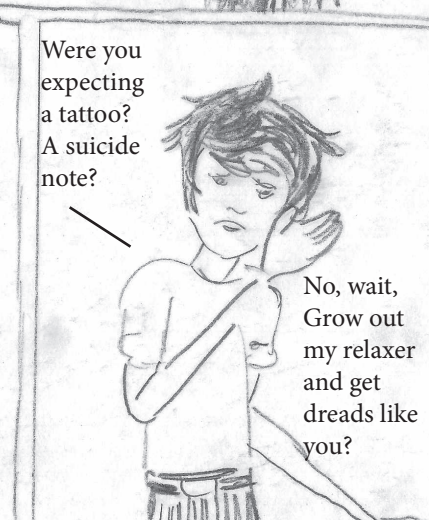
I didn't even call.



You killed my flies! And you moved my lab notebook. Why are you touching my desk!?



Your hair?



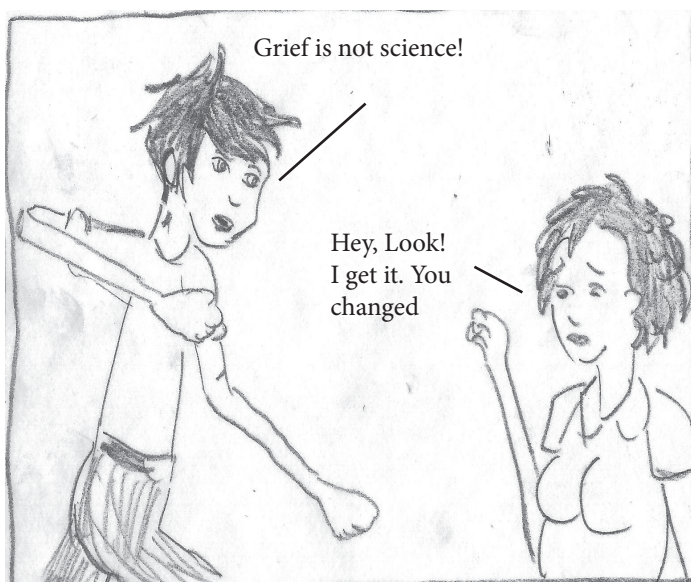
Were you expecting a tattoo? A suicide note?

No, wait, Grow out my relaxer and get dreads like you?

After I hung up, I cursed out Rigo. Fuckery.

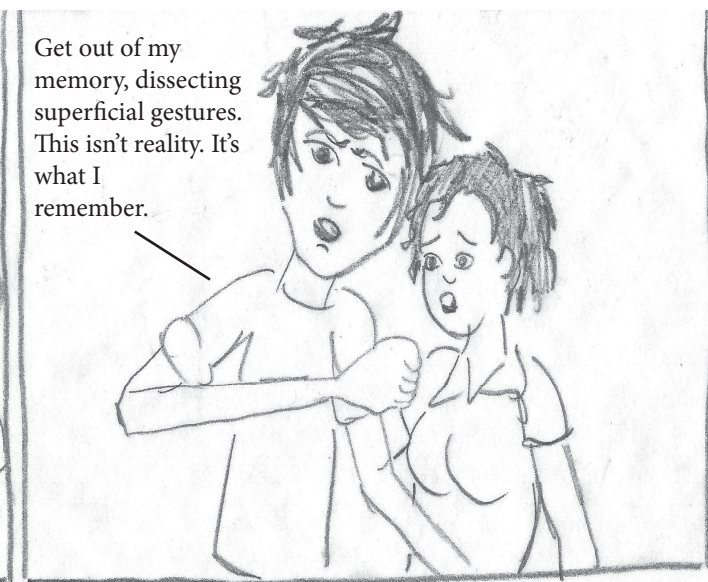
Back in the Bronx: On impulse I went to the Dominicana on the corner had her cut my hair. It felt like atonement.

West Indians favor women with long locks. Hair =beauty. Fitting. Hair is dead tissue anyway.

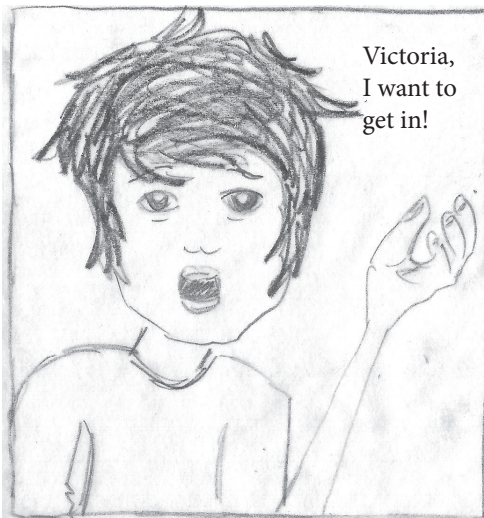


Grief is not science!

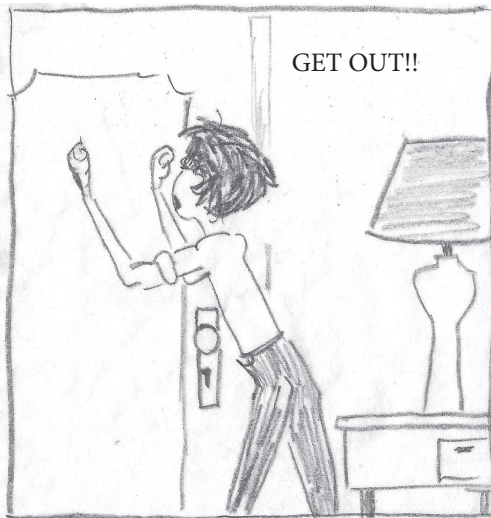
Hey, Look! I get it. You changed



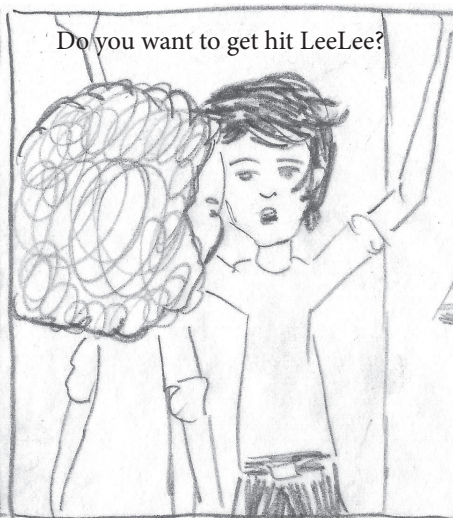
Get out of my memory, dissecting superficial gestures. This isn't reality. It's what I remember.



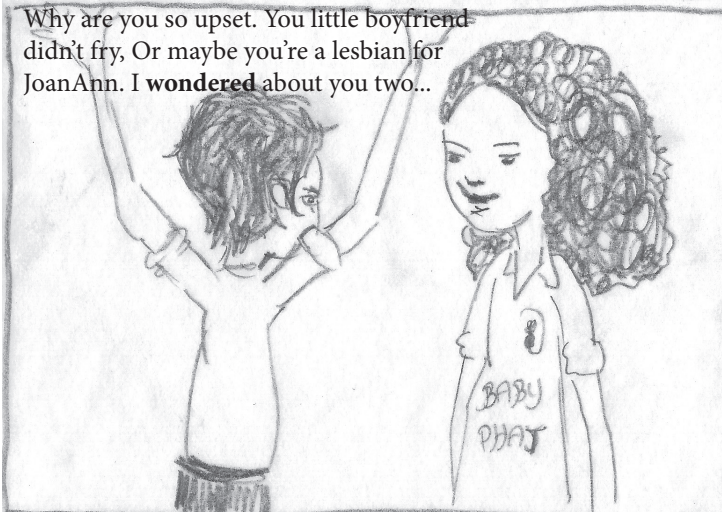
Victoria,
I want to
get in!



GET OUT!!



Do you want to get hit LeeLee?



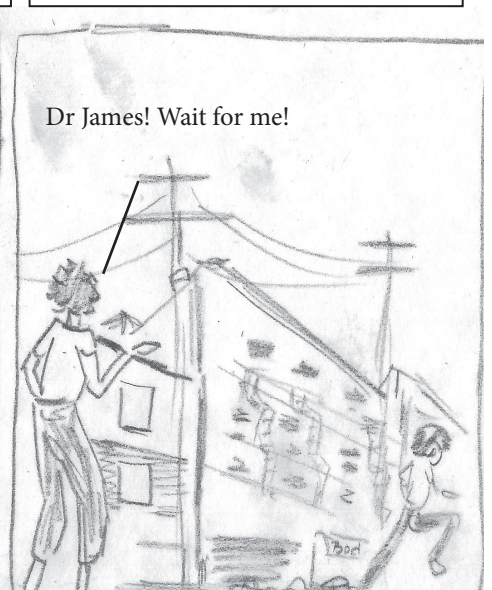
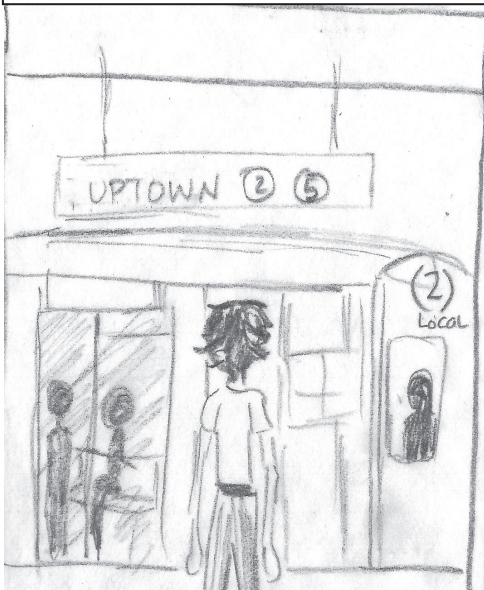
Why are you so upset. You little boyfriend
didn't fry. Or maybe you're a lesbian for
JoanAnn. I **wondered** about you two...



In hindsight, I should have not hit her. And if
I did, I should have apologized.

Some people call it claustrophobia. I a
wreckage, it's a shell that cocoons you.

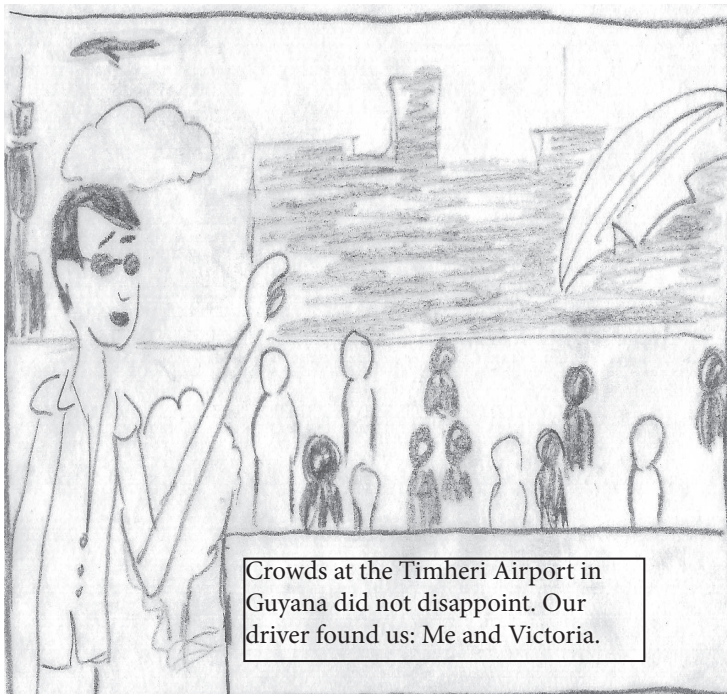
A lone figure being born into it.



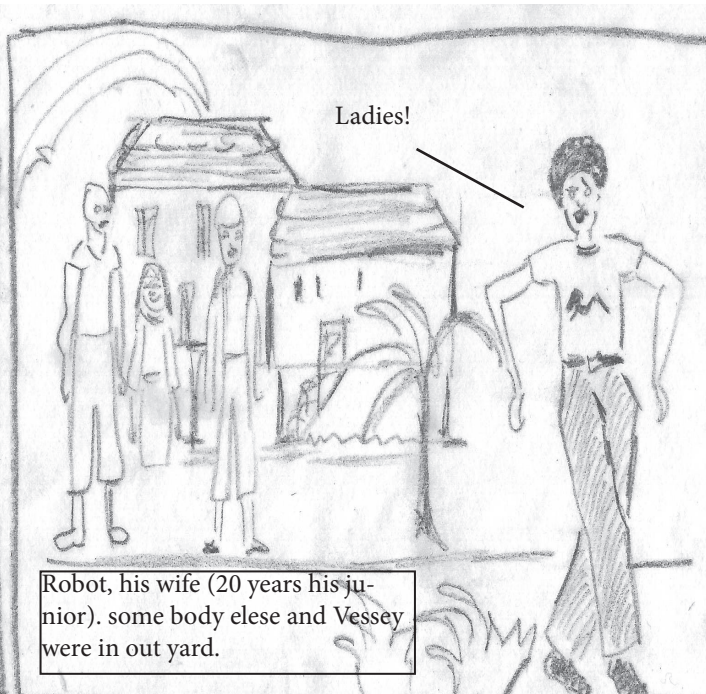
PART TWO

“Hide and go seek”





Crowds at the Timheri Airport in Guyana did not disappoint. Our driver found us: Me and Victoria.



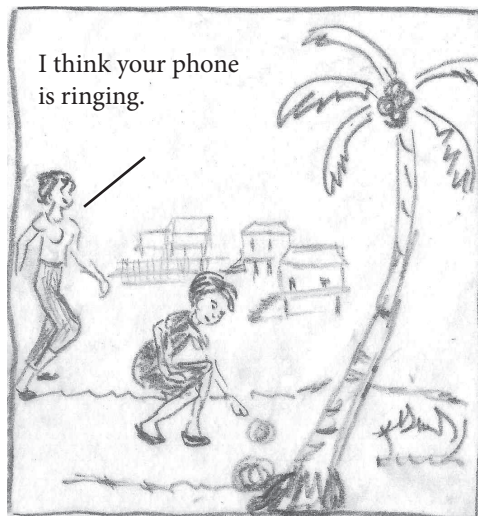
Ladies!

Robot, his wife (20 years his junior). some body else and Vessey were in out yard.

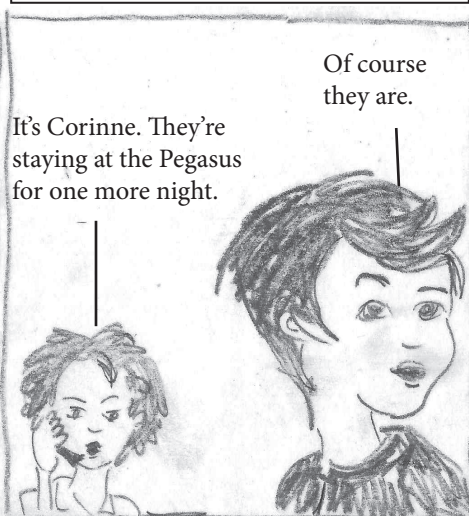
Rasta tree was smaller.

She still has a scar along her left knee where it cut her. Tribute to the coconut gods.

Driven by sheer instinct, the part of the woman that is still the girl smashes all reminders of her past.



I think your phone is ringing.



It's Corinne. They're staying at the Pegasus for one more night.

Of course they are.



This is where it use to be.

Everyone had their "I woulda" version of the fire, especially Vessey.

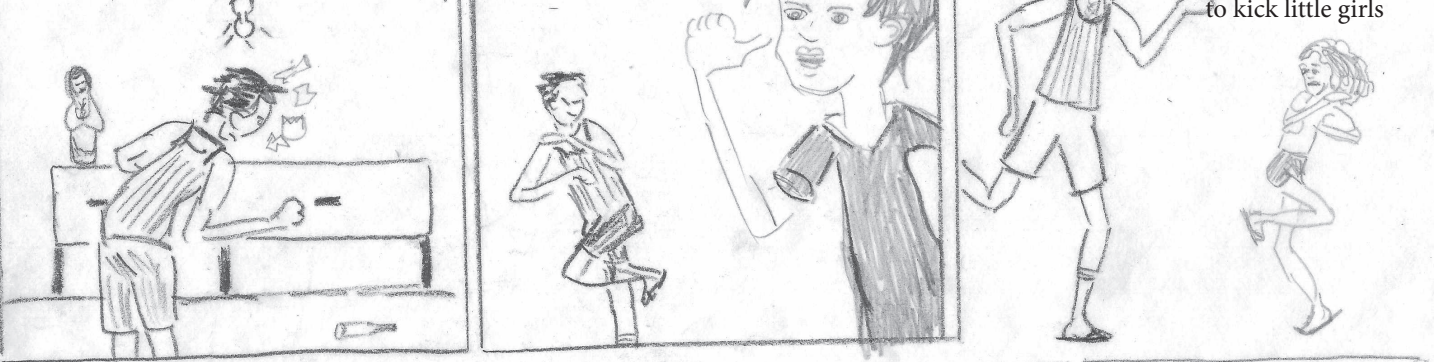
I woulda smash
Rumfish wit he
bockle



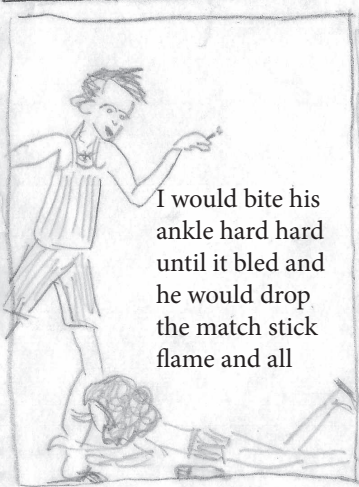
But then...



I woulda only been
ten; is how we re-
member each other
and he knows how
to kick little girls

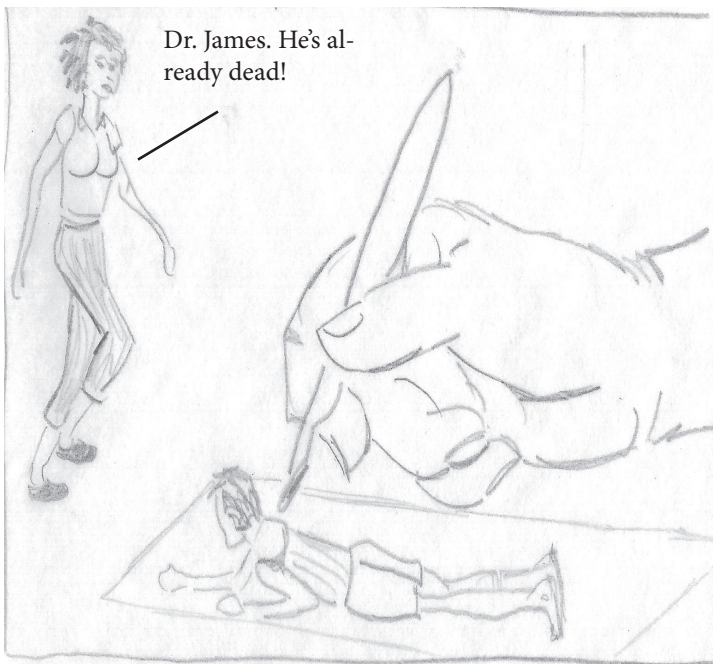


I would bite his
ankle hard hard
until it bled and
he would drop
the match stick
flame and all

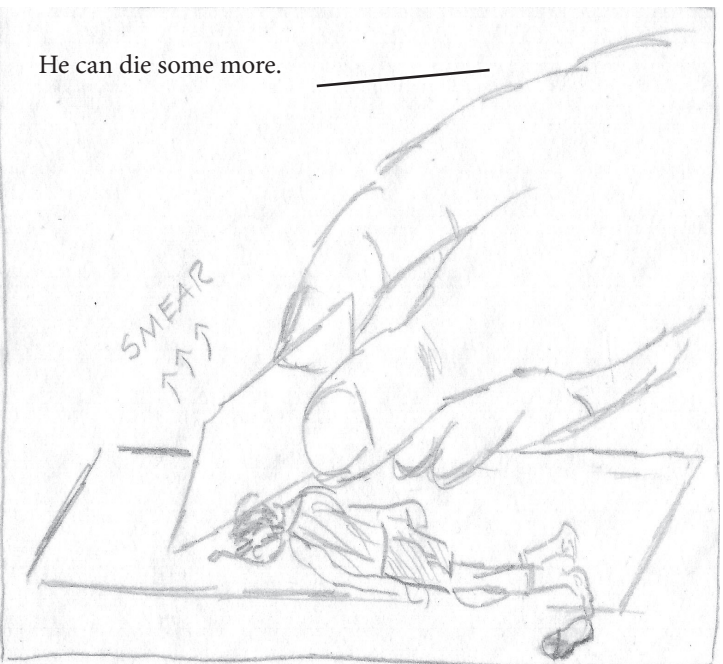


But, he's ready.



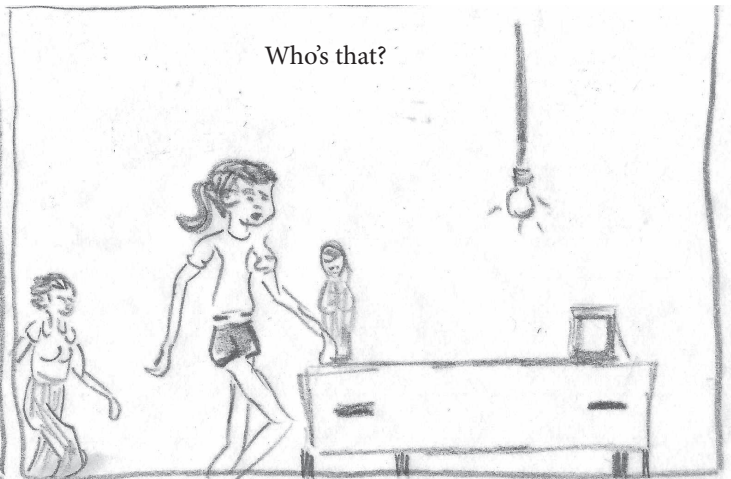
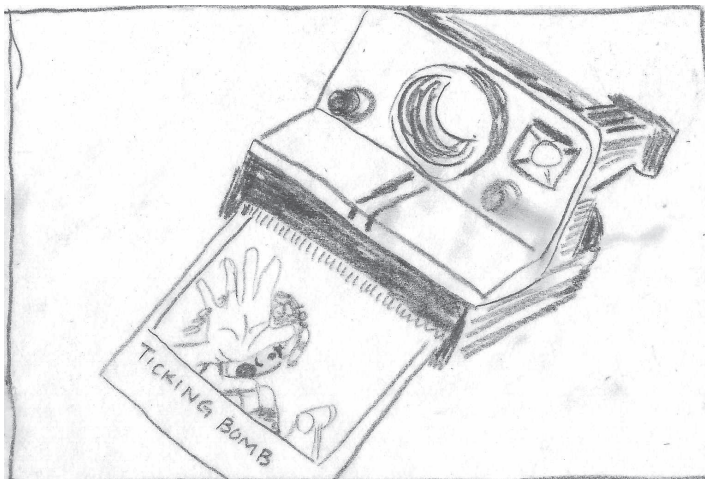


Dr. James. He's already dead!

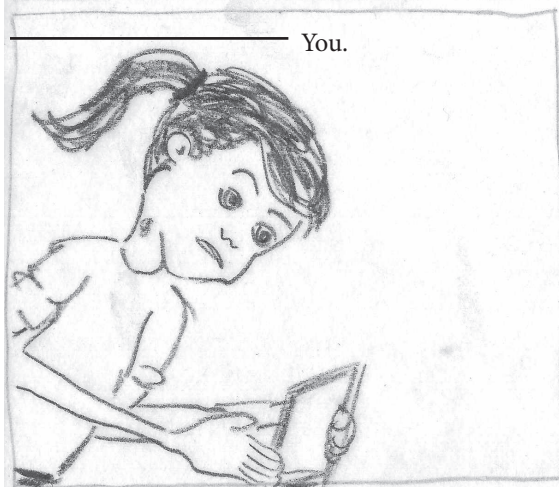


He can die some more.

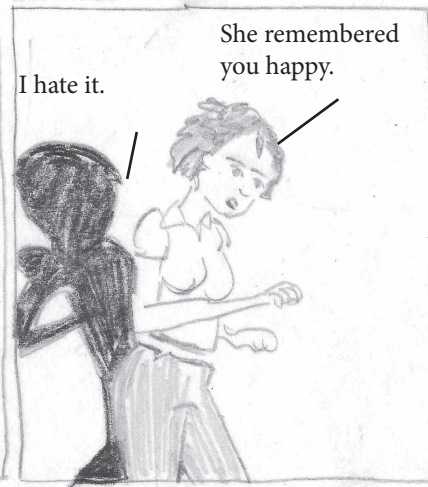
SMEAR
↑↑↑



Who's that?

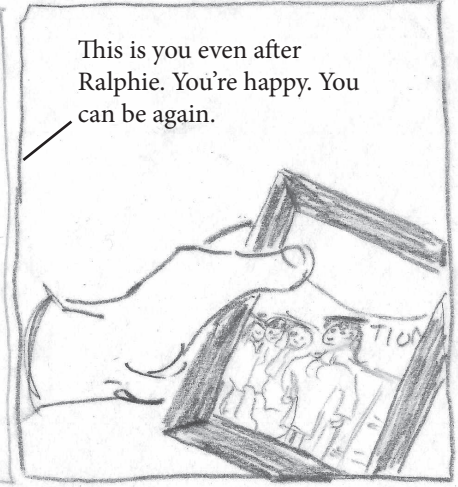


You.



I hate it.

She remembered
you happy.



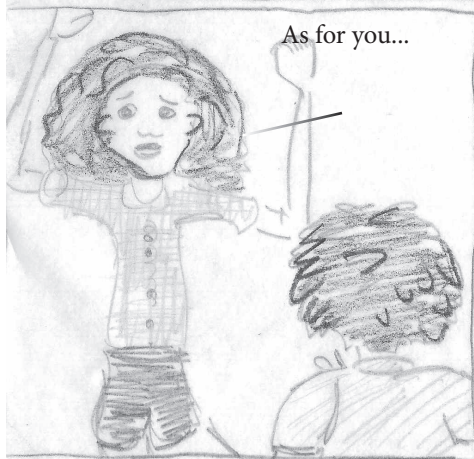
This is you even after
Ralphie. You're happy. You
can be again.



It's okay to be that little girl, again.



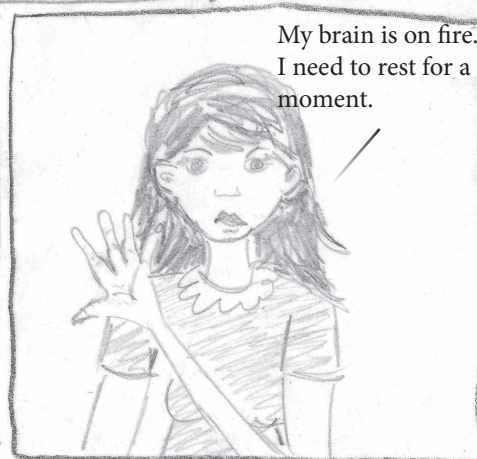
Don't placate me!



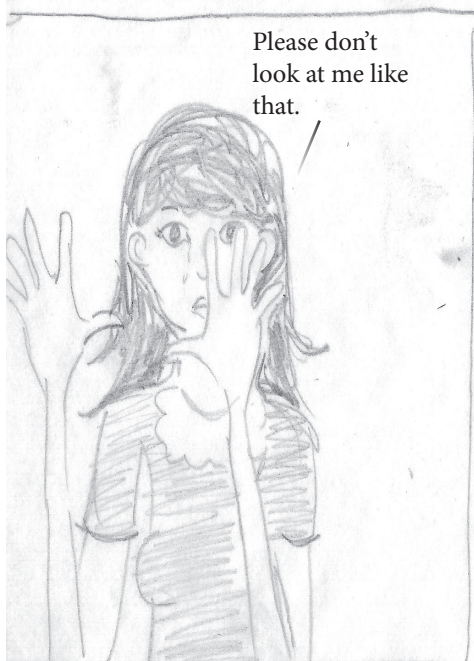
As for you...



You don't know what change is.



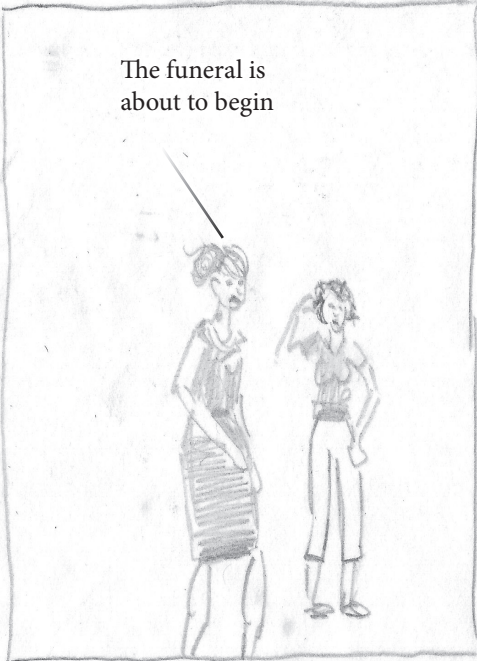
My brain is on fire. I need to rest for a moment.



Please don't look at me like that.



Dr. James, I lowered the dose. You're here, again. Just Leona.



The funeral is about to begin

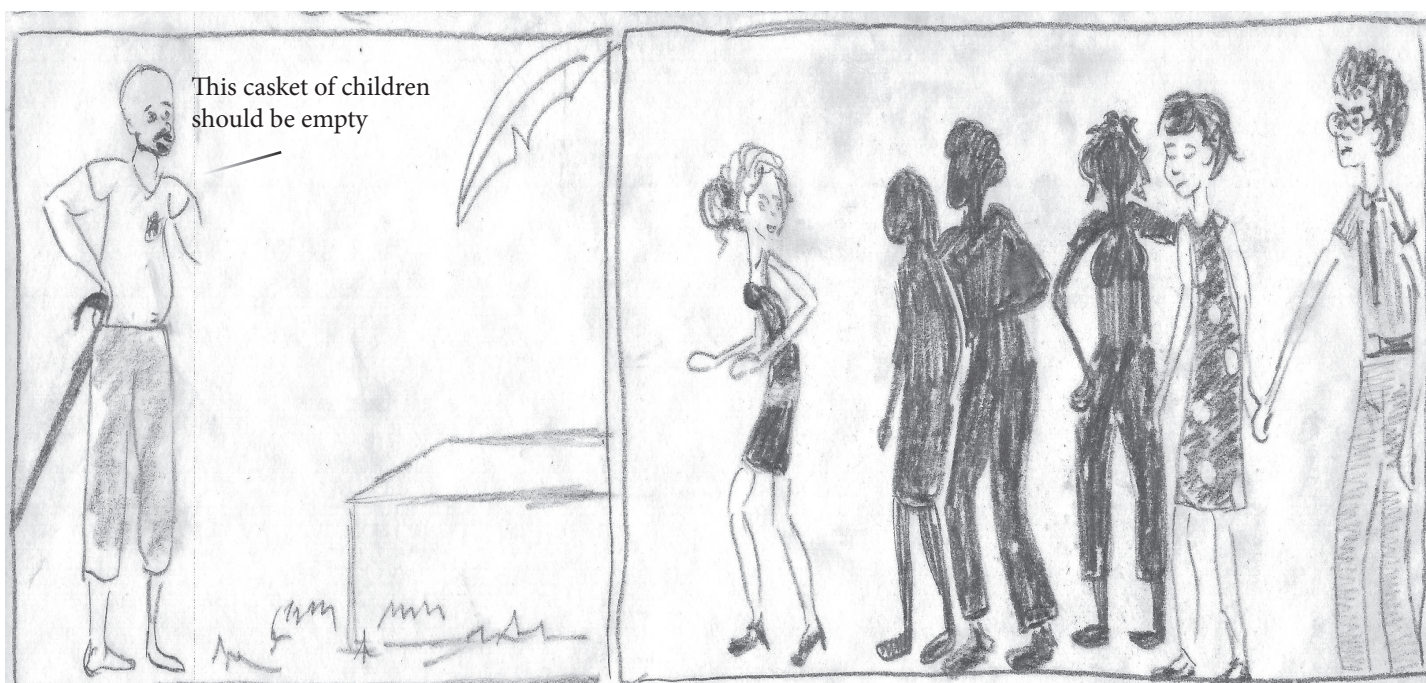
Alas, the nightmare of Dr. James is not over.

PART THREE

“Fire Escape”



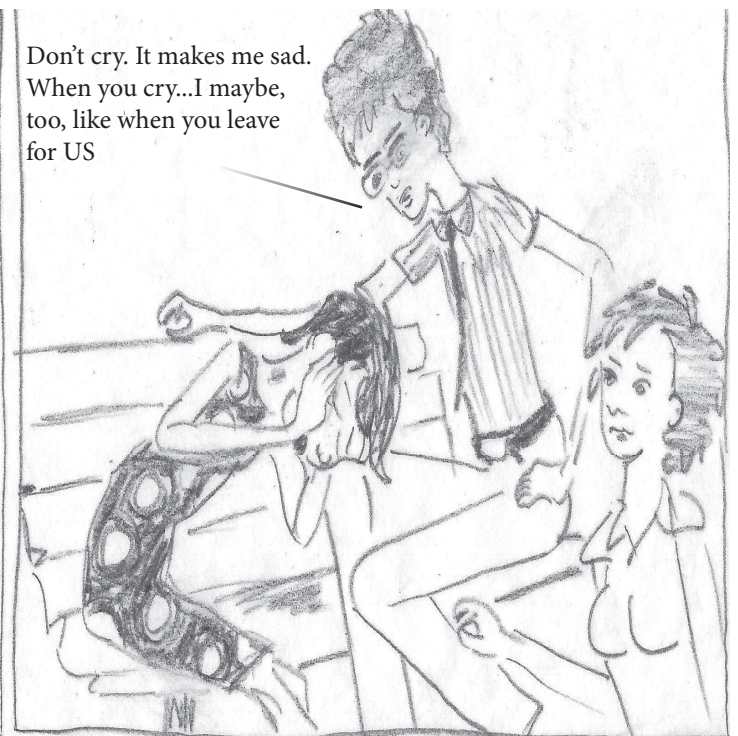
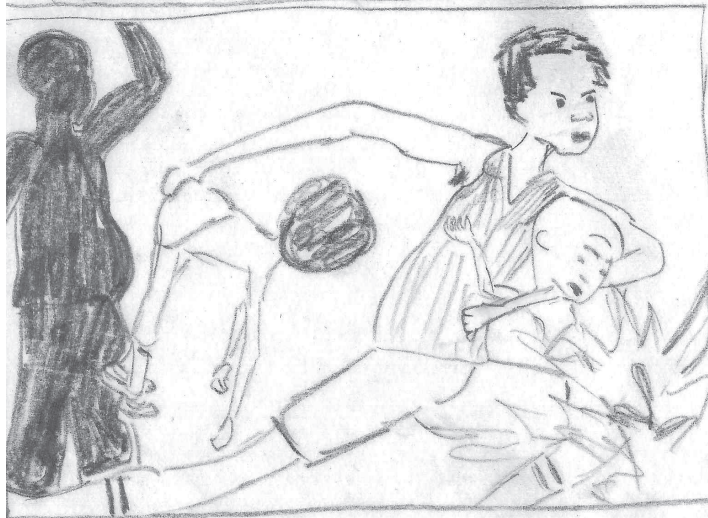
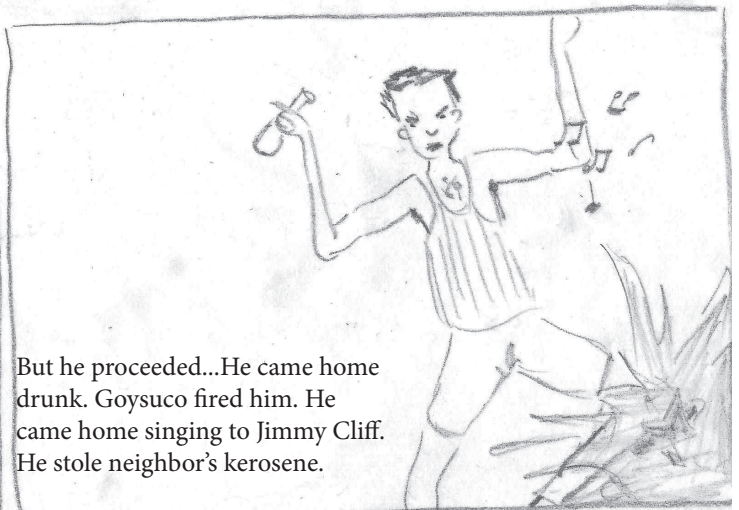
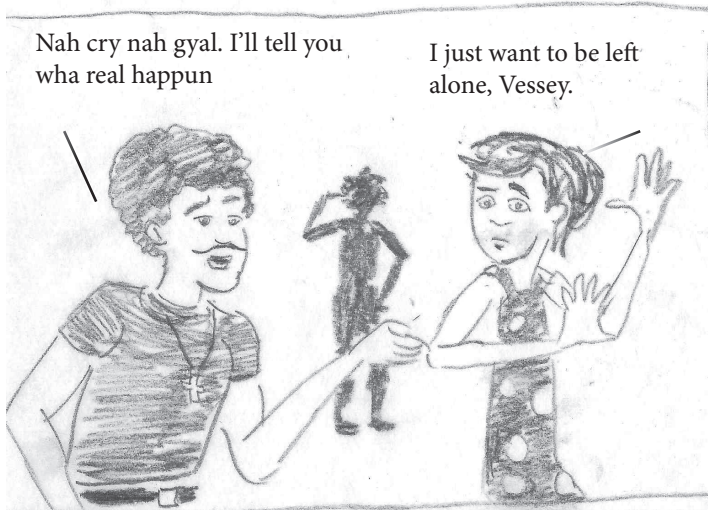
Everyone wore grief. Victoria wore a tight black party dress and white panties that showed through. No one noticed she dropped her baby weight but not her breasts.



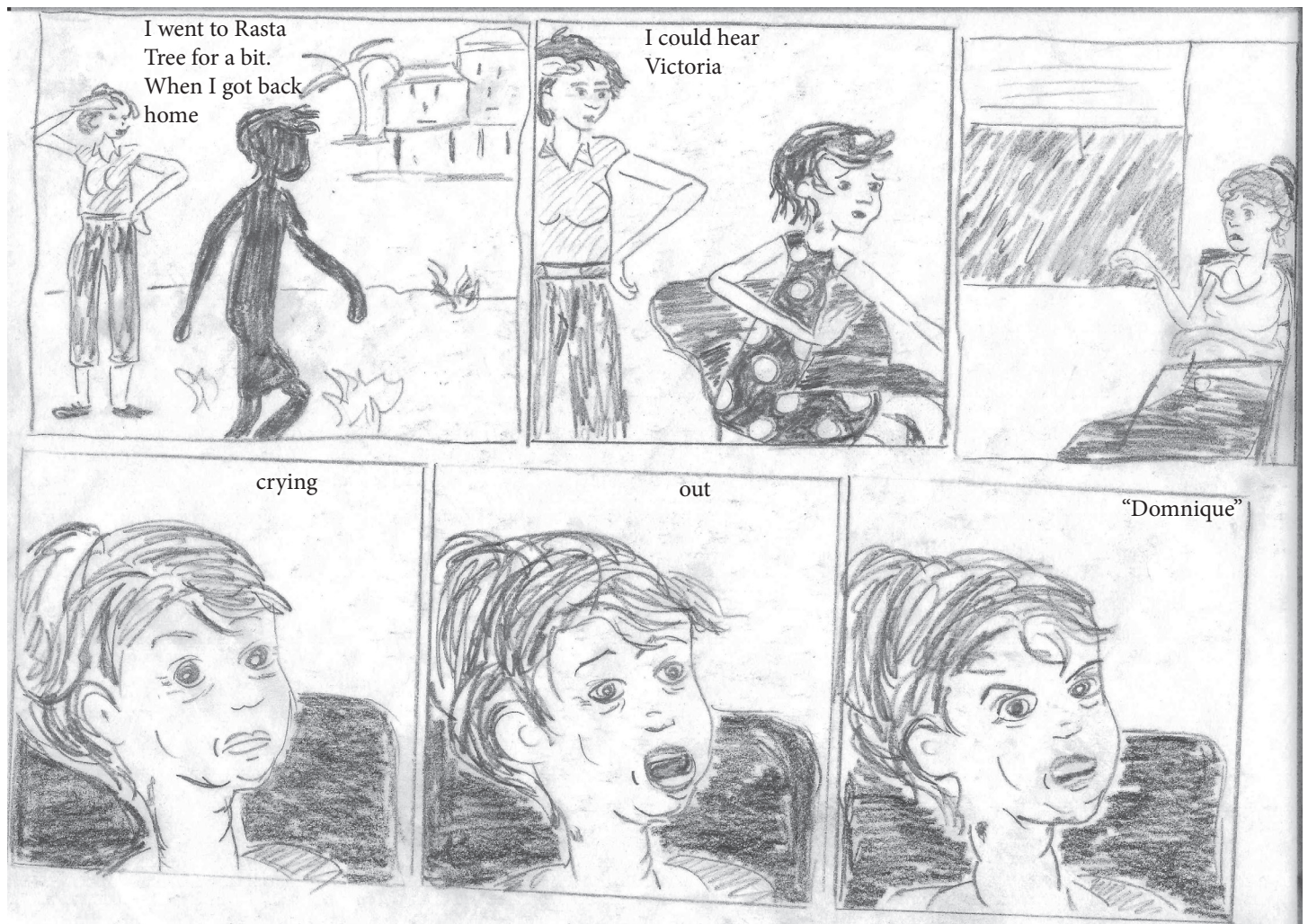
This casket of children
should be empty

Robot spoke when I couldn't. Dominique read something from the Bible. We held hands the entire day.

Nobody noticed.

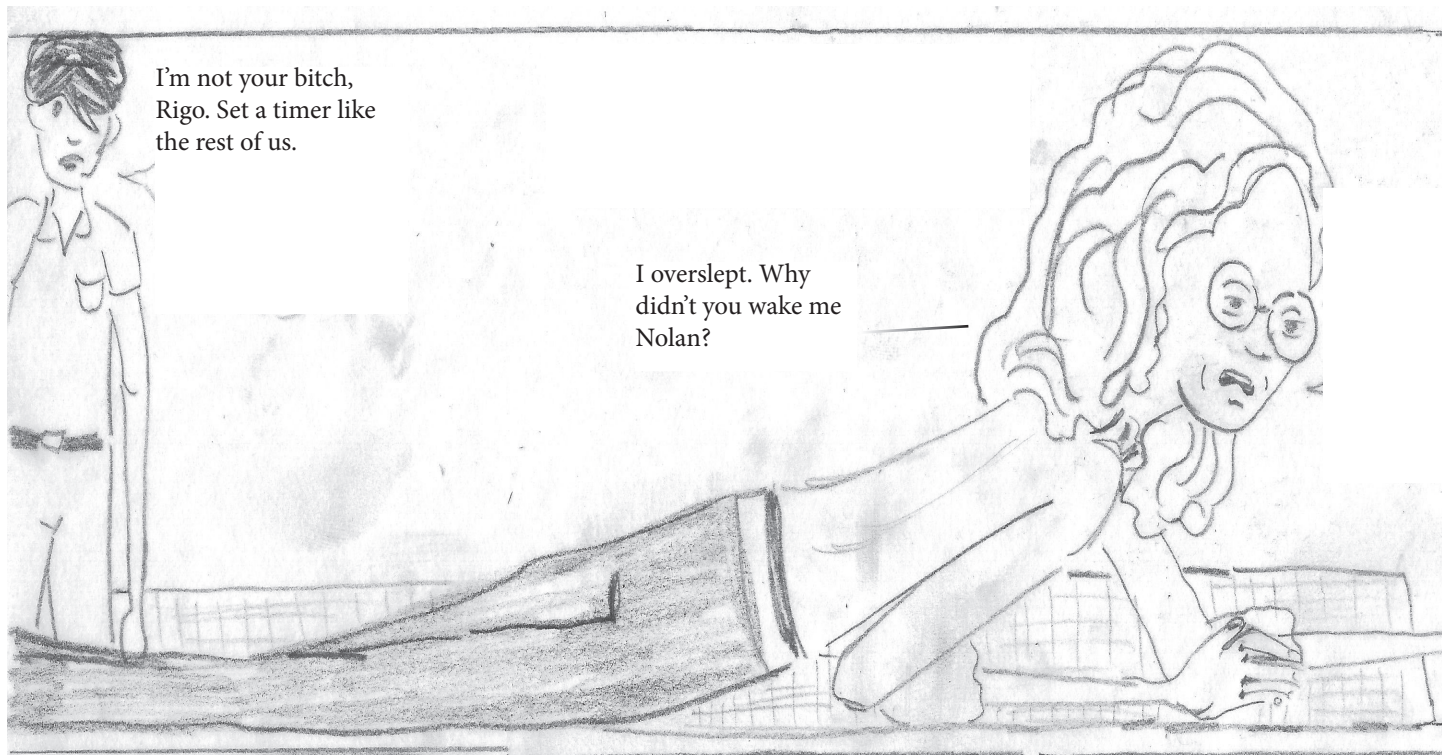


That would have been a great first kiss moment if I hadn't had my tongue down a dozen throats since high school. Oh well.

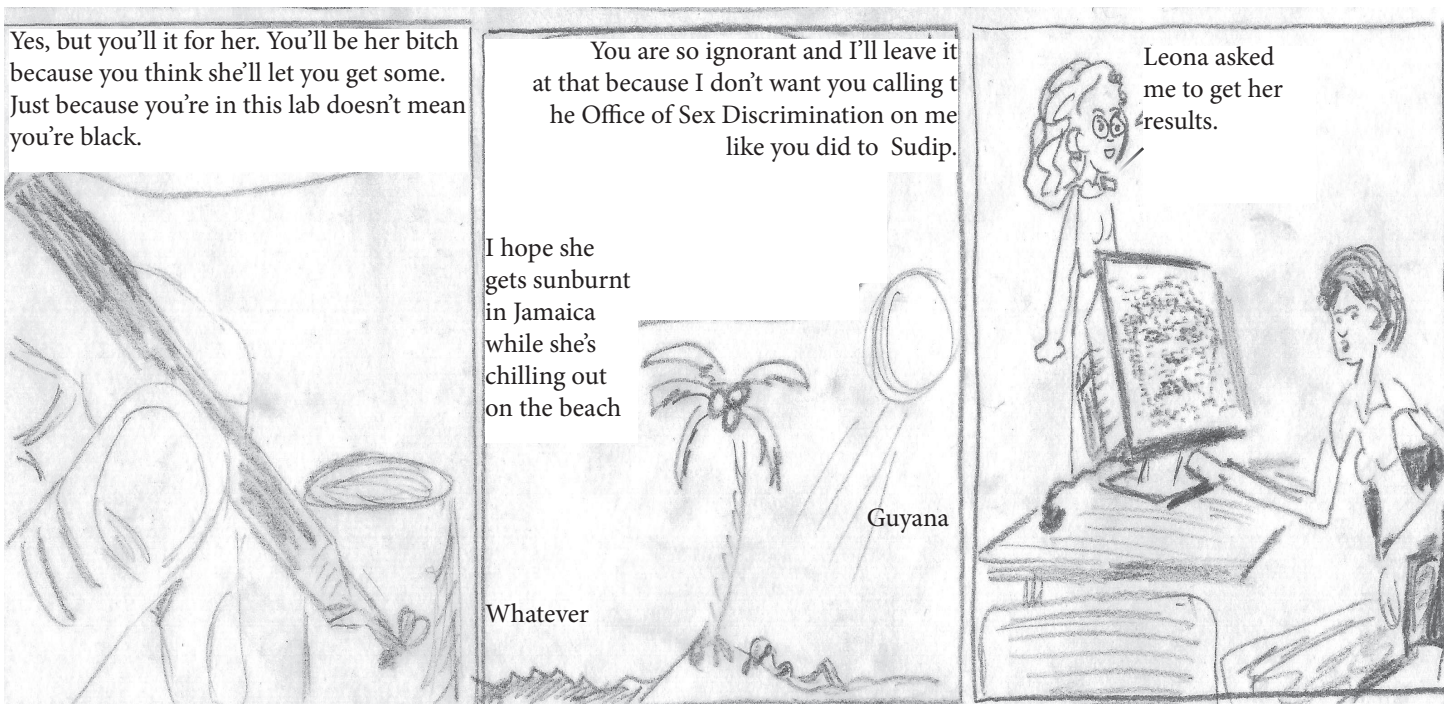


PART FOUR

“Enter the last Bitch and the last Bust-up Shot”

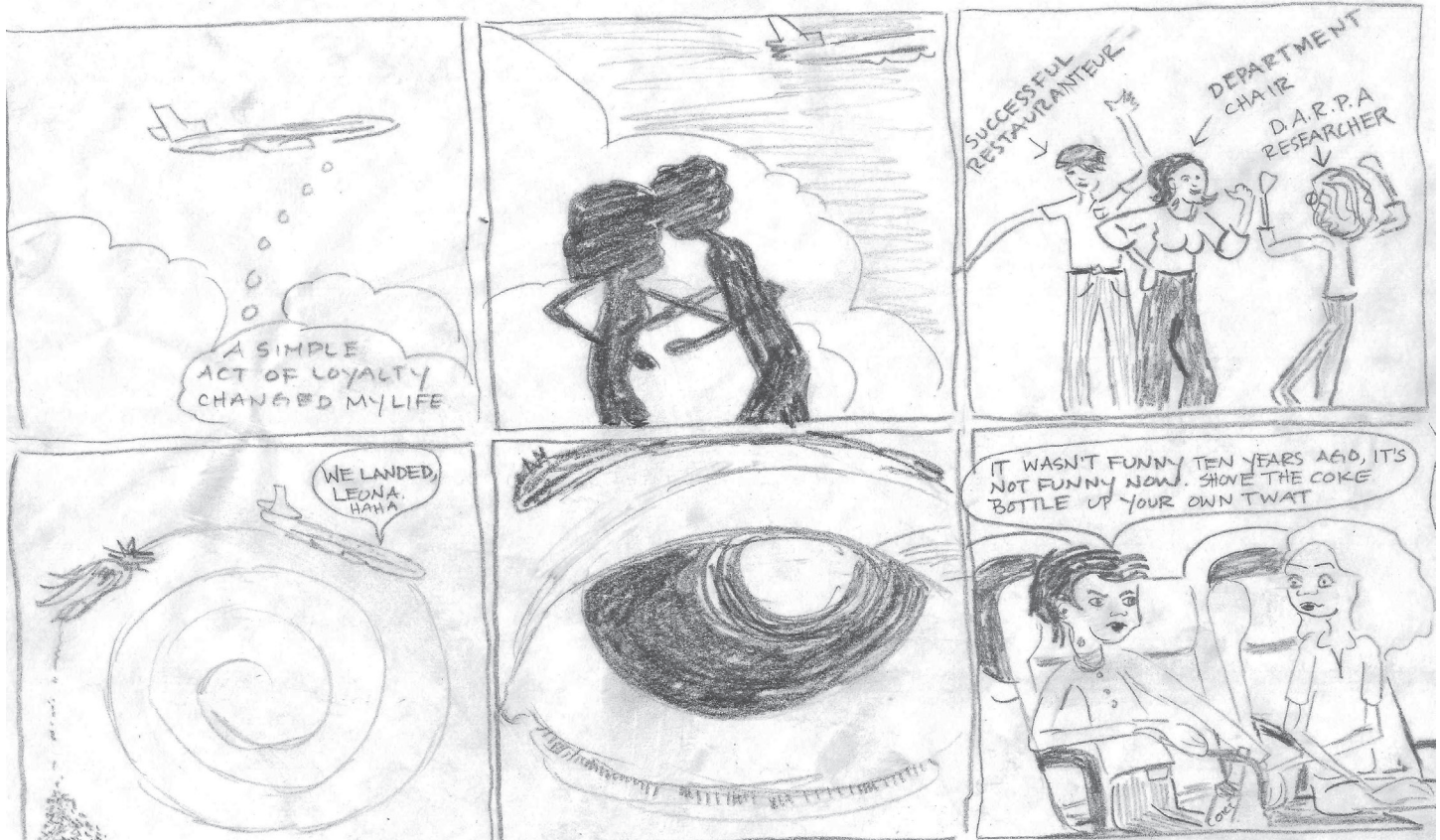


It was normal to sleep in the lab inbetween experiments. Wake each other. Share ramen. Shoot whiskey. Run drunk relay down long shiny corridors. Rigo would brood and complain not being a fan of group or individuals.



Later that week...

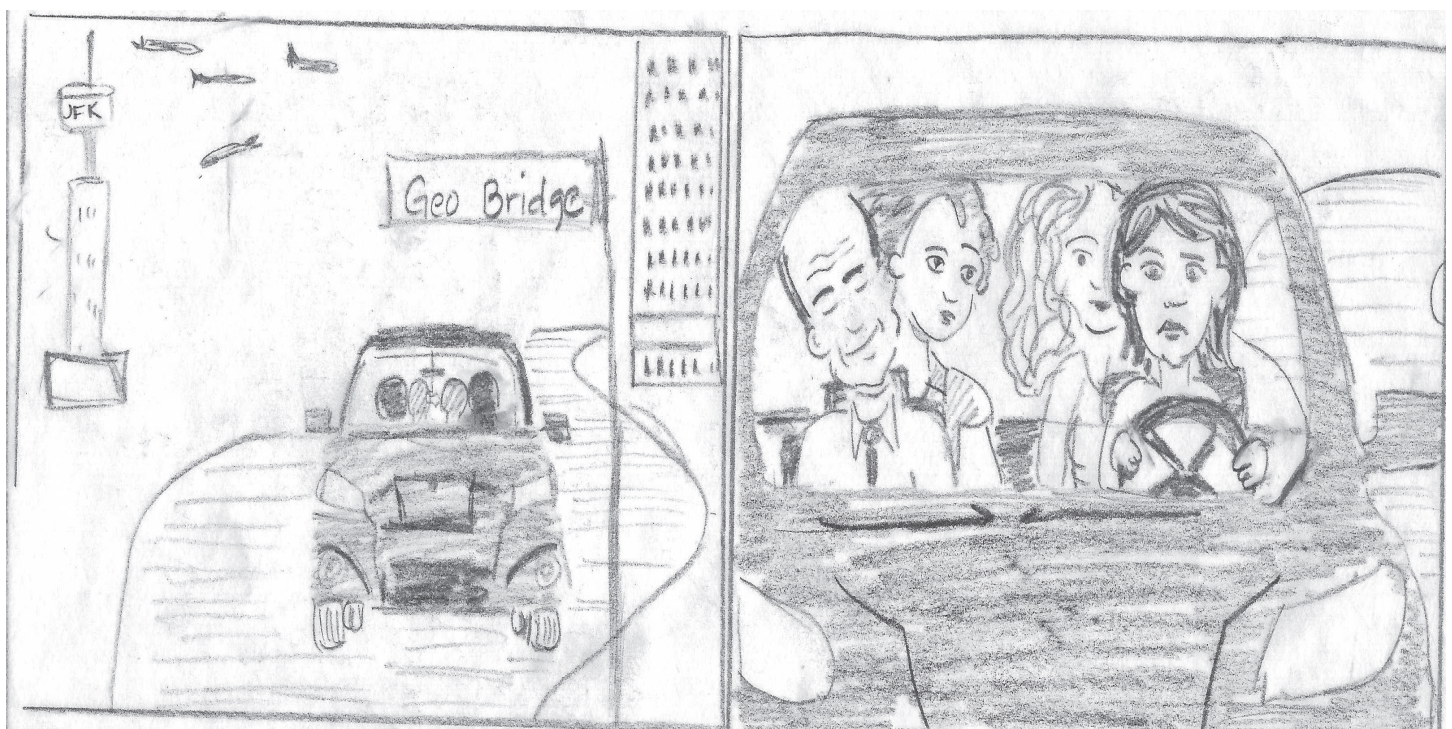




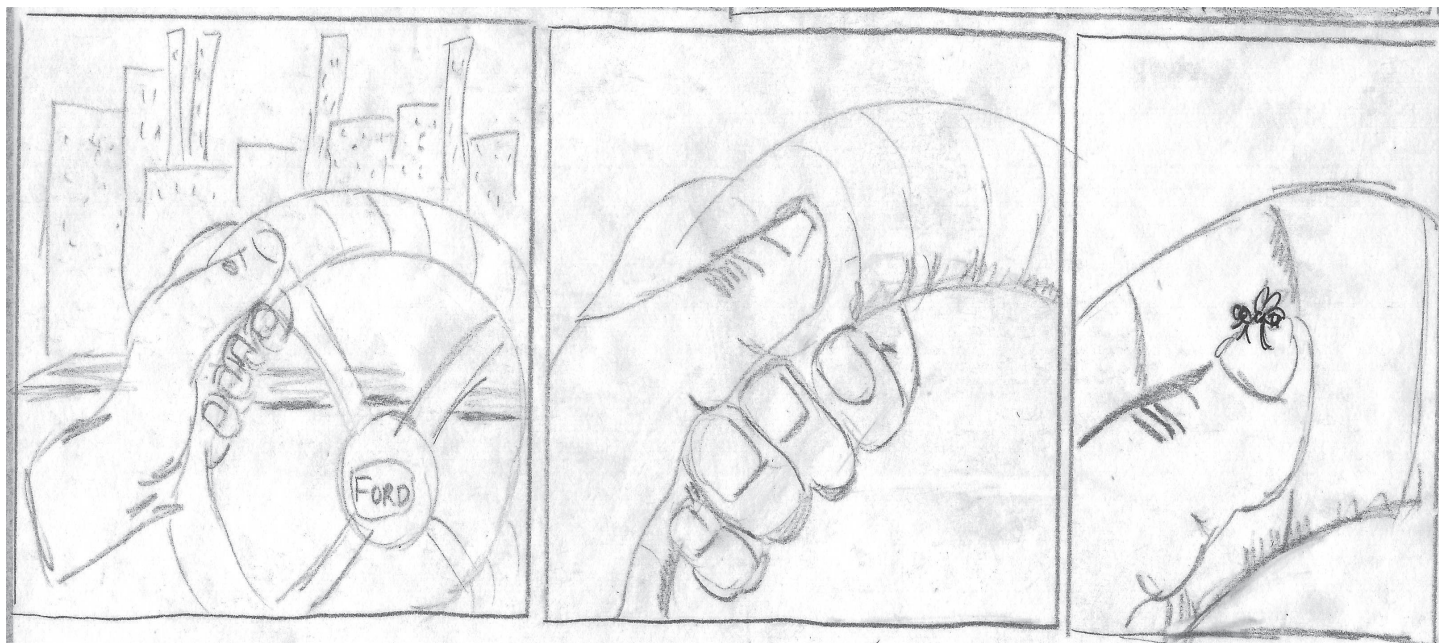
The fire was lit

but learn how to eat things raw

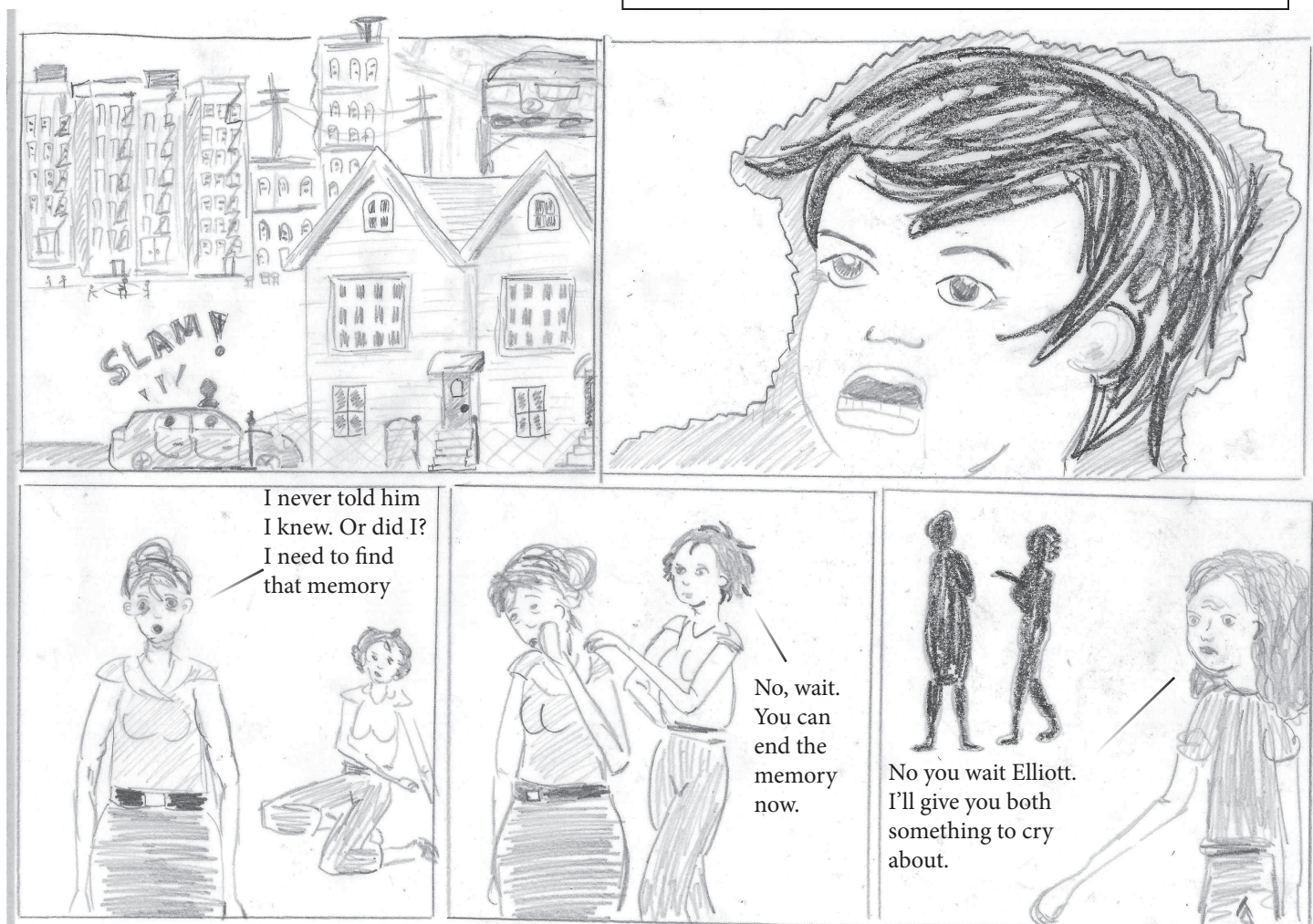
swallow bones and all



Daddy had poor night vision. I drove. Victoria wanted to stop in Jamaica, Queens at Singh's shop on Liberty Ave for roti or bust-up shot as they call it. They both taste exactly the same.



Containment is the only solution.

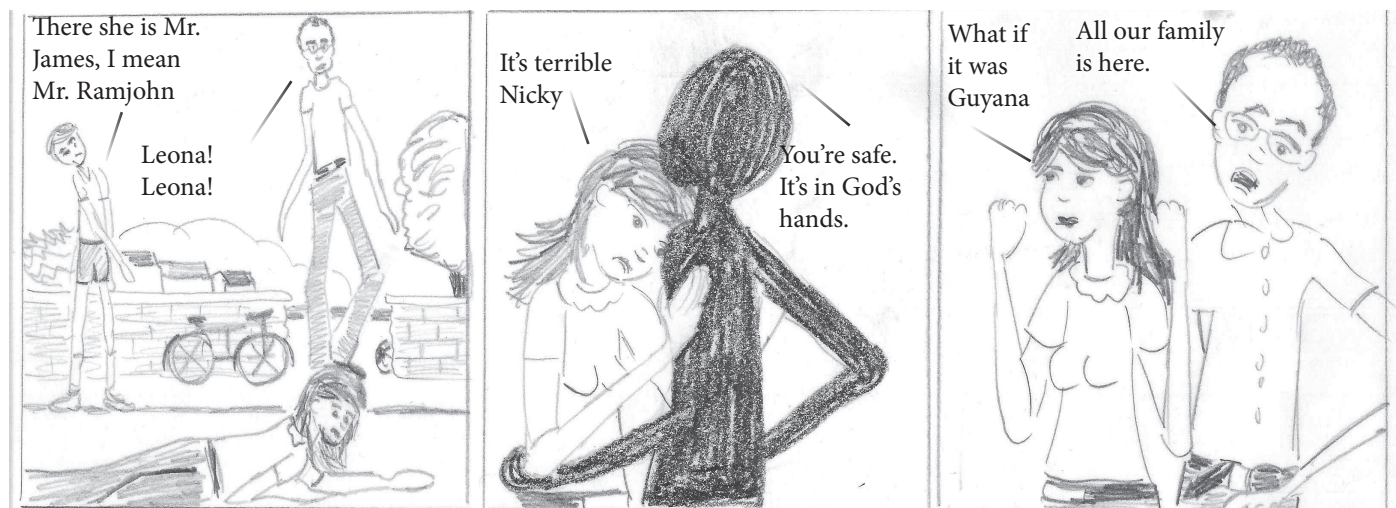
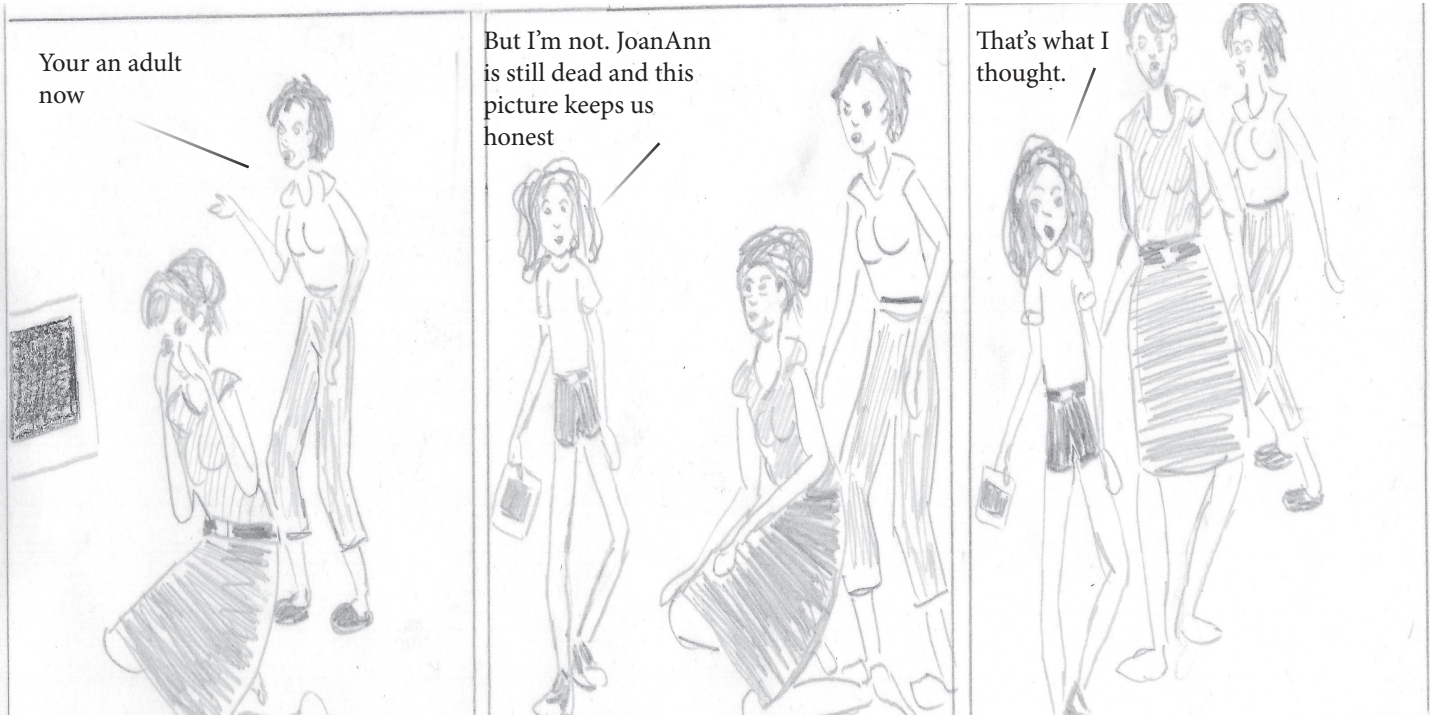




PART FIVE

“Anger is useful”

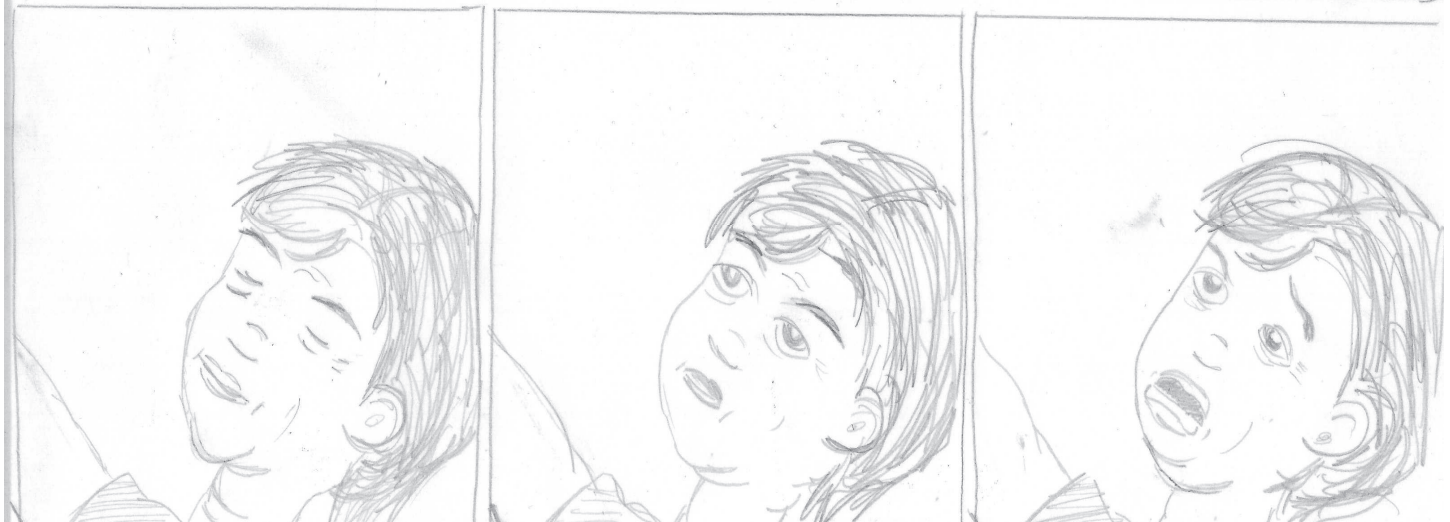




They both hated feeling powerless.

And, at cruising speed under the influence of weight...

Greece is lovely in July.



In the
end it all
worked out

The Nobel
Prize to
name one.



What happened in
Greece?



Don't you dare
blame us.

In the end it all worked out: Nobel
Prize to name one.

So what happens now!?



Am I crying?



I think this portion can be scratched



What do you think?



I think it doesn't matter because they'll read you however they want in the end.



I think we should stop



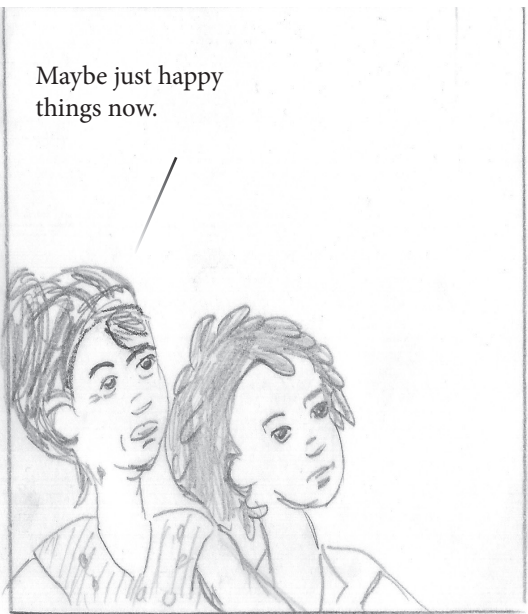
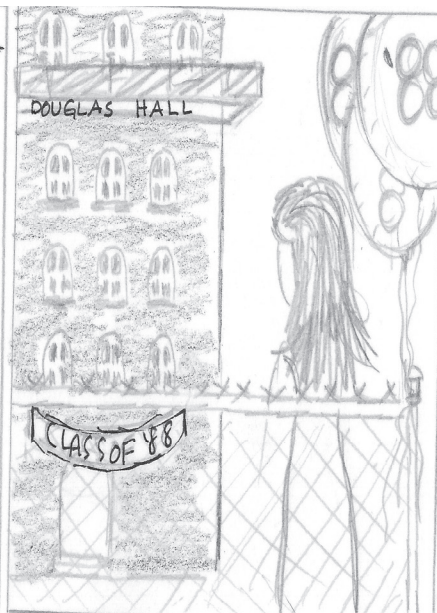
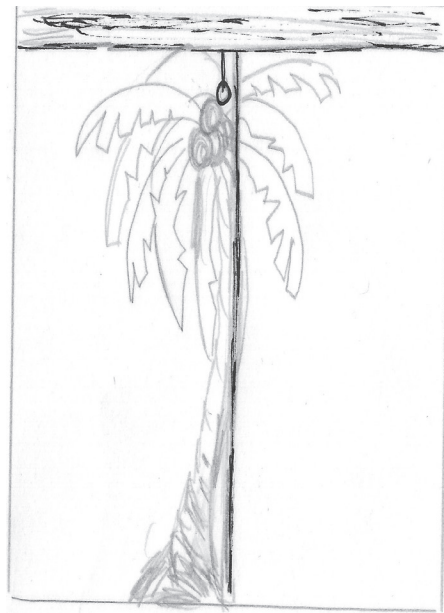
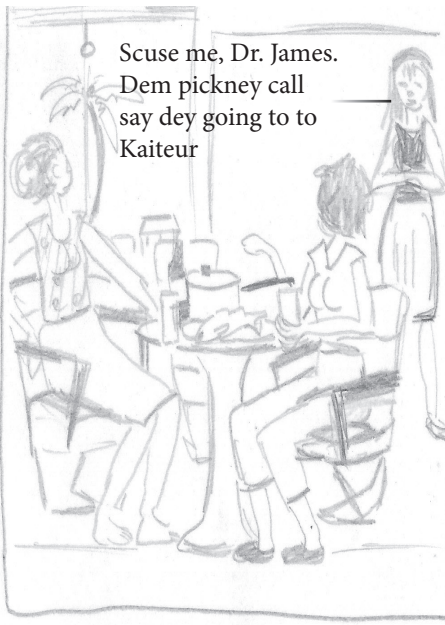
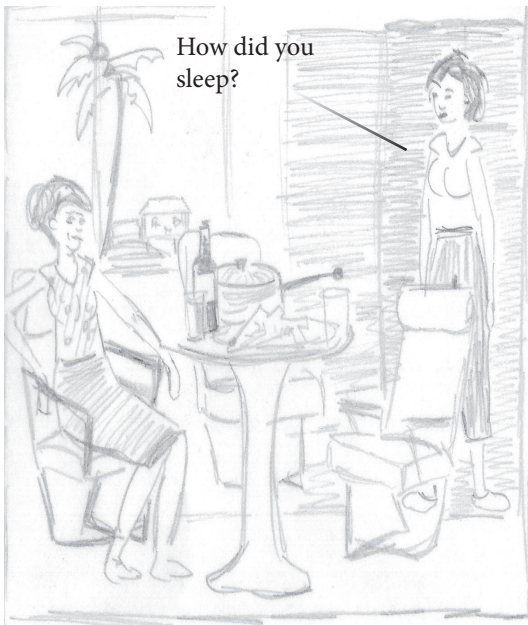
And where a little girl had been crying, a woman sleeps soundly



In a dream



It is perfect again. And, in the morning...



SPECIAL PROGRESS



The hall they rented is in Yonkers because I.S. 158 doesn't exist anymore. I.S. 158 has been cut into three charter schools devised to accommodate new pedagogical paradigms meant to remedy the inner city's innerness. Back in the day, they had two kinds of special. One just had a yellow bus, corrugated metal trailers labeled "Special" and short-fused teachers who weren't afraid to swing back, like Mrs. Jackson. The other "special" ranked I.S. 158. The reunion is not there; it is here at the Elegant Rose Hall on White Plains Boulevard covered in not much snow.

I leave my wool coat in my Jetta which I am glad I do because the hall smells like a Jamaica bashment: jerk, curry, rum, wine and whine. Could be Trini or Guyanese, too. But I doubt it. I scan across the room, under the burgundy and white balloon helix arch, over the three tier burgundy and white iced cake, next to the blitzed deejay drinking at the bar, while a merengue CD bashes hard, while Pan American people wearing too much CK One and accoutrement go at it, and find no one I came to see. Dominique stayed home, doesn't know how I can go out and that made me pissed in this feminist way because had it been a girl that I miscarried I wonder if he'd be so judgmental.

"I have to go out. I am not partying. I need to get normal, again." And he could care less about friggin luteal phase abnormality. I leave and don't blame him.

Under his breath, "it's those fucking chemicals you handle."

"I'll be back by ten." And I leave spelling bromothylmol blue.

The waiter, this young redhead, holds up a plate of shrimp: tails off. So naturally, I'm suspicious until I see balding Booker.

"Guurl, is that you under all that, under all that fine?"

"Boo-kah, " and yes, it's high-pitched because it's my tenth reunion. Ten years since my last valedictorian speech, two days from the MacArthur call. My glory sandwich of shit innards.

"You look so bald." I recognize his teeth against skinning wide against his shiny face like an orca's belly. He was called Blurple, so black he looked purple. I go throw all of our nicknames. Me: boney-maroney, flat-ass, Skeletor, forehead, brainiac; TrapJaw because I always had to answer everything; Twisted Sister because I someone heard I had scoliosis; white girl; Tootie when I got into boarding school; pluck two because by eighth grade the boys ranked me two out of three cutest in the class; and then butt crack after Ralphie.

"Bald is better." And he takes my hand to rub his genie bottle in deep magicless swirls that, of course, means to trace his penis. It always did. For his benefit and the waiter's I take the shrimp, whole.

"Damn girl, you getting me hot."

It was spring and everyone was thirteen and horny. It was spring and everyone wanted to see how much they could get away with. This little Guyanese Monica who came to 158 in the seventh grad—I had hated at first but she turned out to be real chill—was my lab partner. Mr. Ohannesian’s set the pairs and even Ralphie couldn’t weasel her way past. By cheating off my tests, Ralphie ended up in advanced science with me. I was done letting stupid people copy off of my tests. Spring or not, I was going to get the liver dissected before anyone else, even my super smart lab partner, Monica. I looked in a microscope eyepiece when Booker came up behind us, out of nowhere.

“Yo, Leona. You want to play a game?”

“No.”

“Yo, Monica, you want to play a game?”

“What kind of game?” Monica’s voice had nothing better to do, but I did.

“No, she doesn’t want to play a game. She wants to finish her experiment. Go.”

“Fine. Be like that.” Booker stalks off.

It was spring, our last spring with Ralphie, but who knew that, yet? Everyone but Ralphie was in the S.P. class, for real. Twelve of the top students who did high school level math, science, english, and history. We were special. We were shiny nickels when all you have are other nickels to spend. She was a zined up penny. With our special-ness we saw Baryshnikov, and we meet Cuomo—shook his hand, too. We met Spike Lee—he didn’t touch them, though. We were first, second and third place in the Science Fair: me, Nadia Valdez, then Monica Ramjohn, in that order. We were drill squad leader (Colette), basketball captain (Patrick), and spelling bee champs (me, again), debate (Booker and Jose), twins who danced in The Wiz when in the Emerald City scene when they were four (Phyllis and Lia). There were three more people in our homeroom but they were Korean—the Kung Fu Crew; they cliqued themselves out of relevance. Then, there was Ralphie here in Advanced Science whispering something in Booker’s ear to make him laught and making Booker her new bitch.

After Booker swallowed his greasy croquette he tried getting my attention away from the door, again.

“Yo, you remember them cats who sat in the back?”

“Kung Fu Crew?”

“Word.”

“Whatever happened to them?”

I shrug with my attention on the door and on my bunion cushion. “Probably running shit.”

“Word. Word. So, who’s running you? You look good girl. You lookin’ so good. I’m not single, but I can change.”

“I’m married, Booker”

“Whatchur man gotta do with me?”

I laugh like a maniac because it’s a song lyric and I do look good even with my belly bump still bloating. This is fine because my breasts are elephants. I compare myself to any woman in eyesight. The skinny ones were born that way, so they don’t count. I look for women like me who are formed by division: breast, hip, ass. Line by line all of us looking at each other with tape measures in our eyes.

“So, Booker, who else is here? Nadia?”

“Oh, God. Saw her at Macy’s. No husband, and gangload of kids.”

“Any of them yours?”

“Funny.”

“I’m in the Nation, was. I was in the Nation. That’s where me and CiCi met. Where did you meet your man?”

“I knew him since I was three. In Guyana. Childhood sweethearts.”

“Word? Ain’t you had a thing for Pat?”

“Oh my god. That was so old. This is true love.”

“True love look good on you. Mmm.”

“So, you were in the Nation.”

“It’s been a transformational thing for me.”

“Absolutely.” And, I smile at him glad he’ll never ask me about my work immunostaining drosophila embryo when my tits are this big. And, I won’t have to talk about Dr. Tricia Igor and how she put her name as co-author on my work five years ago. And, I won’t have to explain how I’m as sad about that as I am about my miscarriage of three weeks ago. And, I won’t have to correct him when brushes my ass for the fifth time because I’m a proponent for the human imagination.

I smile at him like the definition of transformational is changing with my every nod as his very white teeth saw into some jerk chicken.

“Do I have something in my teeth, “ Booker flashed three angles for Nadia.

“Does halitosis count, sucka?” They dated in the sixth grade so it was funny.

Booker, bored of Nadia, raised his hands but Mr. Ohannesian was somewhere outside. He was staring out the window he cranked as far open as the metal bars allowed. Warm layers of New York heat and street made our fetal pigs’ funk spread evenly in the classroom. Mr. Ohanessian, my favorite teacher this year, lost his get-up-and-go right around the New Year. We diagnoses him as a depressive after someone found an empty bottle of medication in his trash in March and the principal had to explain it wasn’t drugs when we all bum-rushed in the office, stirring up shit. He quit teaching that summer, but that day he just continued to rot in front of us.

“Yo. Yoo-hoo, Mr. O. You finished with our letters of rec?”

“Booker, are you finished with part one?”

“Are you finished with my letter?”

Mr. Ohannesian gave his look. Would have been more intimidating if his moustache wasn’t so thick. He turned back to his ghosts outside the window; maybe they weren’t back-talkers like us. Something. Anyway, I used my low voice of wisdom—but, not so low to sound like gossip. I spoke so Patrick would be piqued.

“Don’t you know what depression means, fool?”

“Yea. That’s the mark my fist is gonna leave in that muthafucker’s jaw if he don’t finish writing my rec for Stuyvesant. I’m trying to get in early for basketball.”

“And, Nadia to think, dot, dot, dot. You gave up this man.”

Ralphie got involved. “That’s what you get for waiting until the last minute.” She snapped her blue nails between Booker’s eyes. I found the liver but didn’t bother bothering Mr Ohannesian. It was spring and I wasn’t so much lazy as I had my eye on a boy holding a book. Last year, when I told Ralphie about it, big mistake, she called me cream machine every time he walked by. Oh, yeah, cream machine was the other name because I also mentioned I had a wet dream with him in it.

“Damn Leona. You want to eat him or what?” Ralphie gets involved in my Patrick daydream.

“I found the liver,” I belted out so that everyone thought she meant the fetal pig.

Patrick and his wife show up right before the party cake is cut by a LaShawn Marquette. I don’t remember LaShawn but she was on the drill squad. There’s a speech, too. I stand attentive, posing and wondering where all the sweat in my shoe and palms are coming from as I look over a shoulder. The hall has gotten more crowded, but there’s no way you can miss a 26” keyhole satin red dress with reinforced bodice to flaunt 36D make out

faces. His wife is rather slutty. I measure.

I saw him them first. They were on the sale rack. First thing I always did was go to the back of Pretty Girl, straight—no beeline—to the red tags. I saw this fly wrap skirt that reminded of something Lisa Bonet wore on “A Different World” when she was Denise. And, in my mind, I was already planning high school through my clothes. I was going to boarding school and was going to be fly. The best look so far was the middle part with a flat press and bumped ends. I couldn’t do Denise, but I could do a better version of Vanessa. So this skirt had a seam up the back but it was a wrap skirt and I was plotting my outfit rotation for Tuesday and then for the Wednesday after when I’d get my combat boots off lay-away just in time to wear it on Thursday when we would do the fetal pig dissection.

“They just run big. It’s the style.” The Dominican sales associate is barely sixteen and was being watched by her Persian boss holding a hanger pole who stood by the African dude who watched the cubbies where shoppers leave there bags because it’s been decided no one should be trusted on Southern Boulevard which bring me back to her.

“You look good mami.”

“Nah. It’s still too big.” I pushed out my ass. What ass?

“I might can get you a eight.” She left.

“I might can get you a dictionary.” And I sucked in my stomach and the skirt dropped on its own. My ribby profile in the mirror shrank and heaved as I breathed. I stood plucking my longest two stomach hairs, then I pushed out my chest, then Boys II Men— Motownphilly’s back again, doin’ a little east...coast...swing, Boyz II Men going off, not too hard, not too soft—came on, then I caught the last fucking hair under my pointer nail and pulled, then I thought about the twenty three dollars I had in my wallet and maybe I could afford some Chinese food before I headed to Brainchild™.

“I can’t find your size in green, but I got brown,” I-might-can-get said.

“Look Leona. I love it!” Monica busts in my dressing room.

There was it was, that farm fresh onion in my throat that just rolled into my gut. She was wearing my skirt, my Denise Huxtable skirt. “Monica, I thought you were getting those jeans.”

“Nah.”

I buy nothing; take my Natalie Merchant boots off layaway and lose my deposit. We hug, I imagine. She takes the 2 train uptown and I go downtown into Manhattan, to Brainchild™ to work even harder to get noticed.

Somewhere on the 2 train, between Jackson Ave and 96th, I tried to give myself intelligent advice, something about how a turtle goes about crying. It walks back into water, I guessed.

There's some kind of onion on my tongue. I am thinking it was the veggie croquette the waiter brought over. In the bathroom, I use my tongue scraper but it reactivates the funk.

I stared at Monica's outfit, covetous. Ralphie sensed something and she was pleased with herself. Ralphie, who for all the things she was not, was a model animal.

"Yo, Nadia, you want to play a game?" Booker winked at her.

"Not if I have to end up in the cabinet with you." And her girls oohed and ahed.

"Don't worry, I'm immune to your pussy-go effect."

Booker grinned. "You get it? Pussy-go. Placebo. Pussy-go bye-bye."

Slow ass Jose caught on. "Pussy-go like placebo!" He was thoroughly amused by Bookers pun, even more amused that it made sense considering Nadia teased eleven dicks that year, alone, and we hadn't even had Sadie Hawkins, yet.

"Language, Jose," was Mr. Ohanessian's contribution.

"Fuck you, Blurple,"—you see, Booker was so black he looked purple—"Just because. I don't. Like your negro ass. Just because you lonely. Don't be saying shit about me to my face."

"As opposed to...not to your face?"

Nadia's mouth was open but she had no comeback.

"Uh. Uh. Duh, duh. What? What? My name is Na-dee-ah. I'm we-tarted." Letting some drool fall through his pantomime was genius and Nadia knew it. Nadia wasn't hurt but she wasn't exactly tearless. Four drops hit her graphing paper, and Mr. Ohannesian gave her, Monica and Collette a bathroom pass to regroup.

"Come on guys. Settle down."

"Come one h-guys. Settle d-hown. H-what are you doing?" I was conflicted. On one hand, Booker's imitation of Mr. Ohannesian was rude. On the other hand, Patrick was laughing. I tossed my head back like a maniac cow. Monica did, too, and her camouflage headband falls down to the linoleum. Jose picks up the headband and hands it back to her.

Under the chandelier, Monica's roots are touched up and greasy. I can't tell if she's hiding gray or

dandruff. She has a nose ring, but I have heels.

“Still working at NYU?”

“Columbia,” I say it like it’s my nation because I know working as an assistant admissions officer at some private school is hers. “I’m teaching and I have a lab.”

“Wow, teaching. I read an article where you were mentioned...”

“Was it the HHMI Professor grants...” Monica is turned around and squealing in someone’s arms as I run out of corrections.

We have hall passes and Monica is squealing and dragging me by the hand like a bad mime.

“Where the hell were you? I had to start part two on my own.”

“You’re not going to believe this...” She pulled me with urgency into the stairwell and we went up a few flights to the last step on your way to the roof access door. Light from a high window protected by a metal grid guard cut an ommatidia into the wall.

“Oh, my god. Oh my god. Leona! I was in the cabinet.”

“Fetal pig cabinet?”

“Uh huh.”

“Oh. My. God. Jose!” And, I howled and she suctioned her fishy stick hands over my mouth and I gasped, because now I’m the bad mime. “Did he touch your itty bitty committee.”

Monica feigned hyperventilation. She shoved her head between the green skirt that should have been mine and I fanned her.

“I sat on Figgy’s dick—”

I go, “Excuse me?”

“Not to be nasty but it was bigger than I thought. I thought Jose was going to go in but it was like they all knew Patrick was into me. I didn’t know. He’s soooo cute, and oh my God, at first it was just the tip. You’re not angry, Lee-lee.”

“No. At least one of us got him infected with genital warts. I hope they explode. I heard about this this woman who was getting waxed for a year and they thought this dot was a mole but then in kept moving into her anus with more dots. And, she accidentally broke one when she was doing a Brazilian. I hope it smells when you pee and it burns when he pees. I hope your baby looks like a fetal pig. My first time is going to be in a five-star hotel on a Parisian beach with my husband. I can’t wait to get out of here. I hate phonies. I hate all you dumb ass

people. I'm going to throw you off the roof. I'm prettier. Why did he choose you over me? Dirty bitch. When I get married, I don't want no pussy-ass man who wants some dirty bitch, like you..."

"Good, because I thought you'd be angry."

"I'm so focused on graduating. I don't have time for these trifling boys. I got a man back in Guyana. I'm not trying to give anything up to no boy... I need a man."

Monica squeals. "Well, now Patrick's a man! We did it. I went all the way. It felt goooooood. I wasn't bouncing or nothing because I didn't know where his ejaculation was. It was so romantic Leona. He kept looking me in the eye and then we kissed." I was about to say something.

"Yo, Monica, Mr. O is looking for ya'll." Ralphie's beefy canned voice reaches us two flights up.

"Oh, my god, Leona. ralphie was right. He likes me."

Monica pulls me out the same way she pulled me in. Ralphie faced us cheesing. She cheesed so wide that the gum flesh protruding between her gap-teeth flashed back its very own smile. They high-five and Monica for-real blushes: brown and buff and pink. I am just red.

"So how's your husband?" Monica asks.

"Good. And you. You got married, right?"

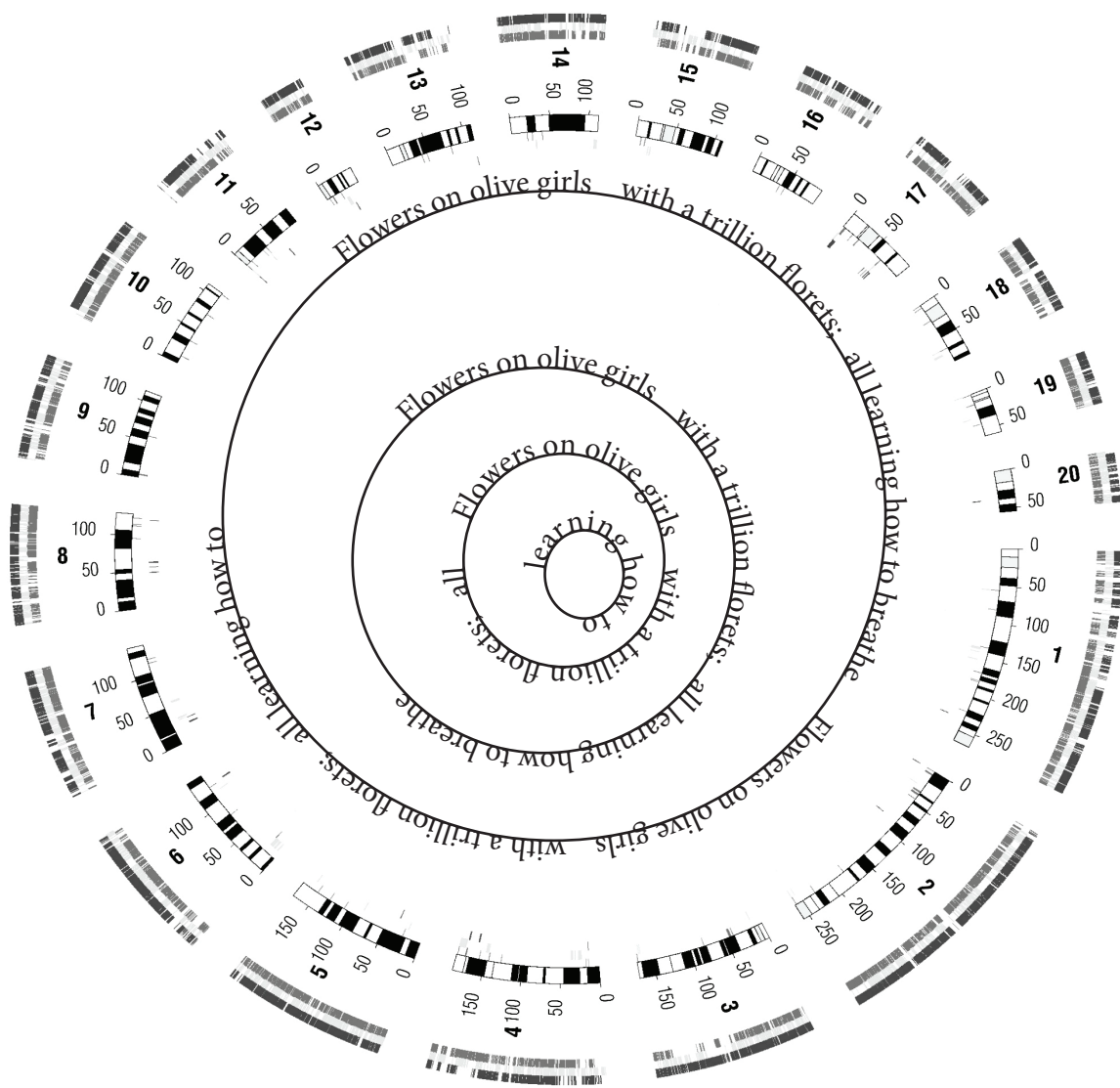
"Divorced. Well, let me not hog you up all night. Looks like Booker wants another dance. Round five."

"I'm probably heading home now, but it was so good seeing you. We should get together and have coffee. Tea."

"Absolutely. There's a Starbucks by my office. Here's my card." And on it, she has a different last name.

"You kept your husband's last name?"

"The important thing is that I didn't keep the husband." And with that she works a grind to the dance floor. This is the moment where I am supposed to take stock in what I have at home. That the moment the hall thins out I should feel compelled to apologize to Monica for what I drew in her yearbook, for what I said about her behind her back instead of to her face. I head to the coatroom and into my Jetta and wake Dominique for short unsatisfying sex.



TAPESTRY





"Theire eyes watch you," I say.

"Mommy, did this hang in a church, too?"

"It's a tapestry."

"It looks like carpet. Daddy says there's a lady in the carpet in the hotel. He sees her every day."

"I don't know what you're saying, Corinne. Probably in a home of an overlord. See down there? Commisioned in 1204 by a Scottish feudal baron."

"Have we been to Scotland, yet?"

"Yes. Remember last year after I went to Oxford to talk we took a car and drove to see llamas..."

"Oh yeah. I like monkeys. Can we go to the zoo?"

"I thought daddy took you last week."

"I want you to take me."

"Let we catch up with the tour guide."

"I'm. I'm tired. Carry me."

"You are too heavy, Corinne. You are a big girl."

"You carry Natlee and she's fat."

"Natalie is a baby."

"She can walk."

"You are too heavy. Your daddy is stronger."

"Why didn't we wait for daddy, then?"

"He has to work. He is off only Saturday and Tuesday."

"Can we come back on Saturday? I'm tired."

"No. I work."

"How come you can't?"

"I work. I do important work."

"So does daddy. He works in a big hotel."

"Come let we go."

"I wanna read about monkeys."

"Let me reeead it, nah." And this makes me laugh because she's picking up my mother who is with Daddy and Victoria and her two unruly boys in the European sculpture. We left them screaming in from of "Ugolino

and His Sons”. How fitting.

“Hurry up and read it, Corinne.. The tour group is moving ahead.”

“It’s too long. I just wanna take a picture of the monkey.”

“Want to, not wanna. Okay, hurry up.”

She likes monkeys, this one. Monkeys stuffed, monkey puzzles, bedsheets, rain boots, and hair barrettes with bananas but not bananas themselves. Corinne says they taste like medicine but she loves plantains. Inside each of her top drawers are unfinished diaries with short stories about monkeys, mostly good curious ones like George. No signifying monkeys full of mischief from lions and elephants or lucky ones who are spirit animals responsible for family protection, understanding success, or movement through ego. None of these. So, I bought home the freshman Animal Physiology text book for her to read about monkeys and understand the difference between apes, humans, monkeys, and prosimians. If she can learn a bit about scientific names then she can avoid making all the possible mistakes my Columbia students make when they confuse evolution as fur or no fur, tricks or no tricks. Monkey tricks amuse Corinne, too. Apparently, there is something about being eight that stays with you.

Natalie squirms in my arm with her face away from the paintings. Even at three she shows no interest in art or science. She has a stack of Lil’ Einstein readers at home going to waste. All she cares for are the toys Victoria brings.

“Let she be, Natlee. Is like she my dauta. I can trade you one boy for she.” Because I must that desperate for a male heir.

“No thank you.” And her sons Delon and Kirk continue to run around my coffee table *like dem bad ones back home who messup bad the Chineese restaurant last Saturday wit a watah hose. Spray watta troo a window and messup one lady plate of chowmein and plantains.*

Corinne never had Lil’ Einstein or a babysitter who teaches her some French. The having of more is a poisoned paradise Daddy said in a homily, back home and still, now. Victoria rolled her eyes when I repeated this. So now, Nataliaie has a full sized doll that walks with her because of a spring rigged from Becky’s plastic pinkish tan arm to her artificial hip joints. She came with a tu-tu skirt glued with aqua blue sequins on aqua blue tulle. There was matching one for ages 3 to 6 years. It was adorable but would be more adorable if Becky Walk With Me came with a compass indicating, “We are walking North.” I am concerned that: “Let’s go to school!” “Let’s go to the mall!” “Let’s walk on the beach!” isn’t enough of a direction for a developing mind. Though, I am pleased that she is as enthusiastic about walking to school as walking to the mall.

Becky Walk With Me sheds her flaxen locks on the carpet. I caught Dominique using a strand he found on the couch as dental floss. I grow concerned that I am not doing enough to stimulate the cognitive functions of her cerebellum so used a rubberband to attach a compass to Becky's hand.

"See, Li-Li. Becky is walking northwest." Her eyes went dark and I needed some support but Dominique just sat her on his knee and stewed his teeth when I said this.

"Look at Corinne." And Corinne looked up. "Corinne loved books at her age. When I was this age I was reading."

"I remember you running around your mudda yard with no clothes chasing chicken so don't make so," said Dominique.

I stewed my teeth and sprang up from my kneeling position. I don't like invitations like this into these conversation. I don't know what he remembered about me. It always seemed so romantic to think about him, then. I smiled.

Now, I panic.

"Corrine." She's not at my side, not with the tour group. "Corrinne!" My voice bangs out against Caravaggio, Picasso, Belisario and this unknown master weaver of monkeys. It bangs with me forgetting myself, forgetting how loud I am, have been, and can be. Natalie startles and clings tighter to my armpit.

NEW YORK POST

New York Post, Sunday, September 7, 2021

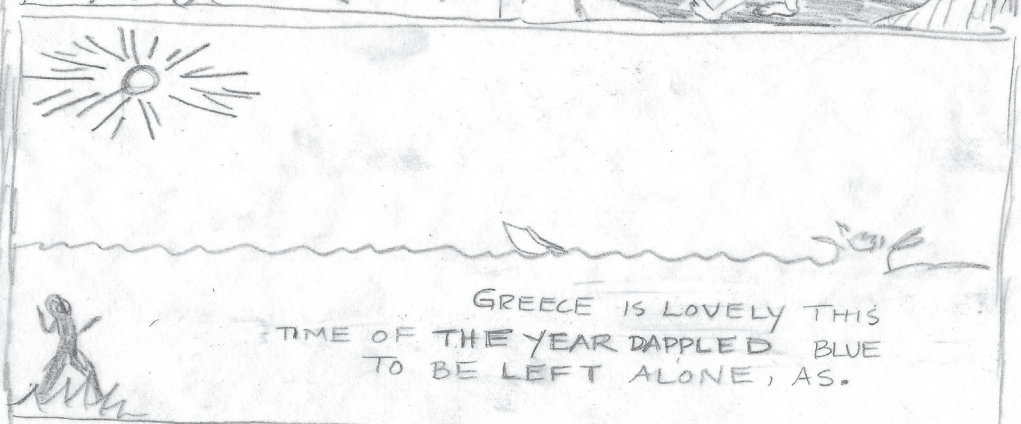
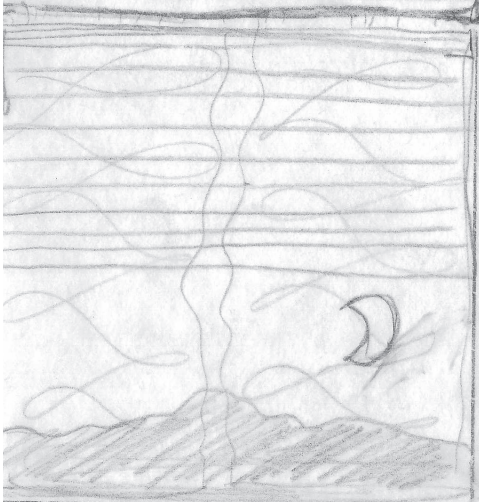
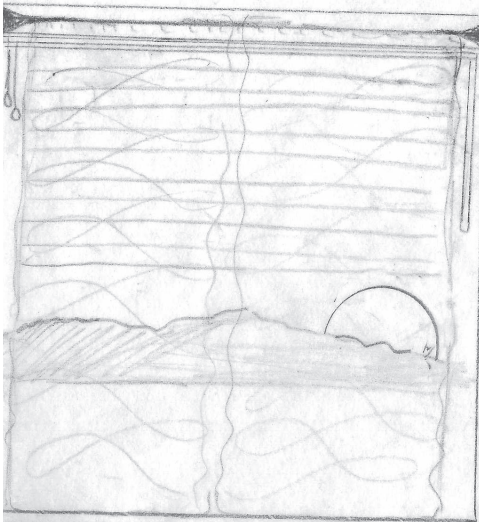
**Page
Six**
**Richard
Johnson**
With Paula Froelich
and Chris Wilson

Nobel Brain Fart

Dr. Leona James visited the busy MOMA with family, sources say. Her daughter, Corinne, age 8, wandered when Nobel Prize winner got caught up enjoying art and a cup of joe, sources say. Corinne was later found by Helen Margin, eighth grade teacher at St. Margaret's (Queens). "The girl was very shaken up but happy to be back with her mother. Kids are wiry at this age."

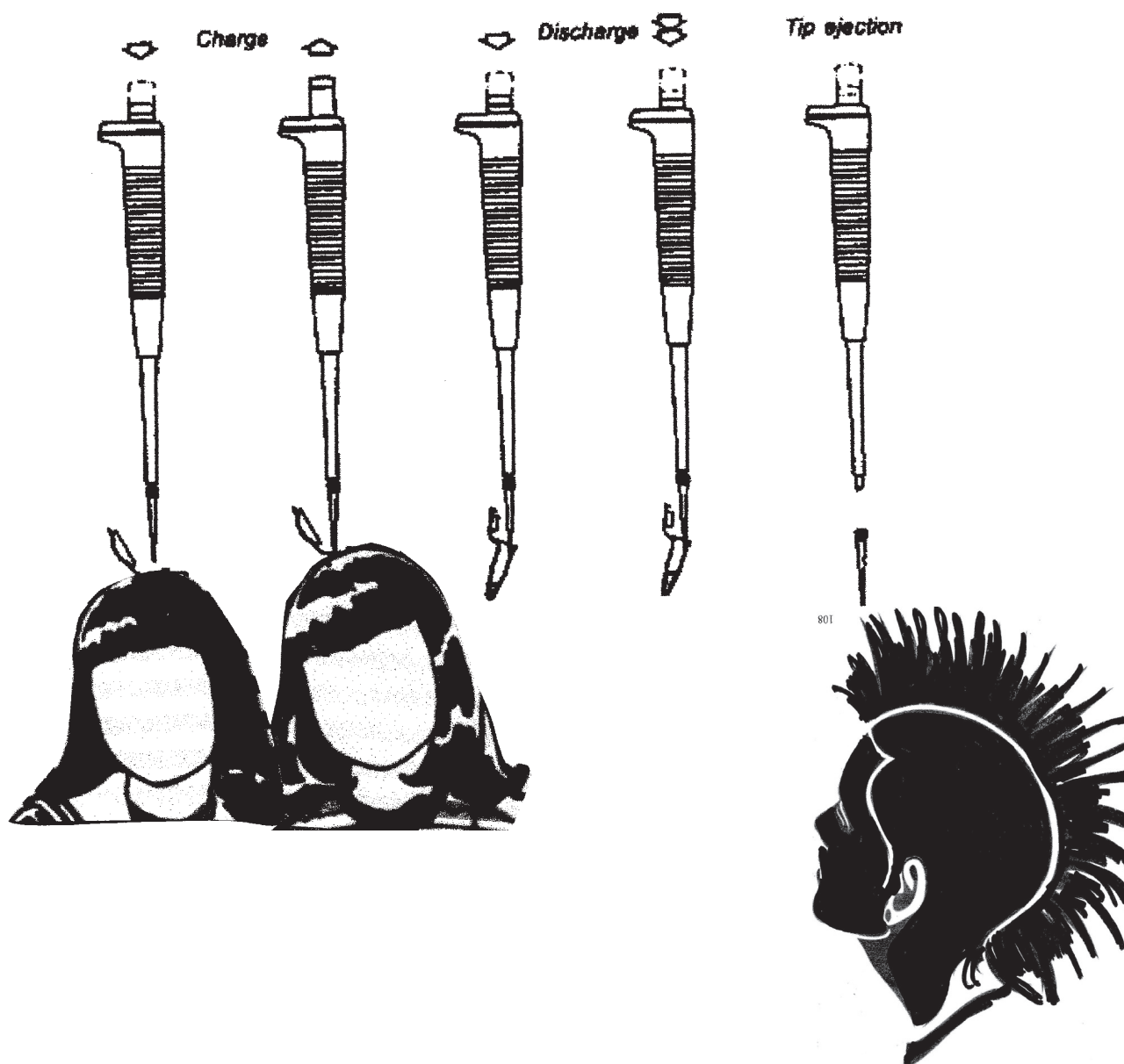
Ms. Margin will be rewarded with a school visit by the inventor of cognitive control drug Xenotrix. Got an invention for parenting?

Let's break, shall we. The children will be here tomorrow. I don't want exhaust myself.

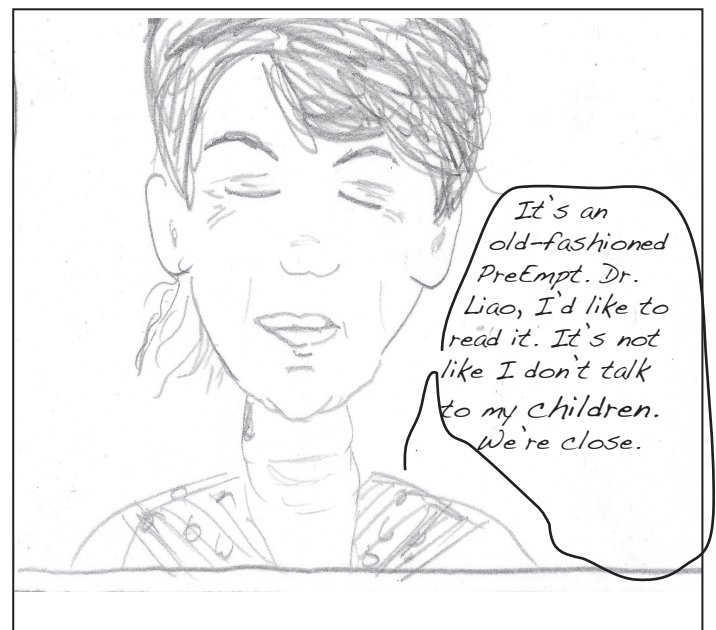
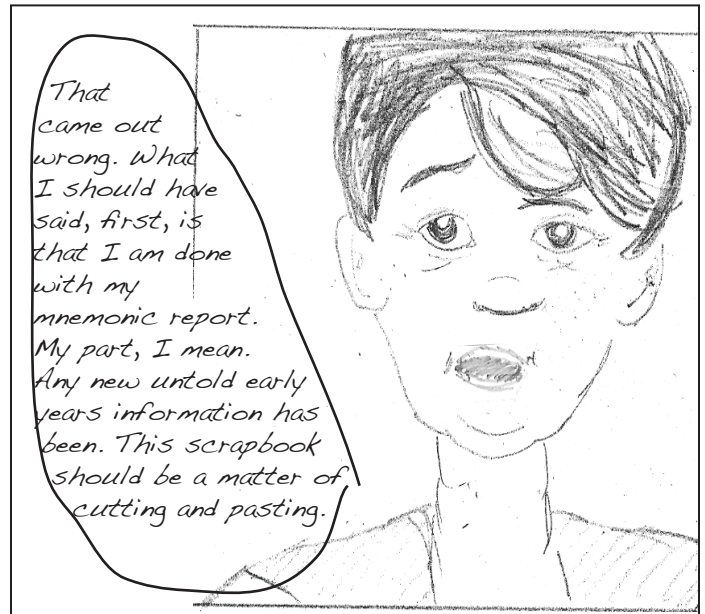
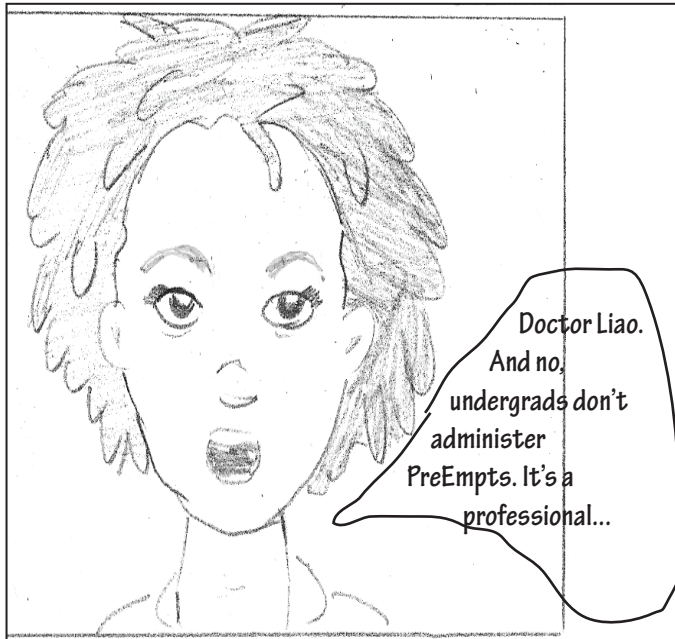




A PAIR AND A SPARE







PREFACE by Griffin O.D. James-Moncrief



Griffin. Age 30, grandson.

Mindy, 20s, the morning crew at the Kitty Kastle



If only that was enough to slip in a G-string.

Preface

With reluctance and amassed naiveté, it begins...

My mother collected mnemonic data as a means to report the genealogic importance of my grandmother, Leona Sunday James. The idea to do so was prompted, in part, by a supply of material-paper that became available at auction, and, to the matter of the other part, explains the excesses of secondary source data as opposed to parsed posits obtained from a simple Encode™. Not having been raised around the significance of material-paper, it is significant to note my obligatory participation in this venture—this homage—will be limited to the parameter of things you should find entertaining: namely, me. It is also significant to note irony. This familial scrapperbook (I believe this is the term) will most likely not include future traces on my lineage as I am coded XX Rendundant. There is a 15-year moratorium on sperm with high recombination to conceive female embryos. The government's moratorium will bring gender parity just in time for my 49th birthday. Null set for this sui generis! Yet, out of this same Latona-mania, guided abstinence, in lieu of preferred sterilization, will prevail should a potential wife or friend agree to modify an ovum in the names of James. The significance of either is insignificant to me.

There are twenty years between myself and my mother, Natalie Lamella James-Montcrief; thirty-eight between her and hers, Leona; and a biological sixteen with the one before. The degrees of change between generations is only significant in the telling as those telling are all matri-lined up. Though the task of writing the first words have fallen on the XY of this lineage, the significance to its telling is lost in lack of profession, lack of prospects, lack of progeny. I cannot report on a past for which I was vigiled as a little boy and then process-reminded as a man. Herein, I will avoid redundancies.

Considering this a research context, generating potential references presented a challenge to the secondary sources (mother, aunt) but the collection is concise. One may even argue that they are tertiary sources given the mutable design of the primary source, my grandmother. As research context, the, represented West Indian-ness is conflated with invented nuances that cannot be reproduced and hence, cannot be proven. This is the past ditch effort of a <blank> generation Guyanese woman to pass down recoverables to “the next” generation.

In sum and of significance, I have enjoyed the company of my grandmother and wish her well on her Pre-Emption™. If any genealogic datum herein is to be recovered for “the next”, one should have encoded. ¡R² Leona!

Instead,

-Griffin O.D. James-Σontcrief

INTRODUCTION by Corrine Madeline



Corinne Madeline James-Covey, 57, eldest daughter and restaurateur. By osmosis or psychic exchange, she inherits her mothers charm with underlings.



Introduction

Introduction to Leona James PreEmpt

Guyana...the land of many rivers (most are dirty)...a mosaic of people (some dirty), religions, spices (all excellent), and crime. Crime, though, before the Second Wave Pacification along the east coasts. It's all gorgeous now. Now, there's a tourist wait list (there's await list for any place with vascular plants). But then, is when I knew my mother in it. Then, I would describe it as hell. Natalie will tell you different with notes braiding in birds and flowers and summers. This perhaps why my nephew and I were tasked with first words and why it was agreed no one but you would read them. (And, a good thing for Natalie. Grif is a kill.)

I introduce you to this scrapbook for your Pre-Emption™ as your first-born but I will introduce myself to “the next”, as Grif says. I am the owner and head chef of Edition. Hopefully it will be around longer than me, but if not, know that I am a James Beard. That will outlast. I learned how to cook from tv and my father who learned it from you (as he told). The aroma of my kitchen will not evoke memories of some distant land but will put into perspective that distance. Ingredients must be modified. I am an excellent cook and learned Guyanese recipes as rote. Who can forget the meal at your 15th anniversary?

I shared a pinch of this and little of that and come and watch me with my father, Dominique. I have learned to do by watching my mother be: I have a fondness for real can sugar and have been fined more than thrice for imported it; I have a tongue steeled for wiri-wiri pepper; I have named a son; I have altered my steps to stray; I have raised two daughters who have looked on me without resent for their career and they have found it! I have made myself on these little ways in the kitchen. As such, this project was first my idea to collect and map family history through transliterated recipes. However, sentimentality won out (as usual).

Given who this material-paper (pretty expensive splurge to get it on paper) is dedicated to: “life is too busy for those of us with professions that don't require a brief description.” I give you credit, Natalie. It takes a humble measure of oneself to collect good and bad datum from a maternal mouth. So to you mother, I give credit for tolerating this project in spite of your critical minded-ness. Common sense has nothing to do with science and vice versa.

Cooking is an art and as an artist I will endeavor to imbue such qualities, here, that I can. Partnering is an art and as a wife I will endeavor to forgive and forget. Sistering is an art and as one I will endeavor to approach each collaboration with an open mind. Mothering is a paved path and hot stones eventually cool. (Leona, this may be our longest conversation.)

May you enjoy many ‘appy times wit’ dis here.

Affectionately, your daughter,

Corinne Madeline

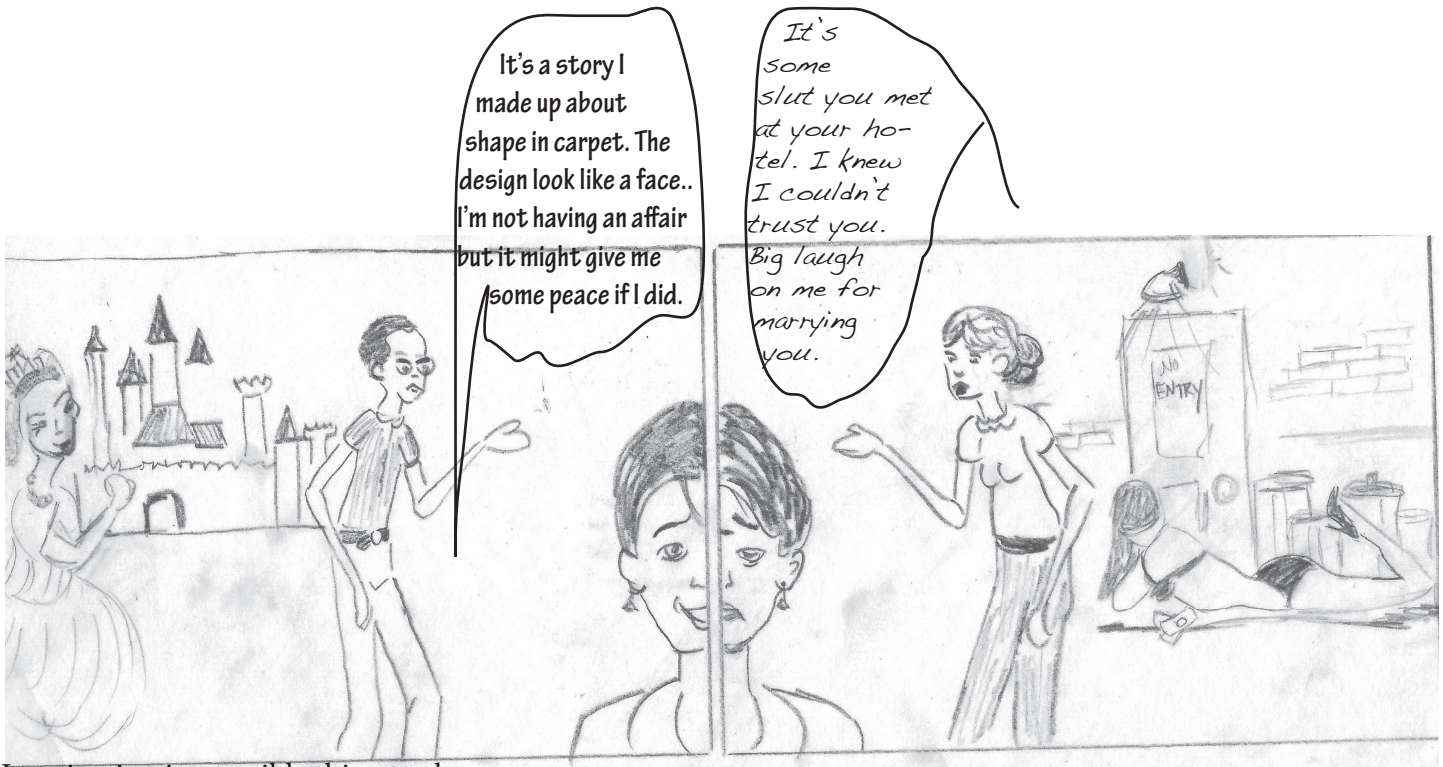
PS. Griffin, I will do my best to avoid redundancies from Natalie, but this is your mother we're dealing with.

AFTERWORD

Bedtime story

*a love missive from my father, Dominique, to my mother, Leona
as remembered by their loving daughter, Natalie Moncrief James*

“Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess named Natalie who lived in a cold cold country in a cold cold house, in a cold cold room. It was so cold that when she cried, her tears turned into crystals like diamonds. Her wicked stepmother loved diamonds so she made sure that Natalie went to bed sad every night and in the morning the wicked stepmother would collect the bucket of diamond crystals that filled it. One day a merchant came to the cold cold country, to the cold cold house, and sold the princess and magic carpet for her cold cold room. The merchant told Natalie that the magic of the carpet was that it would always keep her safe and warm. That night, Natalie was not sad and in the morning when the wicked stepmother saw her bucket was empty she cursed and yelled at Natalie. the princess ran to her carpet and fell upon it crying, “Oh dear carpet I don’t want to be cold and alone any longer.’ The beautiful pattern in the carpet turned spoke and said, ‘just press your face to the carpet and your wish will be grant.’ Poof. Natalie became part of the carpet. So now when you look very close at carpets, and if you are very lucky you can see her beautiful face smiling back you and keeping your feet warm. The End”



Imagination is a terrible thing to share.

HOW TO WORK WITH...

care, maintenance, manipulation



How to touch...

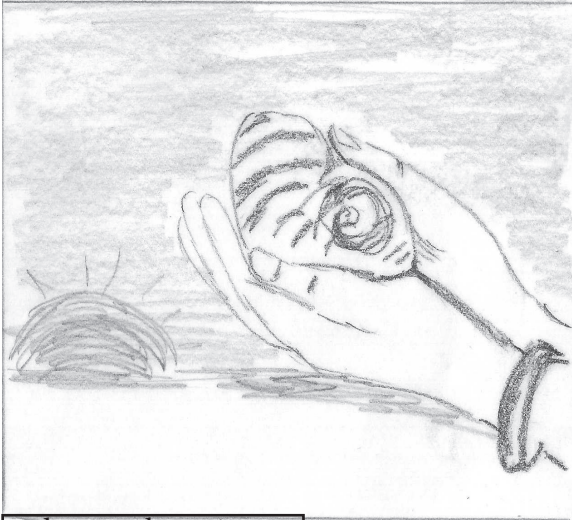
colleagues who stole from you



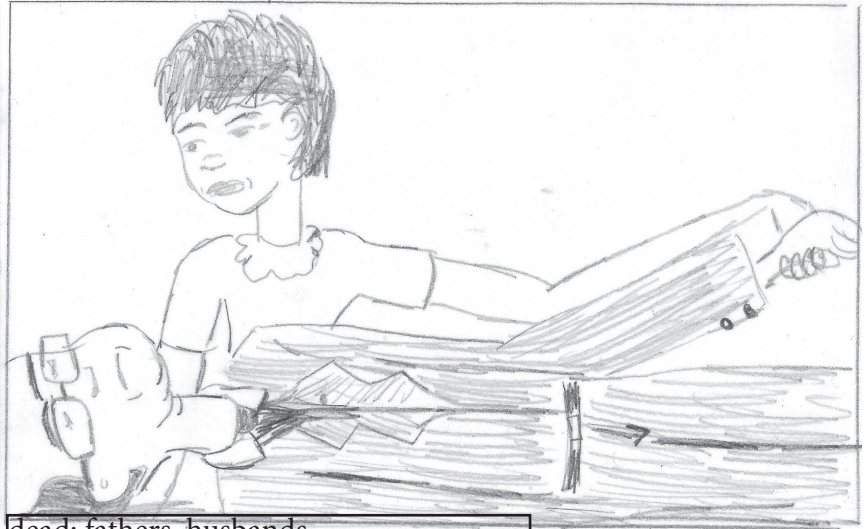
parentless bullies



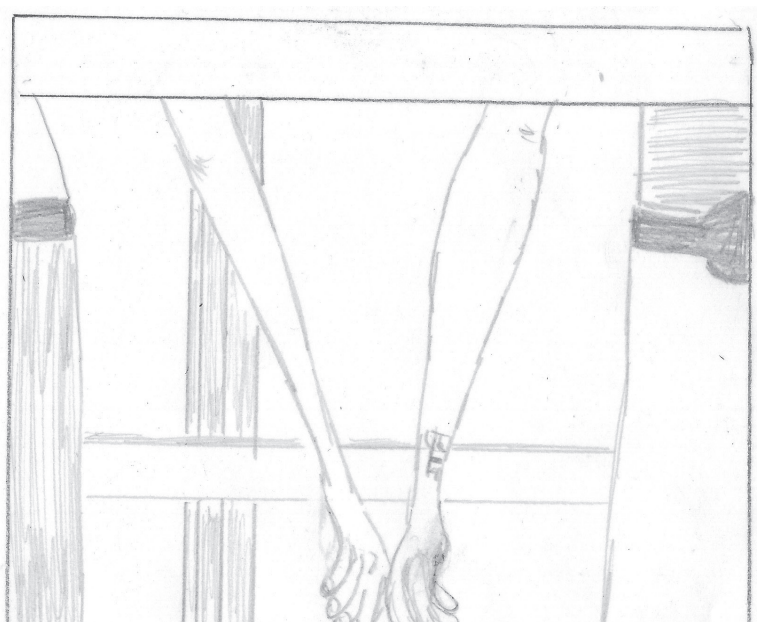
12th century museum art



endangered species



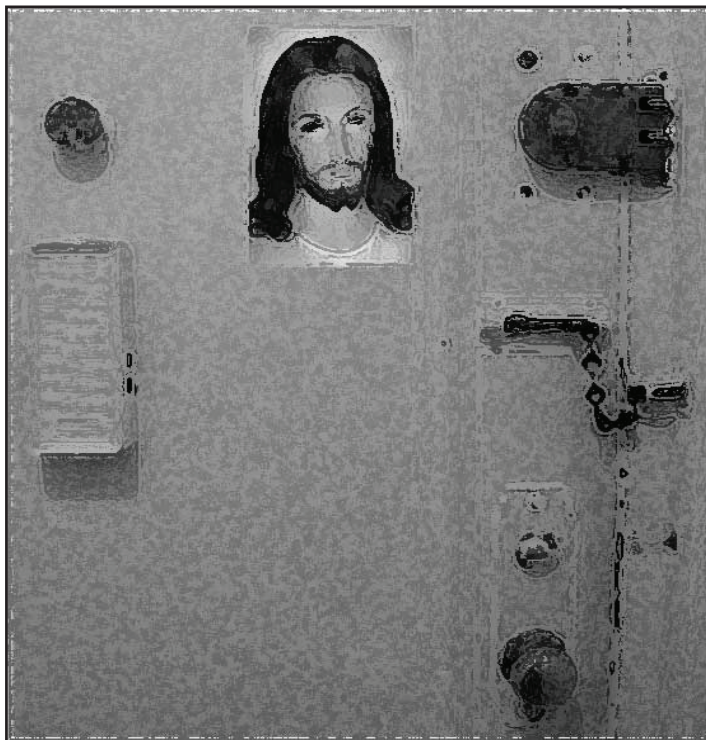
dead: fathers, husbands



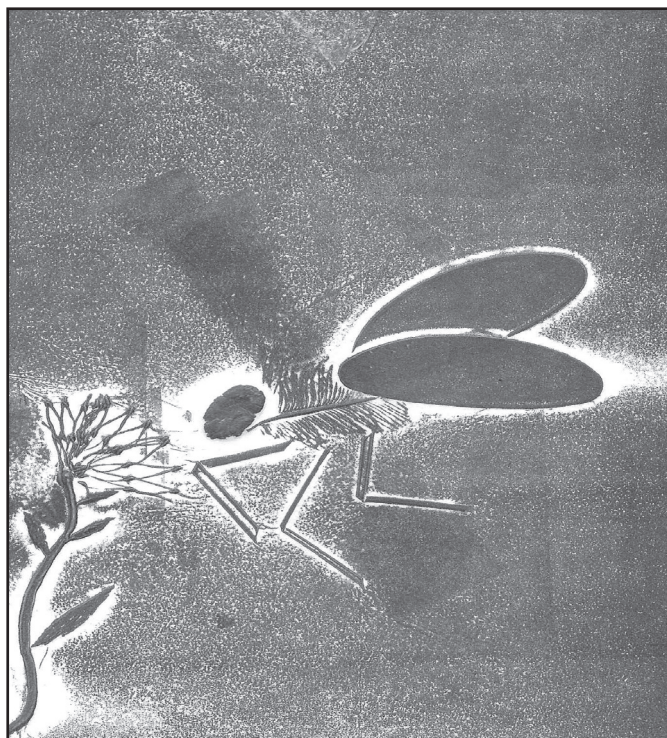
Ex-boyfriends you see while attending a conference in their home state where they own a restaurant, after they've made you brioche, before you fly home and pick a fight with your husband for his low ambitions.

How to live in your first NYC apartment after you're married.

Make Jesus your butler.



Make sure it's a butterfly and not roach.



Agree on a paint color quickly so that you can have a romantic weekend tickling, fucking, and eating on real hardwood floors.

How to make the most out of boarding school

Play a sport that requires a skirt.



Understand white male dominance and stay competitive.



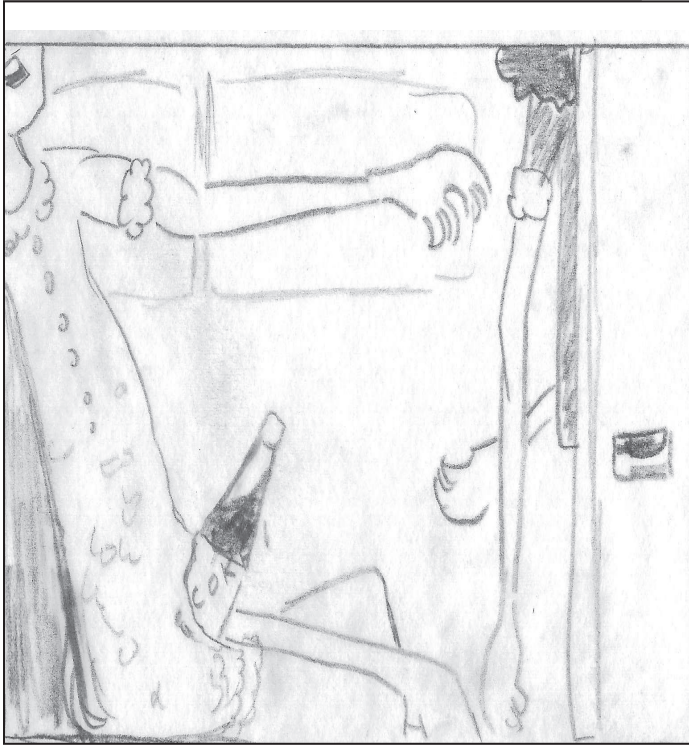
Remember three of your favorite bones are your hips: ilium, ischium, pubis. Some use MTV to counterbalance each move, step, misstep, repeat; perfect. Whine up and jump from your memory cell. Supplement moves with irony. Use a dutty whine like morse code to tell them where your mother's ovaries are from. Dem a call it type-writer and windmill. Grind a slow way, then dem a shake up fast. Lovely. Grind a slow way, then me a shake up fast. Better. Grind a slow way, then me a shake up fast. Butt: a Jamaican gyal is all dem a see. Grind a slow way, then me a shake up fast. The code switches. Whine yourself into a legacy. Forget Paul Revere but remember his ride.

"Where is Guyana, again?" [wait for it]

"Ohhh, Jonestown." Grind a slow way, then I shake your hips faster. Irony supple-ments you like hot damn. And even though you give each other shit for the same shit, when 'knife an fork ah fight fuh dumplin', black boys and black girls find each other like radar.

How to enjoy sex or not having sex

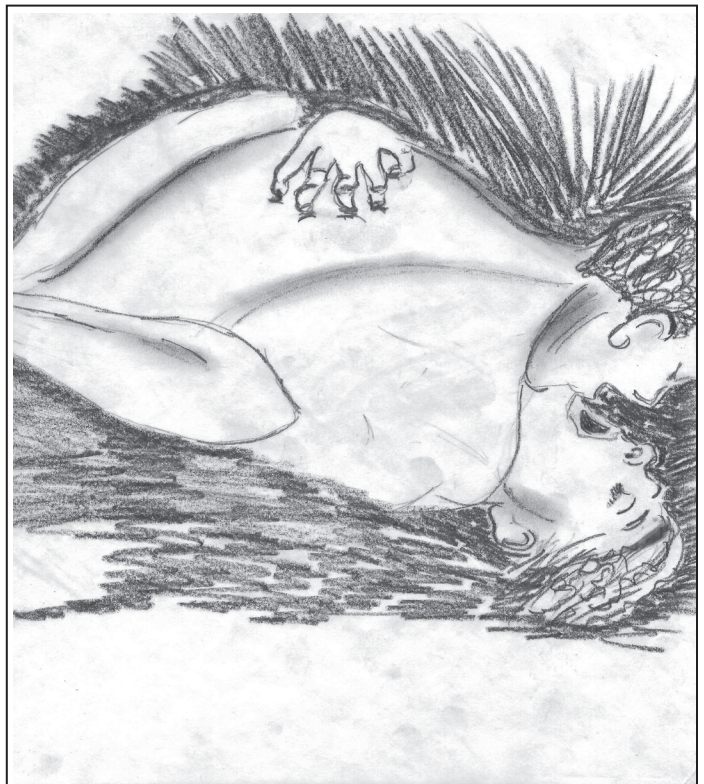
After a long hot ride in a tapir it is not acceptable to have your older sister shove a Coca Cola bottle between your legs and laugh while you scream.



After the love of your life fucks your older sister it is acceptable to take two fingers on a campus bench in moderate to heavy snowfall.



Wait until he starts to asking rhetorical questions about his penis and answer in the positive. This will stimulate stimulation and you will get sleep soon.



Wait until you reach your thirties; you'll know what I mean.

How to commit adultery at work



Get a grant. Travel where civilization is actually civil. Start to dress compatibly. Start to act compatibly. When you are offered roasted breadfruit understand allow your host to blow on it until it cools down

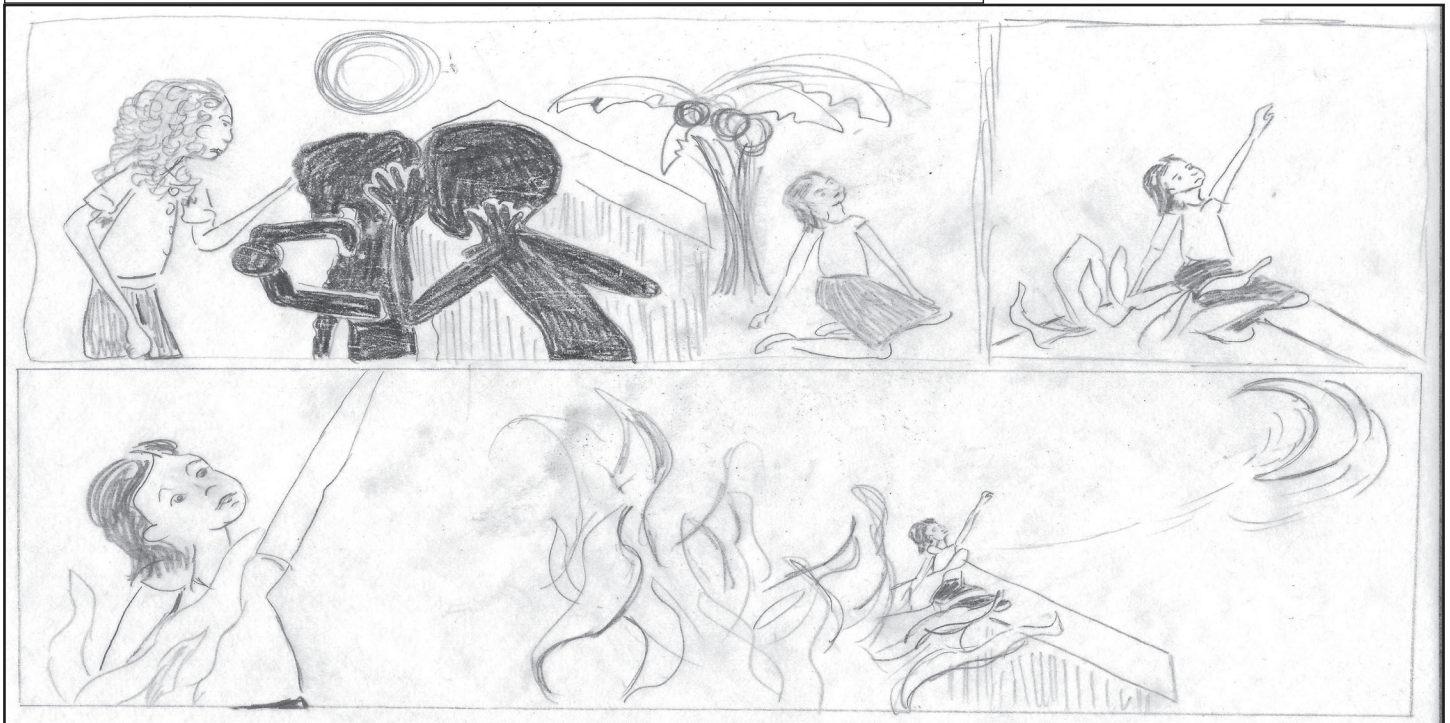
NEVER!



Force your eyes to make out the face of woman in the carpet at the swank hotel where you were promoted from custodian to custodial manager. Pretend this one won't judge you. Stop pretending if you begin to feel guilty about what you did with her sister before you both were married.

How to put out a fire in your dreams

Stop your recurring dreams



Instead, dream you are ten again. Turn your friend a doll. Carry your doll to the roof. Remind yourself you are dreaming. Now fly.



minque. difficult times I paid for this house. I'm the breadwinner. Don't tell me I can't have male friends; they're just colleagues and this is just a cocktail. Why are you trying to hold me back? Often manifested in the shape of a child. Manhood, as in, the smallest incident can cause us to be hurt. Evaporative properties of manhood are enhanced when you are placed in losing positions, but distillative properties are enhanced when you place me in those positions. See Playboy. Me and you covered in Navaio White paint fun for me then a son the end that's it nothing here (nothing here) five months mathematically

Dominique: dominique; (dominique) A wake a widow

he is still born
still in me
still
first born

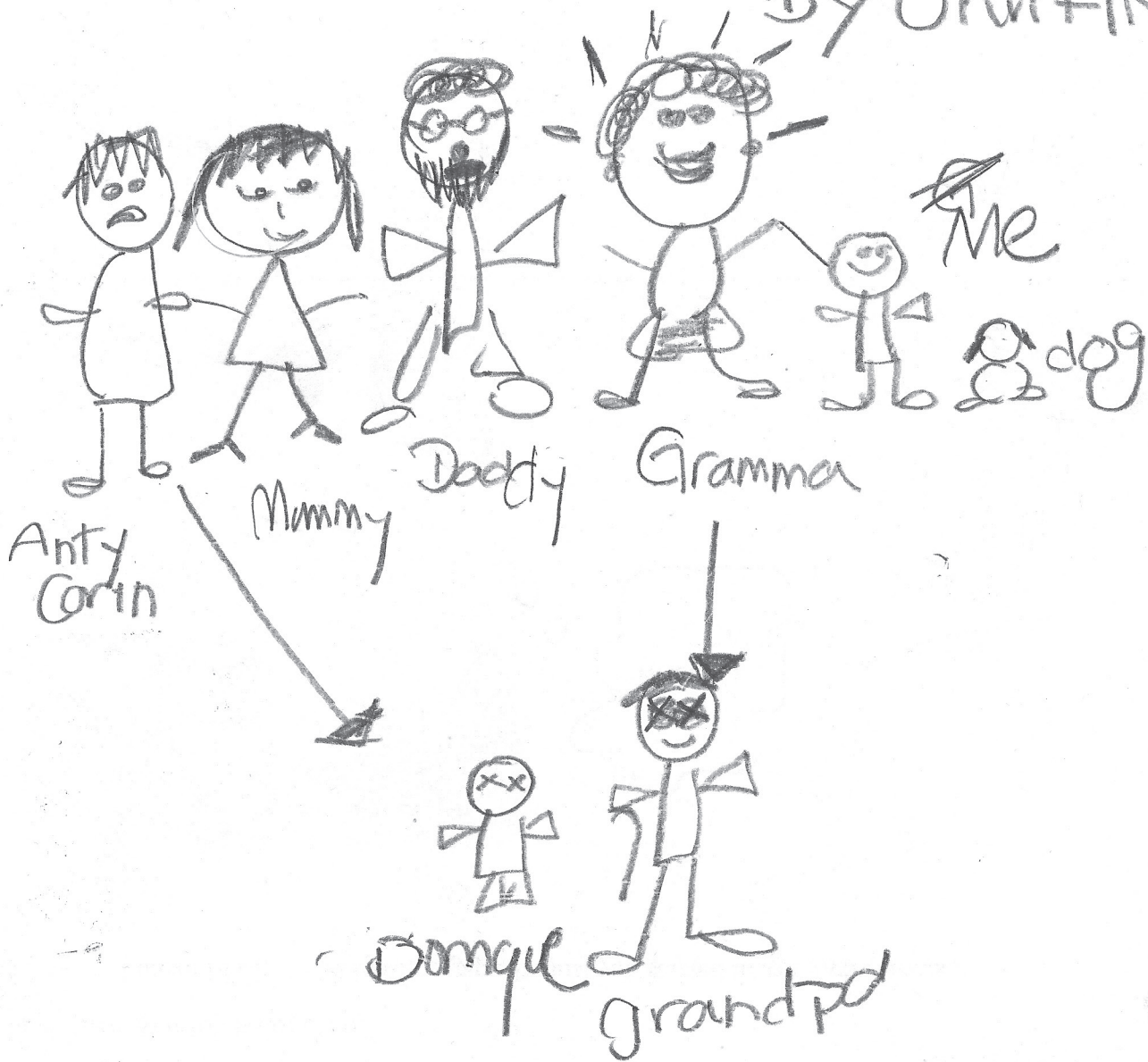
there is the charm
three i harm three

is how
we
does s
lickle boy
blue com
blow you
morn, shee
p in deh m
eadow an c
ow in de co
r n where
is dat
bwoy
under de
haystack fa
st sleep. will
you wake him
will you w
ake him?
under de
sea fast asl
eep. who
will wake
you my li
ckle boy
my lickle
boy He
will sure
ly cry
G hosts,
I have
every
one's ex
except your
accept
yours
Ghosts
as a
sign

Ghosts, as in, I have seen everyone's except for yours. Are you punishing me? I still won't accept the explosion of a locust on my car windshield as a sign from you: the ocean ocean ocean ocean ocean water water omb wound

smelling of wash soap and him not saying too much is this sweet pretty color when it circles de Eart

Family Day by Griffin



FABLES



The Monkeys and Their Mother

1

“The monkey, it is said, has two young ones at each birth. The Mother fondles one and nurtures it with the greatest affection and care, but hates and neglects the other. It happened once that the young one which was caressed and loved was smothered by the too great affection of the Mother, while the despised one was nurtured and reared in spite of the neglect to which it was exposed.”

-Aesop

2

“The monkey, it is said, has two young ones at each birth. The Mother fondles one and nurtures it with the greatest affection and care, but when the hunter, with bow, arrow and bloodlust pursues she drops the one she loves most and is left with the one who did not slow her down.”

-A daughter

3

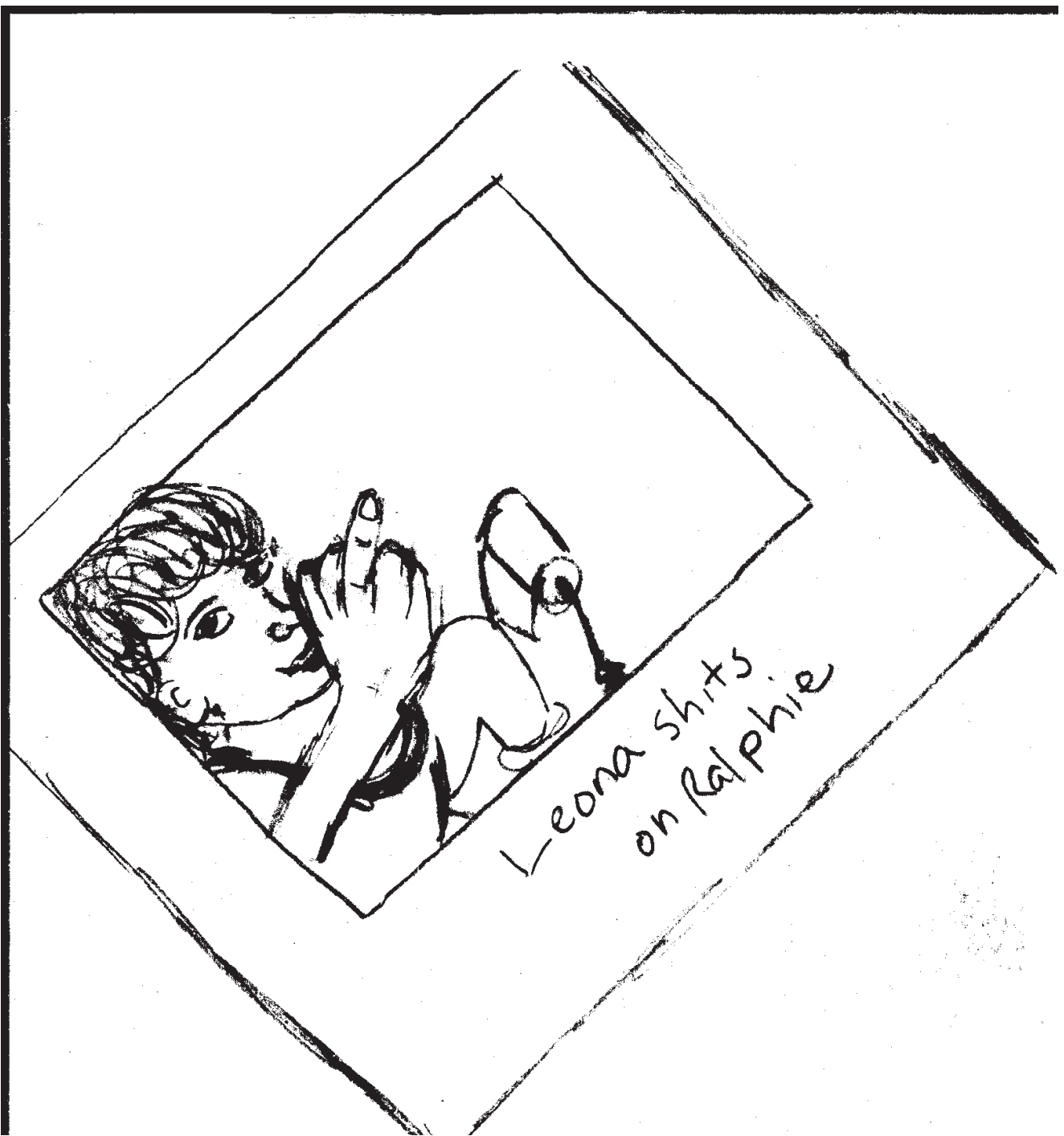
“The monkey, it is said, has two young ones at each birth. Perhaps, she deserves neither.”

-A mother

3

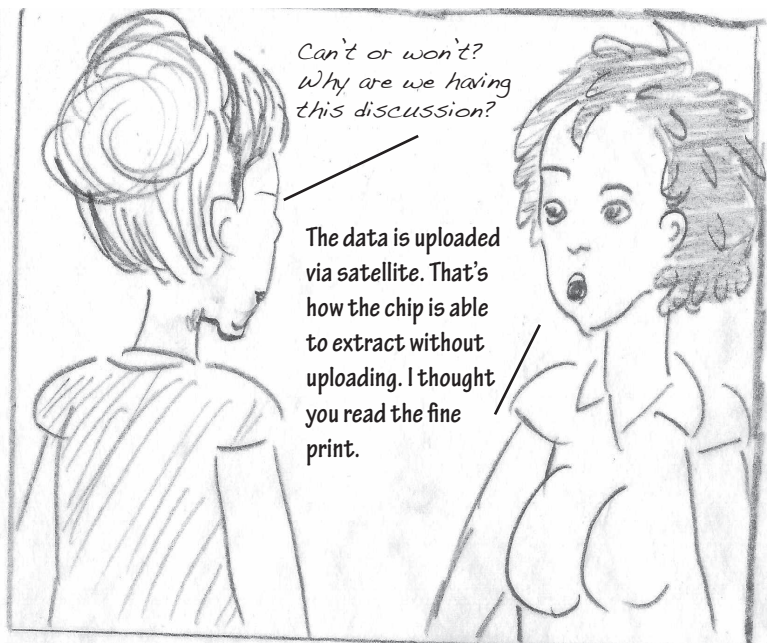
“The monkey, it is said, has two versions of the same tale.”

-A monkey



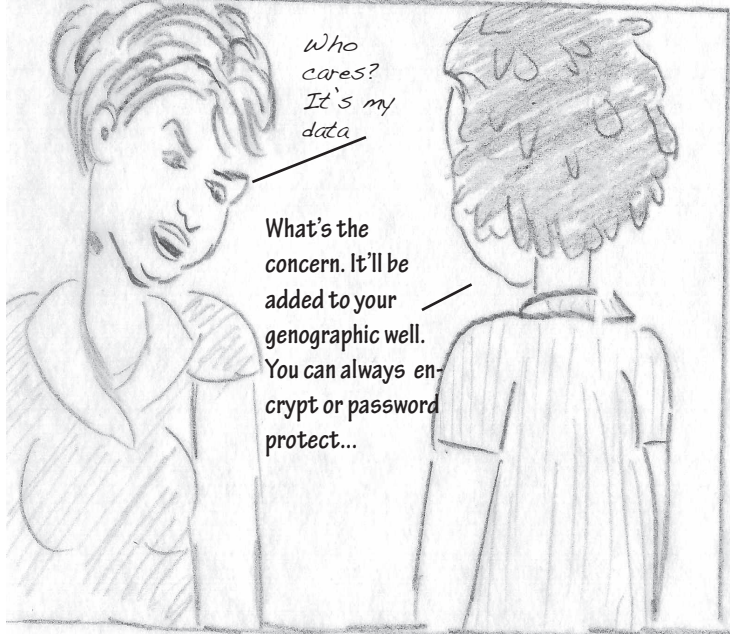


I can't do that?



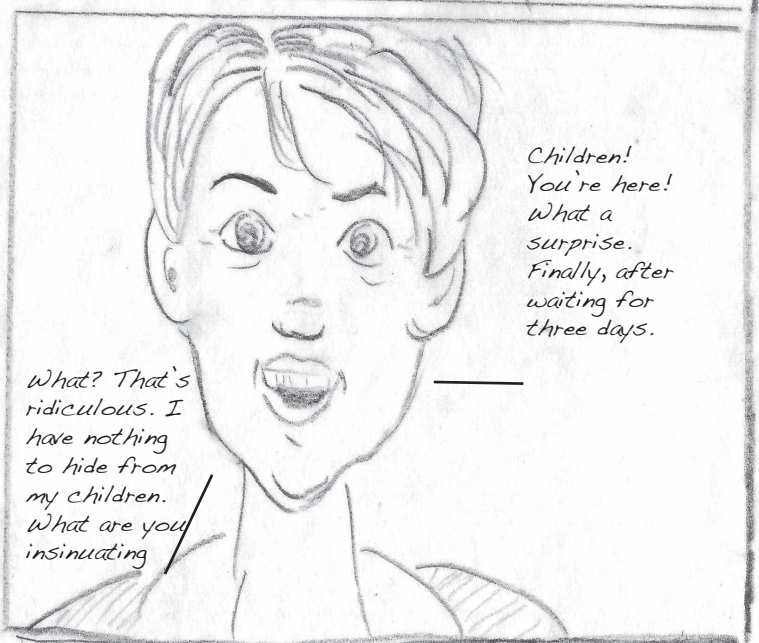
Can't or won't? Why are we having this discussion?

The data is uploaded via satellite. That's how the chip is able to extract without uploading. I thought you read the fine print.



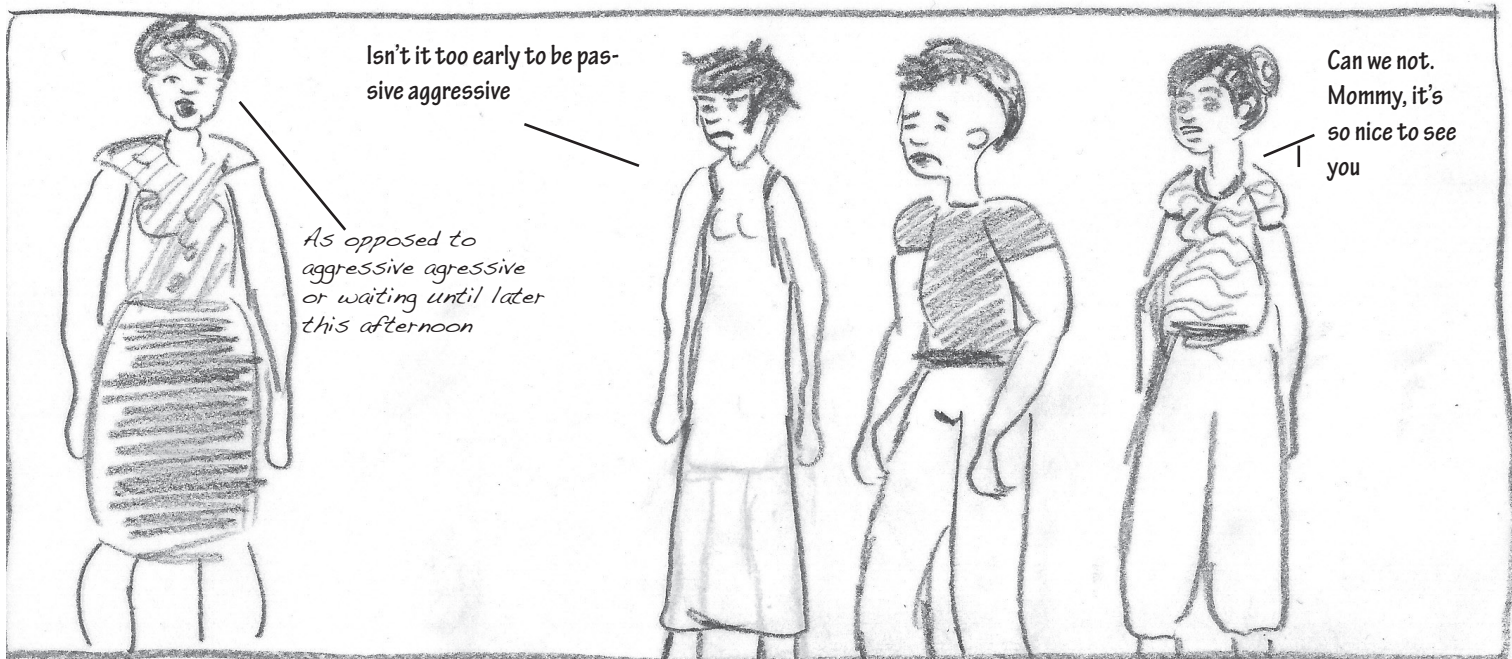
Who cares? It's my data

What's the concern. It'll be added to your geographic well. You can always encrypt or password protect...



Children! You're here! What a surprise. Finally, after waiting for three days.

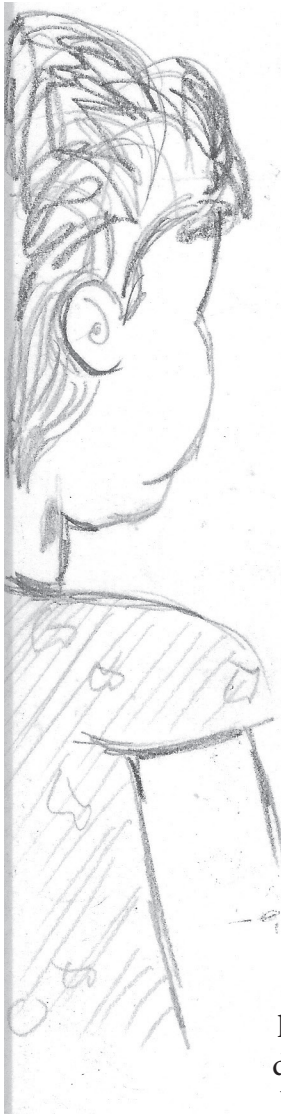
What? That's ridiculous. I have nothing to hide from my children. What are you insinuating



Isn't it too early to be passive aggressive

As opposed to aggressive aggressive or waiting until later this afternoon

Can we not. Mommy, it's so nice to see you



You know, Natalie had to beg me to come. Beg me. No. Don't interrupt me. This is apparently the last chance I have to say this. To say to you, face to face, what it is you dod to my family when you let my son drown. How dare you be glib with me. How dare you pretend that for past twenty years I avoid you because I am busy. Ms. Liao, did she tell you? Or did she figure out a way to mask that corner of her mind, gloss over it. Did she tell you how she goes off to Greece for a conference, some bi-annual Drosophila thing and she takes Vessey. Yes, they get together after Auntie

RHUM

Vicky died. Enabler city. and coke is what we called you two. Did you know? That was our nickname for you both, back then. It was Natalie who came up with it, though I'm sure she didn't think it would catch on or that it would be true. Lord knows, Natalie wouldn't have said shit if she thought it would hurt your feelings. You're ominivorous, you know that. You just eat away at everything. I trusted you to keep him safe not just in public. Who the hell lets an 88 year-old drunk take a little boy out in a fishing boat. Reliving his days bak home nah gyal. Try fuh ketch fish like dem real fisherman with net and hand. Who'dve known a little boy could get his arm and leg tangled in a net. Oh, and where was Leona you may ask. Well, Elliott, Dr. Liao I'll tell you. She was enjoying a delicious do-nothing moment with a bottle of rum. I trusted you. Dominique wanted to see where Aesop lived. He wanted to know all about the dinosaur bones on Samos. I handful of plastic dinosaurs was all that was left in the boat. Thank god. Thank GOD that Vessey went over trying to find him because if I saw his face next to yours at the airport I would have killed. I would killed someone. He was my son. Mine. Not yours. Not a still-born. Not a husband corroding under you. Not a do-over son for you. My son. I could have killed you but here you are. PreEmpting me. So you see, I had to come to see you one last time because I figured that's the only reason you want his parade. You scheduled euthanasia. You want out before your hero dust is all gone.

Mommy? Mommy?! Oh my God



*Do you think they
will make us dream?*



A girl (1987)

in a cornflower blue nightgown decorated with cornflowers and Baby's breath sits on the floor with pieces in her hands. She picks up two and the slope of their edges connect the eyepiece to the lens and she makes a hexagon to lock them in place. After that, her thumb swells—not the place where she bit it—in the place where her breasts are becoming the tender age of teen. A nightgown with lace almost seems silly.

The Hulk, it seems, has come for her and just because mommy and daddy are still on the velvet-like couch watching the tellie—daddy, he still calls it tellie and still says zed for zero—doesn't mean he won't get her, again. The Hulk is bulging and green and can say "Leona" very well.

"Daddy?" She calls for him.

"Leona." Full stop. He's looking at her through his mono-brow and a wall. She is almost embarrassed about her ashy knees caps that show below the hem but if he looks there he won't notice her flat chest.

She leans against her father for protection but the wall gets zing-powed. The first floor apartment's wall crumbles and she can see the bodega across the street. It's the afternoon and this serves her right for napping in the middle of the day.

After the break in, the hulk moves closer and she's not scared so much as pissed. She remembers the Exorcist in her closet who she sneaks food to. It is other tv she should not watch. The Exorcist only hung around twice. The Hulk comes more often.

Closer now, he scoops her up in arms too big to bend but they do. Up close, Lou Ferrigno is baby-faced but he doesn't respond to her telepathic wants and they leave. He won't be reduced like Satan's spawn.

"Just have her back by ten." Mommy has been paying attention all along. And just like that the Hulk leaves with her.

It's night and she's bored or maybe boring. The scenery switches and blades of grass run between her toes. It would be nice to see them but this isn't a dream about grass. She tries to conjure up Bruce Banner but then Bill Bixby must be like forty by now and talking to a strange old white man would be worse. There is a plateau of space in her head and all they do is stare at each other. She pretends to be really scared and since he's immune to her telepathy he just stands there being green.

“I don’t want to be here.” She steps to him remembering he’s inately kind and she is a happy victim but the only time there was a happy black victim on the “The Hulk” was a blind woman with a press n’ curl who ran a blind school. Leona is not blind and wears four slept-on plaits. Blind people don’t roll their eyes and rubberneck. After she slaps him, her hands get all honey-gooed with green skin.

“Are you retarded?” Middle school is a comfort zone.

The Hulk holds back.

“And that’s all I remember from twenty, thirty years ago: he breaks in and while I’m working on my microscope, and no one even looks up. I’m pretty sure it’s me because of the nightgown and I’m pretty sure it’s the Hulk because it’s Lou Ferrigno. I had this happen only when I took naps for my first few years here—“

“Honey, are you listening?”

“Yes”

“You can’t be. You just started up the car.”

“The bat’tree is weak.”

“What did I say?”

“You say you get vex wit’ de Hulk. We all get vex but if he come tonight, I will show he who is hulk.”

“Oo, my hero. And are you going to grab your crotch for him, too?”

“It is me hulk. Brown not green.”

“Yea, don’t make me wish I was still a virgin.”

A wife (2008)

tries to cover her pregnant aerolas beneath blue negligee. They are like shifting stains hand washing themselves in his lucky palm. The waffle light is Knappa from IKEA and six soft bulbs collect a mood on his face and in his right eye. The negligee becomes a rug before it has a chance to be a fashion statement. Frederick’s of Hollywood.

Her husband is too shy to speak up in company because of his accent. He let’s her do all the talking everywhere but here; here is his. The bedroom is his megaphone. “Bush get ears and dutty get tongue”, her mother would tell her, but oh, these are the good secrets that air between them. He uses

his thumb to break up the pattern but she doesn't notice it being better or worse; it's just problem solving. She tries to take back the last thought because picture & text come from the same source and she just needs to feel pink swirls not cede their position. Rugae.

The night is a dream; it's a time to try the things he's seen in Playboy. They are married, after all. He goes first and she runs her hands over his shoulder blades, one hand higher than the left's. She finds it hard not to enjoy herself but needs honey to reciprocate, but all her tongue can think about is tea and hot cross buns. She is not paying attention and he cannot hold back.

The screech of the faucet is flint on steel. The experiment ends.

"I don't know why you nah hear me." And, she can't hear him now because the shower is at full blast. She dances between hot and cold surges waiting for the water to wake up. He peels a flap of curtain and smiles and starts to rinse off her chin.

"I'm sorry, Lee-lee."

The day remembers everything and uses fixed distances to move them from point a to point b in the same room.

"Honey, I say sorry plehnnty time. What more you want?"

"When a man is courting a woman he does not do such a thing on she face. It's pure nastiness."

"We are not courting. We two is married. Mar'rege." And it is said with such charm as he points to her wedding-engagement band from Sears. She has to understand.

"But you saw it in the magazine."

"Fuh trut', but you see it, too."

"You are a nightmare."

"Wha'" He sucks his teeth in a pitch higher than her own and she echoes it back because she means to be heard.

"Wha' you want me fuh do? I have a goal to achieve and you deh stay put when I call you, I say, 'Leona', and you nah move."

"I was thinking."

"Ah. Thinking. Thinking again." He taps his skull. "It's t'inking then that get you vex, not me."

I have no response to Dominique and I accept his kiss. Our distances become comoving, again.

"Today, I will paint the room pink."

"Why?"

"Because it is a girl, no?"

"So."

"Green is for a boy."

"I like green. It's strong. Green can be for a girl."

"Let she grow up like a girl, nah---"

"Lee-lee"

"Yes, Nicky"

"I want fuh paint paint pink."

"Fine."

He primes and paints his apology around two doors and four windows. He is careful and I am cautious: two of the loneliest states for a man and a woman.

A woman (2033)

has eaten and drunk too much at the 103rd Model Organism Symposium, but they're in Crete and he has to deal with it. She is the Seymour Benzer Keynote Speaker and he doesn't care to find out why. She drinks all night and in the day she demonstrates her signature fly dissection techniques to graduate students and postdocs who are too young to have used a compound microscope. He takes a ferry to an island where people actually cook, not cater. He hears the fish are plenty. Six-sides of her wedding ring cuts through her blue nitrile gloves and her knuckle is a paper accordion. She never takes him off. Her hands smell like rubber bands all night but his smell worse.

The boy in the other room is her grandson, not his. He came because he wanted to see where Aesop lived. They won't make it to Samos but he's content collecting old broken shit from tourist outings. He likes being by her side, not his. He calls the boy a "sweet boy" because he still sucks his thumb.

"Don't call him fine. It's cruel."

"It's a joke."

"He understands you. It's cruel."

“Oh, you ‘merican people does stay so!”

“Now, I’m weak?”

“A young man should not suck on t’ings. He leave the breast behind, he leave must leave it all behind.”

He sucks his teeth in a pitch she doesn’t want to get used to.

“Be nice to him. Be like a grandfather.”

“I have me own tiny worries back home.”

“Be nice.”

But her replacement man is not a problem solver; he is just two years of company. He stands in front the hotel room door holding his hips and holding back more comments. For now, the boy stays by her side and likes what she likes so she lets him watch Blade Runner, again, while she naps off a bottle of Reisling.

He is there again: the Hulk, breaking down her parent’s apartment wall. The tv is on but mommy and daddy are away in the kitchen because she hears the big pot clang.

“Leona.” He has an accent; this is new. He shows through his shredded khakis and his hulk is brown. She is still in the cornflower nightgown and her virtual breasts are the same flat size they’ve always been. They’re never important to him but she hunches more to make them fade.

“Where are we going?”

And they make it around the block in his green arms which have lost muscle mass. Atrophy to her. A trophy for him.

The bodega is open and Jose from 8th grade has a pack of grape Now-and-Laters in one hand and a honey bun in the other. At ten o’clock they stop circling and the Hulk brings her back but she gets blames for breaking down the door.

“Are you retarded? Why him?” Her sister asks her.

The nap was too long. All day she is indecisive. Incomplete. The boat from Samos does not come back alive.

“I only want to say a few short words for myself—being Leona Sunday James I’ve had to do a great deal of speaking in my life time and I’m sure the new generation of drosophilists are eager to finish this sentence...Ha-ha..It is very sad to be saying goodbye but it is nothing I am

not used to. I should retire more often. To my stem cell group, keep going even if they blow the whistle on you. To...to...okay settle down...to my neurodegenerative group: you're doing God's work. And finally, to my pet, my oxidative stress group, I pass the baton of my ignorance, my bliss, my abiding passion, my legacy. Thank you all and for godssakes, no more awards!"

Words are almost always good enough for applause no matter how dull.

"Honey." I incant.

Dominique smiles. "Come to bed nah, and be a good wife."

"A virgin (1998)

cross is made by taking a female and gassing her, completely, with CO₂. At this point, you will have the opportunity to brush her into a prepared vial. The media at the bottom of the vial should be caramel brown not blotchy; if it is, then it is old and it should be tossed.

One can only test the effects of oxidative stress on circadian rhythms from obtaining virgins that are e¹: ebony and Cy¹: curly. It is not important to this protocol why, but know that the Hulk gene shares loci to e¹Cy¹. The Hulk presents when it is found in two places at once. See Superman and Clark Kent mutants for more information on multiple alleles. Now, use your magnifying glass to ascertain sex. You may place as many Wild Type males in the vial with the virgin but more than six is obscene. Let us say six. It really only matters what her interaction is with the last male. 80% of what she'll use to breed her brood comes from his ability to displace and incapacitate the business of the male before. Don't laugh. It's true. It's the last male precedence. Write that down; you will be quizzed. Put the males in, like this, like me. Now mark the vials with your blue Sharpie."

"Leona"

"I am not your peer."

"Professor."

"Yes."

"How can I get the males in the vial with just my thumb. Gas?"

"No. That makes them schtupid. Just use honey but only on the tip--"

"The care and culture of the fruit fly is vital to this experiment. With your magnifying glass, ascertain the remaining females on your gas plates. They see you very well with their

ommatidia, now you must see them. If eyes are dull, it's dead. You killed it. Sort them with your razor blades. Move the living females and place them back in the reserve vial. They will be useful for later crosses."

"Questions?"

"None. Okay. Good. Open your...yes?"

"Professor, are they supposed to dream?"

"They're supposed to be stressed. Their progeny are supposed to be stressed hence the mutation Hulk."

"And, you found this Hulk gene mutation?"

"I created it when I was an undergrad, yes."

"Cool."

Since the image created by an ommatidium is created by independent picture elements, looking back at you from the vial of honeyed males will be a girl.

A girl (1987)

in a cornflower blue nightgown decorated with hydrangeas and babies sits on the floor with her hands in pieces. She picks up two thumbs and makes their knuckles connect into a hexagon. They lock in place. After that, they swell—not in the place where she bit them off—in the place where her breasts are becoming the Hulk's. A nightgown with lace almost seems silly when you are the Hulk.

Mommy and daddy are still on the velvet-like couch watching the tellie—daddy, he still calls it tellie and still says zed for zero. It's just her chest that's bulging and green and she tries to talk but nothing comes out.

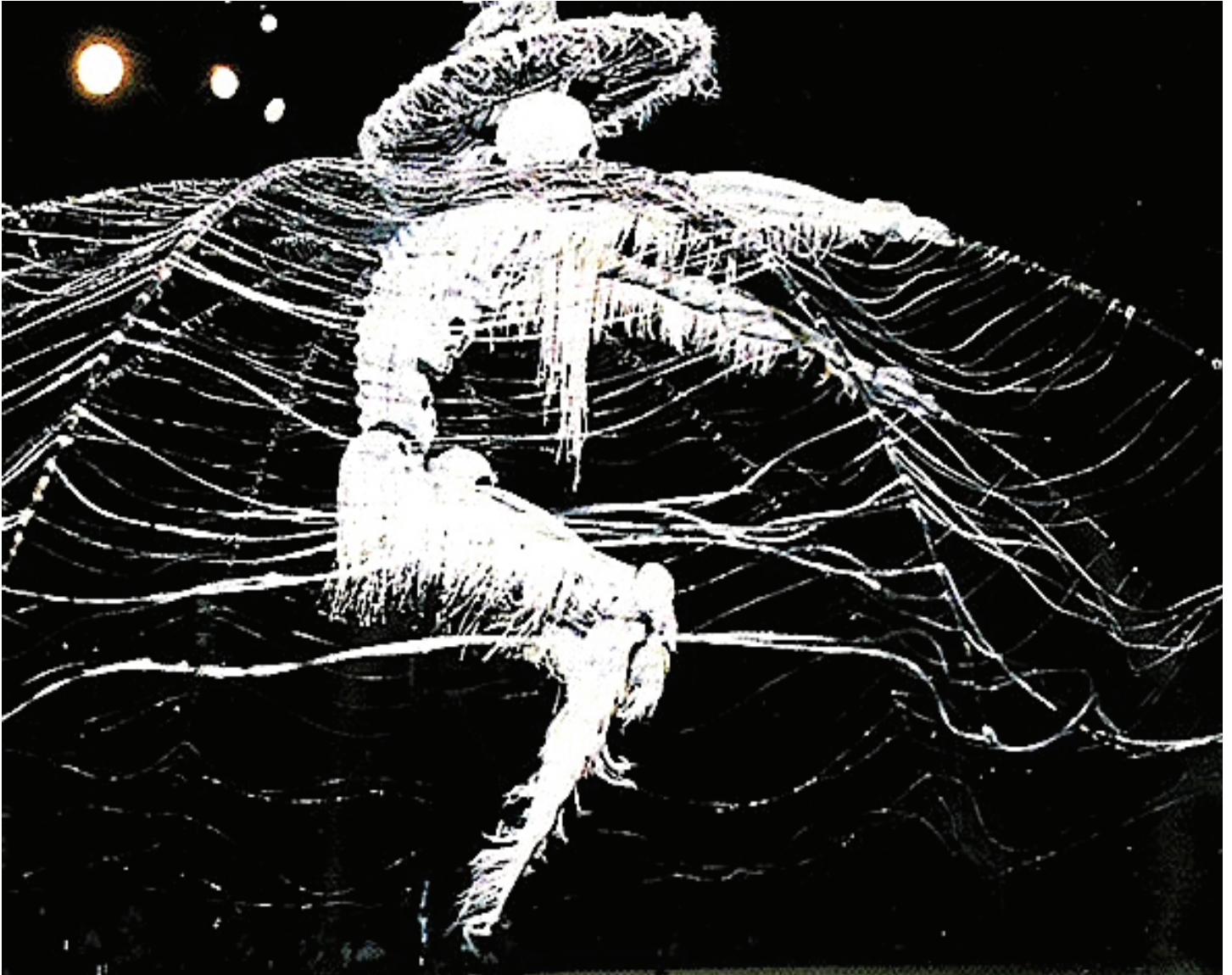
"Daddy?" Her sister calls.

Help me. Full stop, is all that is in her head. They look at her through a microscope. She is almost embarrassed about her weak arms so she smashes the t.v. with her barefoot.

"It's not you money that pay for dese t'ings Hulk." Mommy has been paying attention after all.

Everyone is gone, now, and she smashes up the rest of the house. The first floor apartment's wall crumbles and she can see the bodega across the street. Lou Ferrigno is talking with Jose. They are angry at her for stealing the grape Now and Laters because she really likes are Lemonheads and

INDEX OF WHAT TO REMEMEBER FOR MY DEATH



$$\approx 0.82/\sqrt{n}$$

The margin of error at 90% confidence that my mnemonic is just a statistic expression of the amount of random memories I can remember before I die. Consider this my survey. Sampling error in this survey's results will be larger than the margin of error since samples involve dates, people, events, and versions of those events as they were lived. I lived with faith, then less faith, then none worth measuring. There is no “true” figure for less faith. One should have more faith when you poll your-selves through many years. Margin of error occurs whenever you are incompletely sampled, with confidence.

1985

The year my auntie sent the microscope in the barrel. The year we looked way beyond ourselves—I think you knew we would get married even though I was breastless and slight. The year I moved to America and you stayed behind in 63 Village.

2, daughters, mine: Corrine and Natalie.

2, sons, theirs; grandsons, ours: Dominique and Griffin, respectively. The former is dead.

2046

I went through a gardening phase. It was what sixty-something widows did to let people around them know they were responsibly handling grief and I was. I grew purple heal-alls around too many gravestones: Dominique Ramjohn 1968-2030, Dominique Ramjohn, Jr. 1998, Dominique Ramjohn II 2001, Dominique Hans Martin, April 19, 2029 – June 21, 2039 and when the groundskeeper caught me he said he'd have to pull them out. “Can’t have contamination,” he said. I told him he was foolish and that the properties of the heal-all were antithetical to his claim. “Antithetical” and I wondered if that word was too big for man in coveralls, too—then, I thought of you and how I had said you were antithetical to me with me making more money than you, and you vacuuming hotel lobbies. The roots had been smartened, I remembered saying to this groundskeeper in coveralls. “Can’t have contamination,” he kept saying. I cried as they were pulled out.

2069

Today, is Griffin's 23rd birthday. Dominique, our first grandson, would have been 30.

3.14159265

Pi. A mathematical constant I chant just to be sure I can. The volume of a cylinder is $V=\pi r^2 h$. When I was in high school, I won a bet because I could remember it to its 20th decimal place. Eight places is the best I can do, now.

564 BCE

Aesop dies, supposedly. The margin of errors in his life include his place of origin, his body of work, his death, and how a grandson could remember so many of his fables without questioning.

A death certificate, mine: a daughter, a girl, a grandmother, a mother, a scientist, a sister, a wife, a woman.

A death, Pre-Empt™, a mnemonic arrangement to carefully reorder and sort memories that I want prepared for my vigil.

A dedication, to you Dominique, my husband.

A destination bill, as in, Lot 23, No. 63 Village, Corentyne, Guyana South America. Par Avion. Where I'll be razed.

Aegean Sea, as a place to mourn the loss of an eight-year old who had no business on a boat looking for the fiction of Aesop; as a place to curse the name of a brother-in-law who had no business going out on a boat so rickety and small, which reminded him of back home. I cried as they were pulled out.

Advice

Career: I found it hard to listen to anyone without a degree from old institutions. Love: I found it hard to listen to anyone with old bruises from new husbands. I gave some once to my daughters and I think they knew I took it from the Oprah Winfrey Show.

Asteriodea, or starfish. On our honeymoon, you placed one in my hand and I could feel its tubefeet in locomotion on my palm. It was electric and we kissed.

Aesop's fables, sometimes by myself, I will read these in place of a proper Bible. I'll replace all the protagonists with people I know. Sometimes dead ones. Lately, it's been mostly Griffin, Natalie's son. Today's moral: Train up Griffin in the way he should go; and when he is old he will not depart therefrom.

Anger, impossible to control and not always a bad thing.

Argument

About barrels, and what should go in them.

About barrels, and what should go to charity.

About bromothymol blue, and how pregnant woman shouldn't handle it.

About carpets, and how the make-believe woman you fashioned and found in orange paisley and green florets was nicer to you than me even after you vacuumed her raw.

About colleagues, mine, and how you thought they looked down on you.

About Corinne's hair, and how you did not want to put a relaxer in it. "We are not like these Blacks here. She don't need it."

About faculty parties where you stayed shut down in a corner and my colleagues wondered if everything was alright at home.

About Greece, and how I should have been watching him.

About money.

About money, and how exchange rates are killing Guyana.

About money, and how I earned enough for me, not you. Not a man.

About money, and how you didn't earn enough. Not a man.

About money, and how "you don't earn enough!"

About Natalie's scoliosis, and how she's going to grow up crooked.

About Playboy magazines I found hidden under our bed.

About retirement, and how I need to spend time with a sick husband.

About sex, and how I don't like those kinds of experiments.

About staying home with the babies and how proper mothers behave.

About twenty-twenty, as in, hindsight. It's too late to redo what's been done.

AVON, how mommy made extra money when daddy lost his second job, how the house smelled on graduation day.

Awards

HHMI, 3

New Faculty Grant, 1

NIH, 27

NSF, 30

Lifetime achievement, 2

McArthur, 1

Mother's Day trophy from novelty store, 1

Mother's Day trophy from novelty store, -1. Corrine smashed it in the argument when she said I should have let her relax her hair.

Nobel, 1

science fair, 4

Seymour Benzer, 1

SIN, 1

spelling bee, 2

valedictorian, 2

various

wife of the year T-shirt, 13

Back home, a term of affection used to describe one's place of origin, where I am now, where you are buried as well, where I promised you we would spend our last days together. See Guyana.

Barrel.

Powdered milk; Hanes briefs in three sizes; Brassieres, all with some form of lace, all large enough to be stuffed if necessary, sweet soap. Clothes, gently worn but clean. Dove soap, T-shirts with random American corporations on them, Jiffy peanut butter that my father gave to your family; no-frills label pasta and kid-die sweet cereal; sheet sets; VHS tapes of John Wayne and Harry Belafonte movies, then DVDs; music from the Indian store in Jamaica, Queens; makeup samples from AVON; pencils, pens, wide-rule paper, rulers, eraser, and the classics like Moby Dick; a microscope set when it was a barrel sent in 1981; now, things I do not want to forget. The volume of a cylinder is $V = \pi r^2 h$. I have never known an empty object to get full with just plans.

Blame

For accidents:

For bromothymol blue, then my only sons.

For Corinne's Barbie, then her only son.

For Natalie's dog, then her only son.

For occurrences:

For going to boarding school while a sister had to stay behind in the Bronx, couldn't catch up in the Bronx, couldn't leave the Bronx.

For presenting at a conference in Greece while my grandson sank in the Aegean.

For taking Chris Bell's spot at Brown because I was black and he was white; so he said.

For taking up with my dead sister's ex-husband because he was familiar, but he was not you.

For taking zero responsibility for being a parent, a wife, a mother.

For you because you died while I was on my way.

Bromothymol blue, a dye, a common color indicator used in laboratory experiments. Caution: wear gloves.

Brother, born out-of-wedlock. A recurrence to be accepted.

Brush, hair 100 times for desired effect if desired effect is an afro.

Brush, paint, as in, to be used to gently sweep flies into prepared vials.

Brush, paint, as in, what a lovely mess we made that day painting the nursery.



Ethanol fermentation is a process performed in the mitochondria of eukaryotes. You. Carry. Ought. It is important in fly food media, brewing, and wine-making. Wine drinking, rum-drinking, Demarara rum. Usually only one of the products is desired; in fly food media, the alcohol is baked out of the yeast, and, in alcohol production, the carbon dioxide is released into the atmosphere or into the scientist who can't handle change. The "waste" products of this process are ethanol and carbon dioxide (CO₂). The waste products of this process are more often, people.

Calcium carbonate from coral is similar to calcium carbonate found elsewhere. Most nostalgic source is in the deossification of sunken boys. Loss or removal of minerals due to an unfortunate accident when I wasn't there, wasn't watching. Calcium carbonate is essential in the formation of an exoskeleton to keep pity out and guilt in. Does not protect against raging daughters, but is the main factor in creating your breakthrough mutation.

Carpet, in the Trump Plaza Hotel that you vacuumed every morning. You joked that you could see the shape of a woman's face in the pattern. That made me jealous.

Caskets, as in, never. Never approach them. There are better places to place flowers. It resembles a bed that has forgotten its function.

Char

On crab grass.

On house on stilts.

On Joan-Ann's chest. I remember the skin of her fingers, where she was made to clasp the bible, were toneless white. The coroner powdered her brown and it caked in the splits of her skin. I remember they said she was still alive. I remember seeing her in my bedroom in New York that day; she was holding a coconut and beckoning me to get up. I remember the phone call a few hours later and having to fly back for her funeral. She wore my graduation dress—the one I wore the year before—the aunts put it on her body. I remember I could

smell the last things she smelled was her flesh cooking. I remember fragments of a face that was covered by a lace veil, an eye that peaked open, the other one melted shut. I remember it wasn't her in the casket. I remember Joan-Ann in that Rasta tree picking coconuts and me on the ground picking them up.

Cigarette, as in, the last one you smoked from a pack that was never a real new habit. You tried to find a new habit. Bad habits can't be purchased.

Coconuts, green and young with water sloshing against its insides as she and I jump down from Rasta tree and run, run, run, run.

Coral, ossification kinetics take shape as a little boy with brown eyes and a head full of curls.

Coroner's office, a place to pray, a place that smells of goldfish flakes and purple Now & Later's, a place where there are look-alikes and proxies but I was never going to be any of them.

Daughter, favorite. Will not shed a tear.

Daughter, other. Will cry the loudest.

Dreams, recurring and coy.

Drosophila melanogaster, common fruit fly that molts, feeds, breeds then dies in 23 days: a culmination of life's work. This is how we figured out cancer. There are no protests about smashing and spinning down hundreds of fly bodies for supernatant.

Ego, as in, wrapped around everything. Strangle. Water-logged. Unctuous blue.

Experiments

Father, a drunk, as in yours. You were in Georgetown where you worked in the Health Ministry as a clerk. You

sent money home and that is probably how the argument started, that your father was a drunk lowlife drinking away all the money and you were the real man. It was early that morning and he took the cutlass to children, first. For your mother, he punched her head in so many times she choked to death on teeth and blood. He poured kerosene on her, second, and struck the match, third. There was no other injury on Joan-ann when they found her still mumbling your name. It was as if you kept her alive. I believe it.

Father, a provider, as in mine and then you. I was luckier than you.

Fly, fruit fly, as in *Drosophila melanogaster*. The story goes so: mommy swallowed some mango at the end of a fly when she was pregnant with me. The story goes so on: she fed on a fly that fed on a mango that was shaped like her belly that was shaped like its eye that was where I grew out. There is no margin of error in fiction.

Fly on your wall, how the Rasta tree remembers me.

Fly in your soup, how the colleagues remember me.

Fly in your throat, how the children remember me.

Forgiveness, as in: "I paid for this house." "I'm the breadwinner." "Don't tell me I can't have male friends; they're just colleagues and this is just a cocktail." Why are you trying to hold me back?

Ghosts, as in, I have seen everyone's except for yours. Are you punishing me? I still won't accept the explosion of a locust on my car windshield as a sign from you.

Goldfish food, as in, if you are going to steal from Woolworth's make sure you, at least, have goldfish. See stupidity.

Grandsons, ours. Dominique, drowned. Griffin: angry

Griffin, young man. I remember that his first words were “Gorilla” and Natalie thought he would grow up to be a great naturalist the way I had been a great biologist. But gorillas are extinct and that is not his fault.

Guyana, a map of. A country in South America, not the French or the Dutch one, not in Africa, not an island off the coast of somewhere in Africa, not Guinea, Ghana, Gambia, or Gambia. Guyana.

Guyanese proverbs, the ones that make you smile, now:

Bamba likee bam bam: You’re in trouble, now.

Call out someone name after sunset and their spirit will answer first.

Catch your bed: Go to sleep, so that Hypnos will find you.

“Dominique!”: Dominique.

Don’t do nastiness: You can pay women to do that; I won’t.

Don’t play wit your patty cake: Don’t masturbate (daughter)

Don’t play with your lowly: Don’t masturbate (husband)

One man money mek too much man cry: Sometimes when a person dies others won’t cry in sorrow as much as in joy for the expected inheritance.

Scrub your teet: Brush

Stew your teet: Disrespect

Sweep over a married woman’s foot and she’ll get remarried: I swept over Victoria’s foot many times but she stayed married to Vessey until she died—not from being hit, he’d stopped by then. Cancer. There was no broom for that.

Tek your eyes and pass me: Disrespect

Hulk, mutant Drosophila. I created this when I was an undergraduate at Brown University. The fly was based on the Hypnos mutation created by that cocky professor, the one who smelled of hot ass and wet cheese and introduced me as the hard-working Ghanian student even after I showed him the atlas. Hypnos barely moved but this was considered progress. I was an undergraduate at Brown and when I called you and complained told how angry this man made me you called me Bruce Banner. The name was our personal secret. Anger, as such in flies and men, was a much more honest happening to dissect.

Husband, as in, comfort.

ITT Tech, 1-800-452-9300. Of the four numbers I still remember—pi, social security, the minute you died, it is this one, that still is the saddest.

Lotto, ticket. I found it in your shirt pocket. It was the last load of things of yours. I left it there. I never did check it. It's over twenty years old at this point, the shirt and the chance to win. There is a high margin of error here.

Loss

Lou Ferrigno, as in, the real Hulk. See Dreams.

Love after recovering from wounds skin deep or deeper. Often manifested in the shape of a child.

Manhood, as in, the smallest incident can cause us to be hurt. Evaporative properties of manhood are enhanced when you are placed in losing positions, but distillative properties are enhanced when you place me in those positions. See Playboy

Mango

The nickname given to me by my mother.

Masks

Ceremonial, Guyanese: Arawak Indian in origin meant as protection.

Ceremonial, Hawaiian. It was our honeymoon and your first time anywhere besides Guyana or New York. The shopkeep sold this to you under the pretense that King Kamehameha II himself wore this to ward off bad luck and usher in male births. Back home, when we unpacked it to hang it, we saw the gold foiled made in China sticker on back. We hung it anyway.

Ceremonial, Kenya. The shopkeep sold this to me after I told them my ancestors were East African. Everyone must have one.

Fertility, Costa Rica. Another one.

Medico delle Peste, “plague doctor mask”. I went to Italy on my own for an experience to write about because everything needed to be recorded that year. It did not ward off disease or death. The journal came back empty.

Midnight Robber, Trinidad. I really wanted to wear a fancy bikini for carnivale, but was embarrassed by my skinny legs. Covering my whole body with skulls wasn’t any better.

Mine, as a means of behaving when I wasn’t around you.

Metemgee, your favorite dish

Monkey

Monkey-face. The nickname given to Griffin, by me.

The Monkeys and Their Mother “The monkey, it is said, has two young ones at each birth. The Mother fondles one and nurtures it with the greatest affection and care, but hates and neglects the other. It happened once that the young one which was caressed and loved was smothered by the too great affection of the Mother, while the despised one was nurtured and reared in spite of the neglect to which it was exposed.”

The Monkey and the Dolphins: He drowned

The Monkey and the Fisherman: He drowned

Morals, as in Aesop’s. The best intentions will not always ensure success.

Morgue

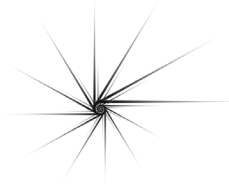
Mother, someone who cannot define sacrifice the way a scientist does.

Motherhood, as in, theoretical not practical. See Ego.

Mumma dead family done.

When a mother is around, she keeps the family together, but when she dies the members of the family tend to scatter.

Nautilus (cephalopod), natural spiral



Nightgown, made by mommy. My name is written on the collar tag in my mother's handwriting so that it would not get lost on laundry day at boarding school. I stopped wearing it when I realized wearing boxers were the style.

Papers, as in, the paperwork necessary to book passage to America

Parietal rules

Boarding school campus regulations governing visits between members of opposite sexes to each other's dormitories or rooms. Three feet on the floor 90 degree open door.

Photographs

A family, 1989, in a house on fire

A family, 1989, in photographs disoriented and lonely looks better than a family in a house on fire.

A family, 1998, in crisis

A family, 2001, in crisis

A family, 2030, intact

A wake (disambiguation\verb), awake, 2039

A widow

Alone

Me, 2067, the last one photograph

Me and you covered in Navajo White paint

Me and Ralphie's thumb caught in the Polaroid when she took a picture of me on the toilet so all the neighborhood losers could see it. Walking up the front steps of the apartment building is hell for two years.

Me and Victoria, 1990, a collage of how we did our hair that summer. We went through every page of Black hair Magazine. She repeated the Bantu knots and I burned the ends of synthetic braids. It was the last summer we behaved as sisters.

Polaroid, to capture embarrassment not memories. Embarrassment like the when I stole a pair of jeans and was caught. My Polaroid was stapled to the wall above the register so everyone could see, even my mother. She smacked my face so hard I needed to rub my neck with Tiger Balm to cure my whiplash. There was no Polaroid of that. Then there was the time before with Ralphie. Not worth mentioning again.

Pre-Empt™, Pre-Emption™. Planning to die with dignity.

Rice, cook-up or plain. What I will miss most.

Rhum, Rum

And Coke

And black tea

And ginger beer

And ice

And milk tea

And paracetamol

And rum

And seawater

Schuptidness, see Goldfish food; see Aegean Sea; see Rum

Silence, Aegean

Sister, as in an unsettling embodiment of a stranger then, not. Me and Victoria. Natalie and Corrine.

Slow fire ah boil hard cow-heel.

If you persevere you can make great accomplishments.

Son, (pronounced dom-i-neek-ju-nyor/ plural forms: Dominique,Jr., Dominique II) stillborn. See Blame,
Bromothymol blue, Ego, Aegean

Stillborn, see Bromothymol blue

Stranger, as in, an unsettling embodiment of the familiar then, less so spread out over time. After all, family is
blood and blood thickens.

Vessey, brother-in-law, widower, someone for whom time was spent when I was most desperate to be held, see
Photographs, Alone

Vigil

Virgins to flip, as in, part of an experimental procedure to sort females after they have molted, changed for mat-
ing.

Virgins to flip, as in part of an experimental procedure suggested by husbands who read Playboy.

Wife, as in conflict. I am yours.

Wife.

She makes dinner. She sews. She combs our hair. She finds a church. She prays for serenity. She has two
daughters and one grows up like her, the other makes an attempt. She finds a school for her two daughters.

She finds work and goes to school. She shares her worries with her sister who finds a school for husband's out-of-wedlock son. She listens to marital advice from a sister who is being beaten and still nods politely. She can cook well but only wants to make breakfast for herself. One lesson caters to others. One lesson caters to self. All lessons are inherited.

Why I regret this now

Why I want this now

Why I want to hold on to everything

Why I want to remember

Why have you changed my mind?

Why you have changed my mind.

Xenon, pronounced zee-non, atomic number 54. It was 2:54 when I was on my way to the hospital. You were stable, they said. You were coming home, they said. I had just booked passage for Guyana; I did. I put in for early retirement; I did. I stopped at a red light. I remember it was 3:43pm. When a large bug breaks apart, guts and all, on the windshield and I wiped it away. They said you went some time before 4 but they weren't sure. I was always meant to be right about these things. 3:54 seemed right. See Ego; see Loss.

Zee-non, spelled Xenon.



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