

Searching the Head

by

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Introductory Essay

The decision to write my senior project in creative writing wasn't an easy one. I began my education at Purchase college as a Creative Writing major but by my second semester, I had become an Anthropology double major and fell in love with both programs. I chose to keep my senior project as a novella but was committed to writing a story that explored anthropological themes that I most resonated with. A few semesters ago, I took a course called Magic, Witchcraft, and Modernity with Professor Kim and was fascinated particularly by the history of Korean Shamanism. However, as a writer of color, I've always been committed to writing black stories. Keeping these things in mind, I decided that my novella would explore Haitian vodou.

My novella follows Vivian Smith, a social worker who has recently lost her six-year-old daughter, Loren, to a house fire. By the end of her first week back at work, Vivian is assigned the case of a missing ten-year-old girl, Andera Thomas. In her initial investigation of the family, she is not able to speak to them directly but learns that Mr. and Mrs. Thomas have been difficult to reach for years as they rarely leave their home and have listed their neighbor, John Touissant, as Andera's emergency contact since he's the only person they have ever truly connected to. Motivated by the loss of her daughter, Vivian is dedicated to saving Andera from potential danger locked up in the Thomas' house. Over the weekend, desperate to remedy her guilt over Loren's death, Vivian breaks in the house looking for clues and indications of malicious behavior and finds Andera locked in a secret room below the basement trying to heal a cat just breaths from death. Horrified, Vivian is convinced that if she doesn't rescue Andera, she will meet the same fate as Loren for whom she didn't have the chance to save. The rest of the novella follows Vivian as she tries to "save" Andera from a religion she's proud to be part of and Andera ultimately saves Vivian from the heartache she carries from losing her daughter.

There is a powerful stigma surrounding vodou practices that most people don't even know is a widely practiced religion in many cultures. Vodou has been referred to with mostly negative commentary and I wanted to portray the religion as what it really is—a belief that worship to spirits brings fortune, goodness, and peace. Aside from vodou, I also explore affect and affective labor in my novella as “work that a person does to suppress their feelings so as to create a desired feeling in others” (Bessette, Lee S.).

This story is completely different from the first I'd ever written on a stack of wide-ruled loose leaf in the third grade about two sisters in a cherry garden. I've since learned about plot and motivation as important elements in a story and ended up learning majority of what I knew before Purchase College on a popular digital writing platform called Wattpad. I was such a Wattpad fanatic that I eventually tried my hand in the “bad boy good girl” genre with a story titled “The Bad Boy Hates Me” which became popular. Since I uploaded the story chapter by chapter, it was messy, unorganized, and unedited and I'm not very proud of it today. However, I was delighted of my ability as an author when a similar writing platform approached me on Wattpad, offering me a publication contract for “The Bad Boy Hates Me.”

I always wanted to be an author up until my sophomore year in high school where I was led to believe that it was impractical. I started to take more opportunities in the sciences, despite it being my weakest subject, in hopes of being a nurse or doctor like many in my family. After signing the contract, and a motivational conversation with my mother I realized it was more important to follow my heart than to listen to other people's opinions. I enrolled myself in several summer writing programs at the end of my junior year and fell in love with writing all over again. Not only did I rediscover my passion to create, but I learned so much about the craft

that I could apply to new writing. I used those very stories and poems to compile a portfolio to send off to schools for a bachelor's in creative writing.

Purchase College was never my first choice, and I wasn't very excited to attend this institution either. I had my heart set on a small school in Philadelphia but ultimately sabotaged my chances of enrolling by not being clear about how much I needed for a scholarship. I'm sure I would have loved it at University of the Arts, but I am beyond grateful that I enrolled at Purchase. I've had the opportunity to study under amazing professors who have so much knowledge to share.

One thing I believe I gained from my time at Purchase is to write with a purpose. I used to write stories about anything just because the idea randomly popped into my head. As I think about my senior project, I realize that I am writing this with a specific intention both for the characters and for the readers. If I were to present "The Bad Boy Hates Me" in workshop, I'm certain the questions would never end. With this novella, however, I have learned to ask myself those tough questions before even putting words to paper. Similarly, I believe the anthropology program has prepared me with the skills and hands-on experience needed to conduct quality research and ethnography that will better inform my novella. While it is a story based on fictional events, my purpose is to break the narrative of vodou being something evil and to encourage the readers to peek into Haitian Voudouisant culture whilst letting go of any stereotypes that may or not be swarming around their subconscious.

One of the things I felt conflicted about before beginning my senior project was how I would integrate both of my majors in a creative piece. I wasn't sure if anthropological fiction was a legitimate genre until I did some digging and read Ursula K. Leguin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which follows a human ambassador sent to the alien planet Winter to recruit

the inhabitants in an intergalactic union. The trouble he faces is accepting the practices of this culture that lives without sexual prejudice and quite literal gender fluidity for the greater good. I loved this novel because it fell under science fiction while also developing themes of differing cultures, society, and psychology.

I also gained a lot of valuable knowledge and literary inspiration from my anthropology research, especially from Timothy Landry's ethnographic article titled "Moving to Learn: Performance and Learning in Haitian Vodou." His stance as an outsider to vodou culture almost perfectly aligned with Vivian's position in relation to the Thomas' and his storytelling has inspired me with ideas for how to most accurately portray the religion to the reader through Vivian's eyes.

A major challenge I face when writing anything is finishing. Ever since my first story in the third grade, I have not completed one of those stories to this day. "The Bad Boy Hates Me" is the only exception for the sole fact that upon its completion I would receive a cash advance. This is my first novella and I'm worried that I will get stuck and lose my motivation to complete a quality work. Typically, when I write longer pieces like this, I pull out an empty notebook and go through each scene, beginning to end, in great detail (even writing pieces of dialogue I want to include) so I won't feel stuck in the midst of writing. I did that with this novella, but I couldn't thoroughly map out the middle to end because I want to be as accurate as possible with my research.

A second, but relatively minute challenge I encountered was titling this novella. Originally, I presented it as "Andera's Story" which is dry, and probably my least favorite working title in my career as a writer so far. In my preferred writing process, the title comes dead last. After

everything is said and done and edited to near perfection, I have settled with a much more suitable title “Searching the Head”.

By the end of this novella, I’d like for a civil change in Vivian’s mindset towards the Thomas’ and their involvement in vodou to spark a conversation amongst readers about cultural stereotyping. As a writer and anthropologist, I find it crucial that I carry out the research and writing of this story ethically and sensitively in order to bypass offensive comments to the cultures I refer to in my novella. Most importantly, I want to feel as if I myself were Vivian; given the opportunity to learn firsthand about the intricacies of a culture that is completely different from my own.

Foreword

I've aspired as a young black woman to represent myself and my culture in nearly every aspect of my life. What is most important to me as a writer of color is sharing black stories that don't follow the common tropes of struggle, disaster, misfortune, or years of systemic racism. Black stories that inspire hope, love, peace, and success exist, but they are rare gems. The way black stories are often portrayed in popular media don't give the full picture to the black experience. Yes, we struggle, but we succeed, we rejoice, we grow from pain instead of sitting in it. Most known for his powerful representation of black stories is Tyler Perry, who has brought so much awareness to the black community and allies. However, it has come to my attention that this is where it ends for some people, in terms of understanding the black community.

I wanted my senior project to go beyond "the struggle" and tell a story that doesn't center around those tropes. In my anthropology classes, my mind was opened to novel experiences. I learned about cultures completely different from my own in the same way some cultures have learned about black history. That is why culture became a very important part of my novella. My goal was to create a story in which the protagonist would be forced to open her eyes beyond the stereotypes of another culture to carry out her job.

My decision to include religion and spirituality as another anthropological theme stemmed from my experience in Professor David Kim's anthropology class *Magic, Witchcraft, and Modernity*. Before taking this class, I had the assumption that we would discuss topics like black magic, brujería, and obeah. Instead, I was enraptured by Korean shamanism, and it changed my mindset completely. However, I was committed to telling black stories and I decided it would better align my goal and teach me more to explore Haitian vodou practices.

In my initial research, I read ethnographies of anthropologists travelling to Haiti and practicing and engaging with the religion under mambos, priestesses of vodou. I watched YouTube videos and read countless blogs about Haitian vodou and quickly learned that is nothing like the pin-in-doll basement practice that I've come to judge it as. Even though having no prior experience with Haitian culture, much less Haitian vodou, I unlearned so many prejudices throughout the research and writing of this novella.

Now that I had decided my themes and my goal for my fiction piece, I wanted to create a world in which cultures clashed. Creating my protagonist as a black American social worker, assigned the case of Haitian immigrant family wasn't completely intentional. However, it did work out in a way that portrayed black on black prejudice. Set in a predominantly white town, my black protagonist did not harbor more or less feelings towards the Haitian family than she would have any other family assigned to her. What I decided to develop with this, was the fact that black people do not share the same background and develop prejudice and stereotypes of other black cultures. My protagonist was as closed minded as any other non-black character mentioned in the story, which made her the perfect vessel for the reader to insert themselves into to explore the novella's themes of ideologies and religion, ritual, affect, and cultural perspectives.

Part 1

“Vivian.” Mr. Delahound strode across the office with a manila folder in his right hand and a Dunkin Donuts hot cup in his left.

It had only been a week since her return to work. The white walls, tiled ceilings, and beige, coffee-stained carpet of the office had comforted her more than her empty apartment had in the three months that she’s been out of the office. She navigated around the cubicles as she’d been used to for the past ten years. There were no windows overlooking the city from the floor, just rows of cubicles with identical desks laden with various papers and sticky notes. The windows were reserved for the big offices and conference rooms located along the perimeter of the floor.

She had just walked up to her cubicle in the back corner of the office, adjacent to Conference Room A, with her purse, phone, and keys still in her grip. Mr. Delahound handed her the manila folder and took a long sip from his cup.

“I have a special assignment for you. This one will need all of your attention, so I’d like you to split your active assignments between Ross and Cher.”

He was a short, round man with pink, wrinkled skin, and a mustache so bushy that he needed to comb it throughout the day to prevent crumbs from loitering on his top lip. Aside from the unattractive mustache, Mr. Delahound was a well-put-together man; his demeanor was almost automated, but he joked that 40 years in the field would do that to anybody. As a boss, he was tolerable; he didn’t loom over shoulders unless it was necessary and he wasn’t sexist, ageist, or racist which made him easy to talk to. He was also a no-nonsense guy—always cut straight to the point and never made anything more personal than *how was traffic?*

Vivian unloaded her belongings on top of her desk to receive the folder from her boss.

“What’s so special about it?”

“Take a look see.” He gestured back at the file and walked back to his big office with the windows.

Inside the folder were multiple sheets of white A4 file paper. The first couple of pages included the standard information; case number, name, date of birth, most recent photo available, school address, home address. What was unusual about this file were the pages of records and a combination of hand-written and typed notes documented by other case workers. Each record ended with a bold red stamp on the bottom that read INTERVENTION FAILURE.

Vivian gathered the papers neatly into the folder and walked the straight line to Mr. Delahound’s office. She knocked on the door once, more as courtesy than for permission to enter.

“Why has there been so many people assigned to this little girl with no success?” She was confused but her tone hinted at frustration.

“Well, two people doesn’t really count as *so many*.” He spun in his chair to face Vivian who stood at the threshold. “This family seems to be exceptionally difficult to get a hold of. That’s why I’d like to put you on the job if you’re ready for it. I know you’re eager to get back into the swing of things, and you’ve only been back in the office for four days. I don’t want to overwhelm you...” Mr. Delahound trailed off awkwardly, not wanting to bring up the incident. “But I know you’ll see to it that this child gets the help she needs, if it’s too much I can assign it to Ross.”

Vivian stood there quietly thinking about the incident in question—the fire. Her mind wandered through the past ninety days of her mandated counseling and support group meetings. She composed herself after a moment and nodded her head. “I can handle it.”

He cleared his throat and adjusted his tie uncomfortably. “And I assume you’ve been cleared for fieldwork?”

“Of course. I will figure out what’s going on,” she affirmed more to herself than to her boss and returned to her desk.

Once she sat at her desk, it took Vivian a minute to get a hold of herself. She couldn’t help but to let her thoughts take her back to that night. It was her first night away from her daughter since giving birth to her. She shouldn’t have asked the nanny to stay past her usual time. She shouldn’t have gone for drinks with old friends she can’t even stand to look at now. She shouldn’t have allowed her selfishness to cause such an avertible event. She blamed herself that night as much as she blamed herself presently and lied to the workplace counselor three months into required therapy because sitting at home alone was driving her crazy. She couldn’t stare at the blank walls of her novel, empty apartment knowing that child negligence could take one more life if she wasn’t on duty to prevent it. The counselor told her she wasn’t superwoman but deep down she believed it was her life’s purpose to try to be.

Neatly placing the file in her bag, she sent a few emails and collected a handful of manila folders from the filing cabinet beneath her desk. She walked to the opposite side of the office floor, where the views from the windows focused on the freeway. She knocked on the door, this time waiting for a response.

“Vivian! What can I do for you, hon?” Cher was the case manager of the office and had been working there longer than anyone else. After forty years of seeing people through their worst, Cher still loved her job as much as any single professional.

“Delahound assigned me a priority case, so I’ve emailed you some of the cases I’ve been working on. These are the files for them. It’s just paperwork that hasn’t been filed yet, nothing outlandish.” Vivian handed her three of the manila folders, labeled by case number and last name.

Cher’s face was riddled with sympathy. Her eyebrows shot up, eyes widened, and mouth formed a perfect pink pout. “Oh, so you ended up with that poor girl...what’s her name? Andrea?”

“It’s Andera actually.”

“I was close.” She shrugged. Vivian chose not to respond to Cher’s blatant ignorance and turned to leave. “How are you?” Cher stopped her.

“I’m fine.” Her tone was bitter, not directed at Cher so much as the question.

“You know...I heard that child’s family kills innocent animals for no reason and leaves the carcasses in the trash bin for garbage pickup.” Cher was always the one for unethical gossip.

Vivian couldn’t stand it, but she had no authority to put Cher in her place, so instead she answered, “Wow,” and quickly headed for the direction of Ross’ desk, an advocate like herself.

He had a cubicle in what she determined was the worst spot in the office, right up front with a clear view of the printer and the elevator doors. It was the one place that carried the most foot traffic and loudest conversations on the entire floor.

“Good morning, Ross.” She grinned.

“What’s up, Viv?” He answered over his shoulder, frantically typing up an email he should have sent the day before.

“Delahound assigned me a priority case and said I should split the ones I was working on between you and Cher. I brought the files, and the rest is in your email. It’s just documentation.”

“Thank God it’s Friday.” He chuckled dryly. “That man is quick to pile on the paperwork but not so much with the paycheck.”

Vivian laughed and placed the remaining folders from her workload next to his computer. “I’ll see you Monday, I’m going to check out the house and see if the family is around.”

“Good luck, Viv. I heard it’s pretty much impossible to get a word from anyone about the family. But I’m glad he got you on it, you typically don’t take silence for an answer.” He turned his head and quickly shot her a smile before immersing himself back into the email. She felt relief in knowing that this case would be challenging. She’d been longing for a break from her own torment and self-loathing.

The GPS shut off as Vivian pulled up to a dingy two-story home. The weeds conquered the front yard and months’ worth of rust dominated the chain linked fence. She got out of her car and smoothed out her pink button up, pulling taught at the hem to reduce the appearance of wrinkles. With her manila folder in hand, she locked the car and approached the property.

The neighborhood itself was well kept. Leaves were raked in small piled on the curb, leaving the street and sidewalk clear of trash and debris. Skinny trees were planted in small

patches of grass about every ten feet or so and the houses surrounding the Thomas' looked more alive and inhabited.

Several signs secured to the gate and front door warned NO TRESPASSING and PRIVATE PROPERTY, but she opened the gate anyway. She stopped in her tracks to really take in the unkempt appearance of the house compared to the rest of the block. Writing notes down in a small purple notebook, Vivian regarded the house as abandoned. The windows were all boarded up and the wood of the porch even showed signs of decay. It would be unbelievable that anyone lived there if it weren't for the faint clouds of smoke emitting from the chimney.

She continued onto the porch and considered ringing the bell, but opted to knock instead, assuming that the bell wouldn't work.

"Hello? Is anyone home? My name is Vivian Smith, I work with the Virginia department of human services." She announced herself, hoping not to frighten the family with the intrusion, but not a bone in the house creaked.

Trying again, Vivian knocked on the door more forcefully. "I'm here about Andera Thomas, I just want to make sure she's alright."

Still nothing.

Vivian could feel the gaze of the nosey neighbors watching in interest from their front yards and kitchen windows. What concerned her the most were the eyes she felt watching her from the upstairs window of the dead house. She looked up and squinted but could not see anything past the wooden boards nailed to the exterior of the house. She wondered momentarily how they managed to get up there and how long these peculiar decorations had been up for.

She looked around the neighboring houses, trying to silently catch the eye of anyone outside, but everyone averted their gaze. She walked off the Thomas' property and across the street, hoping to speak to the man working in his garage.

“Excuse me, I’m sorry to bother you but I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about the family that lives over there?” She was aware of her delicate tone, though it was a statement rather than a request.

“Oh no, I don’t know anything. Good day.” The man responded and disappeared into the back of the garage, likely going inside his home.

“Hmm...excuse me miss.” Vivian perked up at the sight of a young woman retrieving envelopes from her mailbox next door to the man who just rejected her. “Would you mind if I asked you a few questions about the family that lives in that house?” She pointed to the Thomas residence.

“Yes, I would actually. I have food cooking. Wouldn’t want it to burn.” The woman hurried inside.

Vivian sighed and slowly scanned the rest of the block. Everyone who was previously outside had quickly retreated to the safety of their homes. No one wanted to indulge Vivian in conversation about the mysterious Thomas family.

“Guess I’ll check with the school then,” Vivian muttered, checking the time on her wristwatch. It was two after ten.

She walked back to her car, left in front of the dark house, and rummaged in the backseat for a form. She filled out her name, work number, and date and time before neatly creasing it to seal

within an envelope. She left this official notice of her visit attempt in the empty mailbox of the Thomas'.

It took Vivian a little under twenty minutes to arrive at McIntosh Elementary School from the Thomas residence. She parked the car and stored Andera's file safely in her purse before approaching the school's entrance. She was greeted by walls dressed in red and white and in bold black text GO SCOTTIES.

A security guard approached her with a yellow binder in his hands and a warm smile. "Good morning ma'am, please sign this." He handed her a pen.

She returned his smile and scribbled in the visitor log in sheet. Name: Vivian Smith. Reason for visit: VA Human Services. Time in: 10:23 A. Time out was to be determined.

"How can I assist you ma'am?" The security guard asked as she handed the pen back to him.

"I'd like to speak with the principal about a student who is enrolled here. I'm with the Virginia department of human services," she answered, thoughtlessly touching her work ID clipped to her black slacks.

"Okay, just one moment ma'am while I notify Mrs. Francis. Please have a seat and make yourself comfortable." He gestured to the wooden bench right in front of the glass windows separating the lobby from the school offices.

As she waited, Vivian took notice of the student work posted about. There were colorful drawings from art class and even some poetry in the messy handwriting of developing seven-year-olds. Her heart was filled with the feeling of longing. Her daughter had written and drawn

similarly for her. Her sadness mostly stemmed from the thought that most of those drawings were reduced to ashes and would never be hung in her elementary school hallway for all to see.

“Ms. Smith, good morning,” a voice snapped her back to reality, “I am Principal Francis, I understand you’re here to speak with me concerning a student?”

Vivian stood up to shake the lady’s hand, who had a surprisingly firm grip for such a thin body. She followed her to her office before disclosing any information.

“I was hoping to ask you about Andera Thomas. She is in the fifth grade, no?” Vivian asked, sitting across from the gray-haired woman who now frowned at the student in question.

“Yes, Andera.” She sighed; frustration evident across her face.

“Can you tell me the last time she came to school?” Vivian readied herself with pen and paper to take notes.

“Oh yes, yes. One moment, I have the report here, I just wasn’t expecting anyone today...” Mrs. Francis trailed off, searching through drawers and papers littered on her desk, embarrassed by how unorganized she appeared.

“Yes.” She pulled out a stack of papers grouped together by a large binder clip. Her white, bony fingers undid the clip and sorted through the stack. “According to her teacher’s attendance notes, Andera hasn’t been to school since October first, her birthday. About three weeks now.”

“Was there any particular reason why? Did the family reach out? Absent notes?” Vivian asked with her purple notebook in hand.

“Well, we did receive a letter saying they’d be in New Orleans for the week. It wasn’t signed by her parents but from a John. We’re familiar with him. I can go and make a copy of this for you when we’re done.” Principal Francis slid the letter across her desk to Vivian.

“And you didn’t hear from anyone after that?” Vivian asked, inspecting the note.

“No. And it was a mistake on our part to assume that they’d been stuck in Louisiana for an extra week. But we did contact child protective services two weeks after Andera’s last day of attendance.” Principal Francis flushed in embarrassment.

“So last week?” Vivian confirmed.

“Correct.”

“And how was her attendance before the trip?” Vivian asked, focused on her purple notebook.

“She was here every day. I’m not sure who stayed on top of that, we’ve never actually met her parents.” Principal Francis flushed again, this time at how irresponsible she sounded not knowing who Andera’s parents were.

“Come again?” Vivian’s head shot up in disbelief. “So, how was she even enrolled here?”

“That neighbor, John. He’s as good as her legal guardian.” Principal Francis showed Vivian several legal documents which bore John’s signature on the lines that read PARENT/GUARDIAN. “Do you think Andera’s in any danger?”

“Well, it’s been a week since your report and no other case worker could get in contact with the Thomas’ so it’s unclear at this moment. I hope to clear up all this confusion and figure out what’s really going because I don’t think that family is in New Orleans as we speak.” Vivian

allowed herself to be open with the principal. She felt her genuine concern for the child. “Do you know of any other family we can contact?”

“As far as her school file is concerned, Andera has been enrolled since the first grade and her parents have not showed up to a single parent-teacher conference. We’ve sent letters and called home, but with no luck. As for other family, if they exist, we surely don’t know about it.” Principal Francis flipped through the papers spread out across her desk, trying her best to be helpful.

Vivian nodded her head in understanding and wrote it all down as quickly as her hand could move. “What about emergency contacts?”

“You wouldn’t believe it,” Mrs. Francis said, to which Vivian snapped her head up to offer her full attention, “Andera’s listed emergency contact is Britney from Heart for Orphans over in Williamsburg. We figured that once when she scraped her knee at recess—bad cut—and never put that contact to use again. Her teacher was devastated. We all were. The second contact has always been John but he’s an older man, I’m not even sure that his landline is connected.”

This shocked Vivian. She’d never heard of that being done before and began to worry that this case was worse than she originally thought.

“Principal Francis, you’ve been so helpful. I just want to confirm one last thing before I go on my way.” Vivian put her pen in her lap, smiling grimly at the elementary school principal. “How old did Andera turn this year?”

“I believe it was her tenth birthday,” Mrs. Francis answered, staring at the school file.

Vivian nodded and wrote that down amongst her other notes. “Thank you so much for your time.”

“It’s my pleasure, please keep in touch. I’d hate for anything bad to happen to that girl, she’s such a sweet soul,” Mrs. Francis said, offering a handshake.

Vivian smiled and accepted her hand before seeing herself out of the offices. The same security guard handed her the yellow binder and pen before she left the school.

Time out: 10:55 A.

Vivian decided last minute that she’d return to the neighborhood before writing up her notes at the office. She would give the Thomas’ the day to acknowledge her letter, but she wanted to know more about the family before she sat at her desk trying to piece it together. She hoped that at least one of their neighbors would have something more to say than *gotta go*, and that *John* would be around to answer some questions.

When she pulled up to the house, the block was silent. She heard dogs barking in backyards but aside from that, everyone hid in the safety of their homes, avoiding the social worker that asked too many questions. To Vivian’s luck though, there was an old man lounging in an old-fashioned wooden rocking chair on his porch, right next door to the Thomas’, sipping cold tea from a large glass. She thought about how she would approach him before shutting off her engine. She didn’t want to scare him off like she did the others.

She purposely left all papers and note-taking material in the car and even went as far as to undo the first button of her collared blouse and tuck her government ID into her pants pocket. Her goal was to come off as calm and casual. To the old man watching her in amusement she probably looked clueless and nervous.

“Good morning, sir,” she said from the sidewalk.

“Howdy,” he responded in a thick French accent.

“Do you have a minute to chat?” She asked.

“I’m not doing anything important, but I won’t shout across the yard too much longer. Come up and have a seat, before my lungs give out.” He chuckled and stroked his gray patches of kinky beard hair roughly.

At this, Vivian smiled happily and let herself through the gate. She sat in the wicker basket chair next to the man.

“You’re that government lady from earlier, aren’t you?” He asked, staring into the clear sky which reflected off his blue eyes. This feature intrigued Vivian since she’s never met a black man with eyes any color than brown. Even in her own family, everyone shared the same dark brown eyes apart from a hazel-eyed third cousin whose mother was white.

She cleared her throat, nervous that he might dismiss her unspoken inquiries.

“The name’s John Toussaint.” He turned his attention to her and stretched a hand to her.

“Vivian.” She grinned and shook his hand politely.

“So, you’d like to know about those crazy folks next door, huh?” He laughed and took a sip of his cold tea before he resumed stroking his beard.

“Well, um, yes. If you don’t mind? I noticed they are not a popular topic of conversation around here.” Vivian tried to match John’s casual demeanor.

“Truth be told, nobody really knows too much about them, except they don’t come out that house. The kid is the only one who did. But not so much anymore.” His eyes held a faraway look, as if he knew more than he let on.

“Do you know how long they’ve lived here?” Vivian directed the conversation to give her answers to questions she’s been longing for.

John took a long gulp of his cold tea and finished it off, placing the glass of ice cubes on the small round wooden table between his and Vivian’s chairs. “Moved in ‘bout a year after I lived in this house. Happy couple. That was probably twelve years ago now. The wife was pregnant a year later. Slowly, they stopped coming out as much. When the baby was born, I didn’t really see them any. I watched the kid once or twice as a baby and they got me handling her school stuff now, yeah, I remember that much. I’m not capable of taking care of a child with the way my bones rust up, but I can sign school forms and pick up the phone. I hope this isn’t a visit for fraud.” John chuckled. “Because if it is, I was just joking.” He winked at her and waited for her to state her reason of interest in the family.

Vivian shook her head, eyes wide, “No, that’s not the reason I’m here at all. Actually, I’m relieved there is someone looking out for her that I can actually talk to. You mentioned that she doesn’t leave the house anymore. Are you also aware that she hasn’t been to school in three weeks?”

“Well, the family takes a trip every year on her birthday. Usually it’s for the weekend, sometimes the week. I know they go off to New Orleans, but I don’t know if they have any family staying over there. I wrote a letter to the school like I do every year. But when they came back, she still wasn’t going to school. Usually, the little girl come over here and tell me anything

I need to know. She didn't come so I kept my nose out of it." He stared towards the sky as if it helped him remember.

"You didn't think to check that everything was alright?" Vivian mentally winced at her accusing tone.

"Listen little lady, when you get to a certain age you learn your place when it comes to another man's family. And for me...that's *way* out on the outside." John didn't seem upset by her question.

Vivian nodded her head, not really knowing how to make sense of it all. "Would you happen to know why they stopped coming outside in the first place? Were they in any danger? Did they have enemies? Or maybe health issues?"

"Ain't no use really in trying to figure them out," John said, intensely focused on nothing in particular behind Vivian's head, "if you ask me, they're the only danger around here."

This caught Vivian's attention. "What do you mean by that?"

He snapped into focus, making eye contact with her. "Boy! For the tail end of October, it sure is hot. I'll answer your questions, but I sure do need another glass of tea. Would you like anything while I run inside?"

Vivian shook her head, trying to contain her anxiety. The old man pushed himself out of the rocking chair, which groaned under the imbalance of weight, and hobbled through the front door with the empty glass in his hand. She took that moment to quickly pull out her cell phone and open her Notes app, typing as fast as she could everything that John told her. When he came

back, she shut off her phone and tucked it between her thighs, grinning at him as he slowly lowered himself back onto the rocking chair.

“It’s funny, you know,” he paused to sip his cold tea, “I migrated here from Haiti all those years ago to be closer with my grandchildren, but I didn’t realize the amount of white folk I’d be living next to. When Mr. and Mrs. Thomas moved in, I was so grateful. My son and his family can’t keep my company every day and these people aren’t much talkers to those who ain’t skin folk. Maybe that was your problem earlier, huh.” Another pause, another sip.

John continued. “Not that it’s a problem with me, I don’t know these people from Adam, and they sure don’t know me. But the Mr. and Mrs. next door are ayisian. You know? Haitian. My kind of people.”

“That’s great to hear, Mr. Toussaint, and I don’t mean to be rude, but you were saying they were dangerous people. I’d like to know more about what you mean. What is dangerous about them? Do they abuse their daughter?” Vivian tried to steer the conversation back on track.

“Mr. Toussaint?” he chuckled. “Please just call me John.”

“Okay.”

“I did not mean to imply that they hurt their child. I cannot tell you what goes on inside their home, but I *can* say that they made certain that girl left for school every morning. I could see them watch her walk to the bus stop from their windows...before Mr. Thomas boarded them up a year ago.” He gave an acknowledging glance over his shoulder to the house on his right.

“So, what makes them dangerous?” Vivian asked impatiently.

“Kalm tè ou. Relax, Miss Vivian.” John grinned at her edginess. “Regardless of us coming from the same country, those people always seemed etranj...odd. I wasn’t sure of it at first, but I always thought they were into vodou. When the little girl stopped going to school, I had a funny feeling that she may have died or something. But that’s silly. Even with ten years of round the clock silence in the Thomas residence, things would occasionally go bump in the night. Vodou is the only thing that makes sense *to me.*”

Vivian looked at him incredulously. “So, you mean to tell me that they are turning the little girl into a witch?” She couldn’t believe it.

John sipped from his glass, all the talking making his throat dry. “Miss Vivian, vodou is not exactly the same of witchcraft. You Americans and your ideas of magic and spells is very different from what I refer to. In Haiti, vodou is a religion...very similar to Catholicism actually. It’s not the worst thing but it can get dangerous when practiced outside of the community...or for the wrong reasons.

“I have no actual proof that that is the case because I’m too old mind someone else’s business. But maybe knowing that is a possibility will help you do your job. You don’t strike me as the type to give up easily. But tread carefully.” He yawned and smiled at her.

Vivian could sense the silent dismissal of her visit with John and didn’t delay in catching on. “Thank you for speaking with me, Mr. Touss—John. I really appreciate it; this has been very enlightening.” She cleared her throat and stood up, offering to shake his hand.

He stayed in his seat and met her outstretched hand with a firm shake. “Be well, cheri.”

Vivian walked to her car, carefully eyeing the Thomas residence, wondering what was happening inside. She was anxious to return to the office to start transcribing her notes from the day.

Part Two

Vivian couldn't shake the feeling away that she was doing something wrong. She reported her findings back to her boss, who approved of the way she handled it and encouraged her to go back on Monday. But she couldn't help but to think as she sat up in her bed on Saturday morning, that waiting was wrong. Waiting was useless and would do nothing for Andera; especially if she was in trouble *today*.

Vivian sunk down into the mattress of her full-sized bed, letting her comforter and memory foam pillows engulf her. The faint smell of warm pancakes crept into her nostrils though she was the only one in the apartment. The smell calmed her and eased her nerves only slightly. Once lying flat on the mattress, Vivian closed her eyes and allowed her thoughts to stray...something she hasn't allowed herself to do in a while.

At first, she thought about her week. Monday blended into Tuesday into Wednesday into Thursday. The desk work she was assigned to do was busy work, and her boss knew that. He knew that he was obligated to ease her into resuming the responsibility of providing urgent and thorough care to the families subject to her investigation. He knew she was miserable doing the scut work but they both could agree that Andera's case could end up helping Vivian heal. She partly hoped that helping Andera would right her wrongs. It wouldn't undo what happened to her daughter, but she hoped that she could at least prevent it from happening again.

Her mind wandered back beyond the previous week. She thought of the day that Loren was born. It was so fresh in her mind she would've thought that she gave birth yesterday and not six years ago.

November 18, 2013. 3:34 AM. She could remember the events of that early morning clearly. Vivian had trouble sleeping the whole night and indulged herself in midnight snacks at the kitchen counter with the fridge wide open behind her. It was quiet in the house, nobody there except herself. She liked it that way.

She was due for delivery in five days and kept her hospital bag packed and ready by the front door because she was so forgetful throughout the entirety of her pregnancy. She joked to herself often that she would forget to go to the hospital to give birth. Her mouth was full of a chilled Boston Market apple pie she saved from two days ago when she felt her pajama pants become moist. She looked down to see clear fluid slowly pooling at her feet. Her water broke minutes to one in the morning.

Vivian wasn't sure if she should drive or not; the excitement of labor made her anxious to do so. In the end she figured that she could get herself there faster than the ambulance would arrive and threw on a jacket and picked up her keys. Back then she owned a Prius. It was a small 2007 turquoise sedan she bought off the Facebook Marketplace for a reasonable price with only 60,000 miles on it. She struggled with the container of apple pie, her hospital bag, and her car keys while waddling to the driveway. She didn't even bother to lock her front door.

At the hospital, Vivian left her car in a tow zone completely unfocused on the fact that these rules still applied to a mother in labor. She was helped into a wheelchair and the nurses settled her into a hospital bed, trying to make her as comfortable as possible before the contractions would rip through her.

The nurses asked if there was anyone that they should call to support Vivian through the delivery. She thought about her mother and sister before ultimately deciding against it,

concluding that she wasn't willing to deal with anyone's nerves but her own. She preferred to be alone in the delivery room when she would first meet her precious child.

Against the wishes of the nurses, Vivian sat alone in the hospital bed for nearly two hours, breathing through her contractions and pushing with all her might. There was a short moment, just a split second, where she wanted nothing more than to give up. But then she thought about the months of morning sickness, and not being able to drink coffee or wine, and the roundness of her belly that made her feel like Violet Beauregarde in Willy Wonka's chocolate factory after chewing that gum. During her triumphant push, Vivian thought about the countless times she figured she'd have to adopt and that in this moment she was living through a miracle. She had no faith in the sperm donation working but it did. She was about to meet her baby girl.

On November 18, 2013, at 3:34 AM, Vivian gave birth to a healthy six-pound, two-ounce baby girl.

"What's her name?" Cooed one of the nurses as Vivian swaddled the crying baby.

Vivian stared lovingly at her daughter and fell in love instantly. "Loren."

"That's beautiful," said one nurse.

"Should we call your family now?" Asked another.

Vivian refused to draw her attention away from Loren. Her heart was filled with pure joy, a feeling she wasn't sure she ever truly felt before. She just smiled at her daughter and nodded her head. "Yeah," she whispered.

Part Three

Days like these were especially hard for Vivian. She used to spend weekends dedicating them to her daughter. On Saturday's they made pancakes and tried a new recipe each time. On this Saturday, Vivian sat in her bed crying over the loss of her miracle. She felt useless and pathetic as she cried, scolding herself for having the nerve to shed tears over something she still completely blamed herself for. The solution to her misery came easy to her, she'd distract herself with work. She worried about Andera in the same way she did about Loren.

She rolled out of her bed and absentmindedly headed to her closet. Her wardrobe was not extensive. She owned dress shirts, polo t-shirts and a few long sleeve sweaters. Her options for bottoms ranged from gray slacks to black slacks, with the occasional checkered or plaid pattern. She wasn't a fan of skirts unless she was attending a conference and requested specifically by Mr. Delahound to *dress to impress*. She didn't care so much about her impression on the social workers she shared an office with as she did about her impression on the families she was assigned to help. But today was her day off. She laid out a thin white long sleeve V-neck tunic and a pair of black slim legged, tapered pants on the unmade bed.

Vivian brushed her teeth and washed her face before dressing herself and yanking her curly hair taut in a low bun. She kept forgetting to make an appointment to cut her unruly hair.

She wore nonslip black sock sneakers and poured her daily joe in a small tumbler before locking up her untidy, yet ironically empty apartment and heading to the parking garage. Her Honda Civic, a considerable upgrade from the Prius, chirped a few rows down, waiting to take Vivian fifteen minutes back to Andera's house.

It was still early in the morning when she arrived, five to eight. The entire block was unmoving, silent, steady. Vivian eyed each house in passing, wondering what was happening inside. Her car radio was silent. All that was to be heard were the crickets chirping and the leaves swaying high in the trees. Not even a dog whine was audible. She didn't feel comfortable leaving her car on this street. She knew the houses were watching her intently, warning her to leave the quiet neighborhood, accusing her of intruding. The feeling was one she couldn't evade.

She parked around the corner and shut off her engine as soon as she did so. She left her work ID on the dashboard but quickly changed her mind and buried it in the back pocket of her slacks.

Orange and yellow leaves crunched beneath her sneakers, announcing her arrival to Andera's house before she could even turn the corner. She tugged at the sleeves of her tunic and held the material in the palm of her balled up fists as she walked not-so-confidently through the rusted gate. The mailbox was empty. Someone had retrieved her letter from the previous day. There was no smoke coming from the chimney this morning and she glanced over at John's house to see a barren porch and no lights on inside. She wondered whether he was awake and watching her from his bedroom window. She further wondered if he'd approve of her next move.

Vivian forfeited ringing the doorbell and knocking on the front door altogether. Instead, she made a beeline towards the back of the house. The grass at the side of the house was uncut, and it scratched the sliver of bare skin between the hem of her pants and the top of her sneakers. She tried to move as stealthy as possible, but the fallen leaves collected and acted like warning bells.

She reached the backside of the house which was as worn and unkempt as the front. The backyard was a gravesite without tombstones and her mental notes were overflowing her mental notepad. Clumps of dead grass and weeds sprinkled the packed dirt of their yard. Musky scents of rotting bark invaded her nose and overwhelmed her senses. Nothing back here looked fresh. She thought for a moment whether anything she discovered today would be admissible in front of a judge, considering she wasn't on duty nor did she identify herself before snooping around the Thomas' private property.

Vivian shooed the thought out of her mind. She didn't know what invisible force drove her to this point, but she felt a personal responsibility to gain access to inside of the house. Whether she'd do it legally or not, Vivian *needed* to help Andera out of danger—whatever the danger was.

Against her luck, the back door was completely boarded up and missing a handle. Her mental notes screamed *fire hazard*. She looked for another way inside, but the windows were replaced with sheets of plywood and oddly, the idea that the family were most likely vitamin D deficient crossed her mind. Which would mean that they could all be severely ill or even worse. The longer she remained outside the house, the wilder and more desperate her assumptions became.

Fueled by the pain of not being able to get to Loren in time, Vivian dropped to her knees and searched frightfully for a basement window to smash. And she found one. Tiny, cracked, and covered by a pile of withered leaves. She picked up the biggest rock she could find and broke the fragile glass and held her breath as the echo of her break-in resounded through the yard. Nothing in the house or around her moved and she took a deep breath, squeezing her slim figure through the open window.

Her fall to the basement floor was short, which resembled more of a crawl space than an actual basement and she was grateful that she didn't sustain any injury from her bold attempt of entering the Thomas' residence uninvited.

She searched for a light and mentally cursed herself for not thinking to bring a flashlight. But then again, she did not anticipate being in her current situation. She felt her pockets for her cell phone and was relieved when she felt it hugging her ID in her back pocket.

From what she could tell in the dim light emitting from the back of her phone, the basement was musty, and dust ridden, filled with junk—some covered with white sheets, others covered in pure dust. So far, she identified a microwave, a washing machine, and a rusty metal bedframe.

It was bigger than she expected and divided into three sections, separated by concrete walls that rose as tall as her hip. The area she stood in as well as the space to her left were storage rooms for discarded furniture and appliances. To her left she could also make out a set of stairs that led up to the heart of the home. What intrigued her more than getting caught in broad daylight in the home of the family in which she was investigating was the section of the basement to her right, farthest from the stairs.

She focused her light on the concrete beneath her feet and maneuvered her way around the things littering the floor. Nothing took residence in this section of the basement. And it seemed that it was much cleaner in this part of the basement. The concrete floor glistened in the light from her phone.

She walked on, still focused on the floor which she noticed adorned faded, unidentifiable etchings. Right when she figured she hit a dead end, Vivian noticed a small square door in the

corner on the floor. She imagined this to be something like a trap door, or an attic door but on the floor in the basement. She didn't think the house could go further into the ground than it already did. She bent to her knees and inspected the master lock that bound the door close. It didn't matter to her that breaking the lock was both a destruction of property and invasion of privacy, she was already in too deep and the sound of her heartbeat in her ears was louder and more intense than any voice of reason she had left.

She scurried back to the part of the basement which she entered from and gratefully noticed the rock from the broken window on the floor. She picked this up and hurried back to the trap door and banged the rock against the lock with as much force as her frail arm could manage. She knew she was making too much noise, but it was either be quiet and find nothing or hurry up and get this lock broken.

She started to think her attempts were futile until the lock cracked and broke in two. Vivian was filled with the same type of satisfaction she felt when she was first approved for IVF treatments seven years ago. It felt as if all odds were against her until the moment that lock gave. She brushed away the broken pieces of the lock and ignored the callouses forming on her hands.

Upon opening the hatch, her phone flashlight illuminated a metal ladder that led into a darkness she couldn't make out. She tried to ignore her nerves as she descended the ladder, willing her body to stop fidgeting to make it to the bottom safely. She found her footing off the ladder and felt the softness of dirt beneath her. She turned her gaze to follow the light and the first thing she noticed was a wavering candlelight that flickered in the corner opposite from the ladder. Vivian's nerves intensified as her mind flooded with the possibilities of who or what she might find after turning the corner.

She inspected the room in which she stood in. The walls remained concrete as they were in the basement, but the ground was one hundred percent packed dirt. A worm poked through the dirt behind her, but nothing broke through the surface further than where the ladder was anchored in the ground. She walked carefully up to the white wax candle burning next to the wall, and noticed it buried halfway in the dirt as a means of keeping it upright. Then suddenly, the strong flame of the candle blew out by a force of wind she didn't remember feeling. It all would have been too creepy for her if she didn't remember the window that she broke in the basement above her.

Her phone flashlight barely did justice in the lightless, windowless trench she found herself in. She could only see a couple feet in front of her as she made small steps further away from the ladder. Littered on the ground adjacent to the back wall where the initial candle was placed, Vivian identified more wax candles, unused and some knocked over and a small wooden bowl of discarded matches.

The further she walked, the fouler it smelled. She held onto her phone with her left hand and used the back of her right arm to cover her nose, refusing to drop the rock just yet.

“Ah!” She gasped upon seeing the corpse of a tomcat, noticing the mangled details of its belly. The cat lay on its side, with no signs of significant decay but its belly was torn open with multiple scratches on its chest and back where dried blood caked from its injuries. She was hopeful that this cat fell victim to a violent raccoon attack rather than the Thomas' but quickly changed her mode of thinking as she frantically looked around for the cause of such destruction.

Vivian's breathing was shallow and quick, and she willed herself to refrain from hyperventilating and inducing herself into a full-blown panic attack. She struggled to hold her

flashlight steady as she walked past the body of the cat and noticed something move in the furthest corner of the room.

“Hello?” She whispered. Her voice broke as her mind went wild with the possibilities of what she was looking at.

She dared to step closer and could make out a small human body dressed in a cappuccino-colored gown. The closer she got to the person backed in the corner, the more details she could make out. The young girl was wearing a torn and soiled white gown—which really resembled a dirty cream—and sat with her back pressed into the wall, knees hugged to her chest and head buried in her arms that wound around her knees tightly.

“Andera?” Vivian’s voice wavered in disbelief.

The girl slowly lifted her head and Vivian locked eyes with a pale yellow, sad face. Small streaks of blood and dirt riddled the girl’s face and long black kinky straight hair fell about her shoulders. She was crying.

Vivian gasped at the resemblance between this girl and Loren. Tears pooled at her own eyes, but she wouldn’t dare let them fall.

“Andera?” Vivian called again, crouched an arms-length away.

“I can’t fix the cat.” The girl stuttered. “You can’t be here. I have to heal him.”

Vivian shook her head confused. “My name is Vivian, I’m a social worker. I’m going to help you, but I need to know who locked you down here. Are you hurt?”

“I have to heal the cat, the lwa won’t help me!” Andera screamed in hysteria and her body shook as her tears became more intense. Her eyes held a faraway gaze, as if she wasn’t really speaking to Vivian.

“Andera, please don’t scream. I want to help you.” Vivian tried to reach for her, but Andera stood up straight and her eyes widened in fear as her eyes finally connected with Vivian’s.

“You need to go,” she said firmly. An authoritative tone took control of her voice

Vivian was beyond confused. She stood up to straighten herself out and shook her head in refusal. “Andera, let me help you. What they’re doing to you is not healthy. You need fresh air and water.”

“No.” Andera’s voice was strong and demanding and the power in her word shocked Vivian to silence. Her arm fell to her side.

“I need to heal this cat. I need to complete my trial. My ancestors chose me and the lwa will choose me too. I cannot fail, my faith in the lwa is unwavering.” Andera continued. Vivian was surprised by how maturely Andera presented herself at this moment, when she was crying and shivering just moments ago.

“Where are your parents? Do they lock you down here often? When was the last time you ate?” Vivian had so many questions.

“You need to go!” Andera cried out.

Neither of them would listen to the other.

Vivian heard the ladder behind her creak under the weight of someone she did not want to face in this room with no escape. It all happened too quickly for her to devise a real plan. All she managed to do was run to Andera and hold her as she stared in disbelief at a long dark figure holding a wax candle, float over to them and yank Andera out of Vivian's grip.

The figure was covered in shadows, the flame of the candle only illuminating the left side of its face which seemed gruff and plain at the same time. Vivian wondered if it was a mask as she cringed at the bitter smell of vinegar that filled the cellar with the figure's presence.

She tried to follow behind them. She even tried to scream. But Vivian was stuck in her body which weighed down in its spot in the corner. She couldn't understand what gripped her in her place so tightly—whether it be an invisible force, the *lwa* Andera spoke of...or straight up fear.

The flashlight of her phone disappeared, and she couldn't tell the difference between the darkness in the room and the darkness between her eyelids. Her knees buckled and she sat still in the corner in which she found Andera, alone and scared before her consciousness fled from her.

Part Four

Vivian opened her eyes to white walls, blackout curtains hastily drawn to conceal soundproof padding over boarded windows, and hardwood floor with deep scratches across it from moving around furniture carelessly. She was no longer in the windowless room beneath the basement. She was now barefoot and bound to a wooden dining room chair in the middle of the living room.

Her head felt as if it was spinning, like she woke up from a long night of drinks and loud music. After a long minute had passed, Vivian remembered exactly where she was and what she'd done. Her heartrate increased.

“You can drink some water,” a small voice echoed on her right side as Andera came into view. She was changed out of the torn white gown into a long black skirt and a plain white long sleeve, still without shoes, and her face was clean. Vivian noticed her own white tunic had been replaced with a large black sweatshirt that smelled like dryer sheets.

As Andera guided the small cup to Vivian's mouth, she admired how beautiful the young girl was. Her kinky hair was stretched and fell around her shoulders and her mouth was slightly agape as she focused on not spilling the water, exposing a small gap in her two front teeth.

Vivian inhaled deeply after chugging the water and thanked her meekly. There was incense burning, irritating her nose. Andera watched her silently with a curious gaze, as Vivian took note of the framed pictures on the walls of various women wearing white headwraps and gowns. Directly under these photos was a long table covered in a white cloth with colorful wax candles, small flags—each a different color of red, green, purple, yellow, pink, blue, orange—

printed photos and figurines of what looked like saints, and other random trinkets like wine glasses, a bell, feathers.

Next to this altar was a large cloth covered barrel drum. Its design caught Vivian's eye. It was carved at the bottom, with intricate curved lines that resembled the sea. Further up it was painted in patches of gold, green, and blue, with yellow rope tied vertically from the top of the drum to the center before its concave.

"It's called a tanbou." Andera smiled at the drum.

Vivian snapped out of her reverie. "Andera..." She paused as the girl continued staring at the drum, paying her no mind. "Andera why didn't you come with me? What's going on?"

She regretted her words as soon as she saw the frustration in the child's face when she turned to look at her. Andera walked up close to Vivian.

"Why did you come? The cat is *dead* because you stopped me from saving it. I will not get a second chance. Who sent you?" Her words were sharp.

"Andera, vin anlè kounya!" A voice shouted from upstairs.

Vivian sat quietly in the chair, stunned by Andera's fierce glare before she ran up the stairs and out of sight. She released a breath she wasn't aware she was holding.

Shortly after Andera's exit, the step creaked under the weight of a woman descending the stairs, also barefoot. Vivian marveled at her beauty and the strong resemblance she and the young girl shared. The woman was tall and of fair skin, nearly the same tone as Andera, and she wore a long royal blue chiffon dress with lace sleeves and a matching headscarf tied in a similar fashion as the women in the pictures on the wall. Her nose was long and broad at the nostrils,

lips plump and brown, and thick, sculpted brows above her eyes which were big and stared intensely at Vivian tied to the chair.

“Ou se madichon. Who sent you here?” She sneered in a thick accent.

Vivian was taken aback by the hostility in her voice. Confused by the current situation, her response came out stuttered. “Uh-I...I came by yesterday...Left a note—your mailbox. I’m uh...with t-the gov—”

The lady turned over a small plastic card in her slender hands. “Vivian Smith of 550 St. Michaels Way...Apartment 1303. We got your letter from Social Services. But who *sent* you?”

Vivian’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “I—”

She was cut off again. “Did someone pay you to hex Andera?” Her question was direct, and her voice was strong. Unlike Vivian who felt weak and powerless against the woman in front of her.

“Mrs. Thomas, I can assure you that I am only doing what is right for your child.” Her words seemed unsure, unbelievable.

“You will call me Mambo. And you do not know what is right for my child, for all I know you could have turned the Baron against her.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Vivian exclaimed. “You locked your child in a room underneath your house and you accuse *me* of trying to harm her? What about all this witchcraft you do here? Is that not inappropriate to involve an innocent child in?” Vivian gestured to the table behind Mrs. Thomas. She was seething with anger towards the woman’s ignorance.

Mrs. Thomas did not back down. She walked over to the table and touched it gently as if to apologize for Vivian's cruel words. "Look at these *fanm*, the women of my family. Do they look like witches to you?" Her voice raised into a shout. "Do I look like a witch to you? Will you have me burned for my belief because you don't share it?"

Vivian's mouth hung open in incredulity.

Mrs. Thomas continued, regaining her composure. "The only person to be harmed here is you if you don't leave my family alone." She kissed her teeth and ascended back up the stairs, muttering creole curses under her breath.

Though spoken delicately, the threat did not comfort Vivian whatsoever. It was at that moment where she fully realized the gravity of her situation. She was tied up in the unfamiliar home with potentially dangerous people and no one knew where she was. And no one would notice her absence until Monday.

At the exact moment where she believed a panic attack would brew, Vivian's attention focused on the tall, bald man that now stood in front of her. He had a smile plastered on his round face and if it were any other situation, she would've thought of it as warm and inviting.

"Oh dear," he said with the same thick accent as his wife, "they've still got you all tied up like a prisoner. My apologies, my wife can be a bit...intense."

More like paranoid, Vivian thought to herself, as he undid the knots from around her wrists.

“I’m William, Andera’s father. When Naomie found you down there with our daughter she thought the curse had returned. Please excuse her, she’s just worried of Andera’s safety.” He motioned for Vivian to follow him into the next room.

They walked through the precipice into the kitchen, which was painted a bright teal with white accents. Wax candles lit the room in a dim glow and incense burned intensely from the counter next to the gas stove. He pulled a chair out from the small oval table in the far corner next to the windows. They were boarded up from the outside, fractures of sunlight permeated the cracks between each board and the warmth caressed Vivian’s arm.

William stood at the counter, fiddling with a mug and a pot of boiling water. He wore a long sleeve button up, with the top three buttons popped, exposing a white wifebeater underneath. His khaki linen pants were rolled up to about mid-shin. He turned around with two mugs in his hand and placed one directly in front of Vivian, taking a meager sip out of the other mug. Some of the cream-colored liquid sat on top of his thick mustache, which he cleared with his hand.

“Try some, it’s called akasan.” He encouraged Vivian to drink.

She eyed the mug skeptically but before she could ask anything he answered what she was already thinking.

“It’s not poison. It’s cornmeal, evaporated milk, vanilla, and cinnamon. It’s good, we used to drink this a lot in Haiti but with water. The milk makes it much nicer.” He chuckled.

Vivian tried the beverage and struggled to suppress her satisfaction.

“Vivian?” The man called.

She looked up at him from her cup and kept her mouth shut. She didn't want to provoke him like she did with his wife.

“Naomie isn't completely wrong of being wary of you. What were you doing in our basement? You broke a window.” His face was now serious, and Vivian was overcome with guilt.

Being faced with the question, Vivian realized how crazy it all looked from his perspective. Destroying their property, trying to coax their child to run away...kidnapping.

“I'm sorry,” was all she could manage to say.

William raised a brow as if to say, *that's all you can come up with?*

Vivian's face warmed as she forced herself to speak. “Well, you know already that I work with social services. I came by yesterday and no one answered and Andera has not been to school in nearly a month. No one can reach you, and all the neighbors are scared to even talk about you. I felt backed into a corner. I thought Andera was in danger...” She trailed off, avoiding eye contact.

“I saw you speaking to one neighbor though.”

Vivian's eyes shot up to meet his. His face was grim, emotionless. It never occurred to her that despite their silence, they still could have been watching.

“Yes. John.” She took another sip of the akasan which warmed her empty stomach.

“And I assume John told you we perform vodou?” She wasn't sure, but a small smirk played at the corner of his thin lips.

Vivian nodded in response.

“I see.” William stood up from the table they sat at and walked over to the counter, his back turned to her.

Violent images of him charging her with a butcher’s knife played through her head; images of his wife upstairs crafting a vodou doll of her to contort and burn for trespassing. He turned around and sighed.

“It’s true, that is the religion we practice. My wife longer than I.”

“It’s fine, none of that really matters to me,” Vivian lied, “what matters is that Andera goes back to school, and possibly sees a doctor.”

“Oh?” Again, William raised a brow.

“It is what’s right.” Vivian nodded her head.

“Well seeing as *I* am her father, I kindly disagree. All of *that* which you describe matters to us, and what’s right is for Andera to learn her culture and study the religion. She is at a great disadvantage not being born in Haiti, but we will make sure she learns. If she can gain the trust of the spirits...learn how to honor and respect them appropriately...then she will never want anything in life.” William smiled at the thought.

“I don’t think you’re being fair to Andera.” The words tumbled carelessly out of Vivian’s mouth, and she immediately scorned herself.

William’s smile faded. “Ms. Smith, do you have any children?”

She visibly gulped, not feeling all too comfortable bringing up Loren. “I did.”

“Well then you would know that a parent will always do what they believe is right for their child. Am I wrong?” He asked.

Vivian shook her head.

“We are being fair to Andera, contrary to what you may think. If she can learn her role as a priestess, then the lwa will protect her for as long as she lives.”

Vivian settled into work mode. “Mr. Thomas, you said she’d be at a cultural disadvantage because she was born here. Why didn’t you and your wife just move back to Haiti if you knew you wanted to raise her by Haitian morals?” Her question seemed off; she couldn’t find any better words for the subliminal meaning of *go back to where you came from*. She cringed at the thought.

“My religion should not stop me from giving my family a better life. Andera will have access to plenty opportunities here solely because she is an American. If I worship the lwa, or god, or the devil, or even nothing at all—that shouldn’t stop me from living or doing where or what I see fit for my family.”

“But Mr. Thomas, you’ve kept your family locked up for ten years. How can that possibly be a better life than living in Haiti?” Vivian was in disbelief.

“You won’t understand what you choose not to believe. Andera’s life will be better here. Naomie and I know that. But Naomie’s womb was cursed before we left our village and we decided to leave before the person who put the hex on her could do further damage. It was a difficult decision. Naomie was the most popular priestess of our village, but we couldn’t wait for the lwa to avenge her, she was becoming too sick.

“Now we don’t know if Andera is truly cursed or not but what we do know is that if she starts now and becomes a vodou priestess like each of her predecessors, she will have the full

protection of the lwa.” William stared intently at Vivian, trying to see if she understood a word that came out of his mouth.

“I’m sorry...just help me out here. You keep saying *the lwa* and I’m not sure who or what that is.” She shook her head.

“*Spirits, jen tet ou.*” William hopelessly placed a hand on his forehead.

“So, you want Andera to worship spirits in hopes of them protecting her?” Vivian asked incredulously.

“She already does. The table you see out there is our twenty-one divisions altar. Andera is a bright child. She’s already learned most of the lwa and is responsible for setting up the daily prayer and our rituals. What do you think she’s been doing in this house for ten years?” William pointed towards the living room.

Vivian didn’t answer his question aloud. She was embarrassed by her thoughts of them beating her to submission and locking her in dark closets and dungeons.

“Truthfully, when you came yesterday, we thought that person who hexed Naomie found us. And when you were with Andera this morning, Maman Brigitte warned Naomie during prayer. That’s why we must do this now while there is still time. So that the lwa can communicate with Andera herself to keep her aware of trouble that may try to find her.”

“Maman Brigitte? Is that one of your *lo-wah*?” Vivian asked and William nodded his head. “And what do you mean *do this now*? What exactly are you doing?” Vivian’s tone became more urgent.

“Andera’s asogwe initiation. To be a mambo just like her mother...a priestess. We must do it tonight.” William expressed no emotion, but his voice held a declaration that should not be argued with.

Vivian ignored it. “A little girl should not have to bear that responsibility because you folk are a little paranoid.”

William became frustrated by her ignorance. “Andera’s mother was initiated as a mambo when she was fifteen years old, her mother was seven, and her mother’s mother was ten. The same age as Andera. We wanted to wait it out until she became more comfortable with the songs and prayers and to have the rest of the family join us, but we cannot risk waiting. We’ve already started preparations. You will see, this is what is right for Andera.”

“You cannot possibly think you’re doing the responsible thing right now!” Vivian shouted and was surprised by her outburst which echoed throughout the level floor.

“Do not speak to me about responsibility. We know how dangerous it is for young children to experience possession, but Andera has prepared for this moment all her life. *She is ready.* No more talk from you, you are becoming quite disrespectful. The initiation will begin at sundown.” William’s word was final, and he left Vivian there in the kitchen lost for words and extremely conflicted.

Part Five

Three hours had passed since the sun set and Vivian was still sitting in the kitchen watching the sky through the cracks between the boards. Whenever she asked William why they weren't doing anything, he'd tell her to be patient. Whenever she asked Naomie, she responded only in Creole.

Around half past eight, William and Andera were gathering the items off the twenty-one divisions table in the living room. Vivian watched in curious silence from the threshold. Andera carefully placed the items in a plastic bin which she dragged to the side of the stairs, in front of the door that led to the basement. William carried the table to the same spot before digging in his pants pocket for the key to unlock it.

“Vivian, can you please get the drum from the living room?” He asked over his shoulder before disappearing down the basement steps with the table and Andera.

Vivian walked into the living room cautiously, as if there was some hidden intruder in the empty room. She bent down to grab the drum by its concave and wrapped it in her arms in a tight bear hug hold. It weighed lighter than it looked, being about as heavy as a small puppy.

She carried the tambourine to the top of the basement steps and pushed her neck forward to gauge how steep her decline would be. After a quick pause of contemplation to drop everything and run, Vivian slowly side stepped her way down the stairs. When she safely reached the bottom, she found herself standing in the first section of the basement, with the sheet-covered and dust-covered furniture.

She walked through the basement slowly, her feet cold from being unprotected from the icy concrete floor. A crisp breeze invaded the basement from the window she smashed earlier, and she watched in passing as William tried to cover it with blue plastic tarp and masking tape.

As she arrived in the back section of the basement, the strong smell of incense began to mask the unbearable smell of must that came from outside. Andera was carefully replacing the items from the plastic bin onto the cloth covered table while muttering things to herself in Creole.

“Why couldn’t we do this upstairs if these things were already up there?” Vivian asked.

“The living room is only used for prayer. Rituals we do down here,” Andera answered without taking her attention off the task at hand.

“Our ritual ceremonies tend to get pretty loud,” William said, joining Andera. “We don’t want to cause trouble...or worse, have someone interrupt a ceremony because we’re being a disturbance to the neighborhood.” His tone was sarcastic at that last part.

“Has that happened before?” Vivian questioned.

“A long time ago.” William took the drum from her which she completely forgot she was holding. He placed it in the corner of the room, next to the trap door in the floor. The lock Vivian broke earlier had been replaced.

Naomie joined the three of them in the small space. She carried a folded square of white material in her hand and offered it to Vivian, telling her to change.

“Chanje nan sa yo.”

Ever since their first interaction, Naomie hasn't spoken a lick of English to or around Vivian. She didn't quite agree with her husband that Vivian should be allowed to attend Andera's asogwe initiation.

“Lwa a pral santi move enèji li. Atitid lèd li pral atire Petwo lwa.” *The lwa will feel her bad energy. Her ugly attitude will attract Petwo lwa.*

Naomie knew that even her husband knew how aggressive the petwo lwa could become though never witnessing it himself.

William acted as a mediator. “Please change into these. The time is near for us to begin. And while you're at it, please work on a positive attitude. The lwa can read your spirit...if your energy is dark, dark things *can* happen.”

Vivian nervously swallowed and nodded her head.

“You can use the bathroom on the second floor. It's the first door at the top of the stairs.”

Vivian followed his directions to the second floor of the house. She entered the bathroom which was small and plain. It only had a toilet and sink, both white ceramics, in coordination with the white walls. The exposed lightbulb mounted on the wall shone bright white.

Naomie had given Vivian a long white dress, composed of two thin layers of silky chiffon fabric. It was quite soft as it brushed over Vivian's skin, and without the second layer, would probably expose her black undergarments. The sleeves reached down to the top of her forearm before flaring out.

Vivian stared at herself in the mirror, thinking about William's most recent request. What didn't make sense to her was the fact that she'd done nothing but diss his religious beliefs and he

still treated her kindly. There was no reason to keep her hostage, force her to attend the initiation which she was clearly against, and even ask her to be happy about it.

We're on different sides, she thought to herself. If it was up to Vivian, she'd be in the hole underneath the basement.

She thought about making a run for it. Or calling the police. But she couldn't bring herself to go through with either idea. A tiny voice in the back of her mind commanded her to stay, and she didn't do much to challenge the instruction.

The slamming of a door downstairs brought Vivian back to reality. Excited giggles and unclear conversation echoed up to the bathroom she stood in. Out of curiosity, she peeked out the door to see Naomie guiding someone to remove their coat and shoes. The mystery person disappeared from Vivian's view, but a small suitcase sat at the bottom of the stairs right in front of the front door.

When Vivian joined the family downstairs, William happily grabbed her arm and dragged her into the kitchen, in front of the woman that just entered the house. She was short and plump, the opposite of the Thomas' long and skinny build. Her skin was a golden bronze that looked like it had seen more than enough sun. Her hair was short and loosely curled at the top of her head.

"Vivian, meet Mambo Dina. She is Naomie's sister." William smiled. "Now that she is here, we are going to prepare Andera to begin."

The two ladies were left in the kitchen alone.

"So, you're a priestess?" Vivian tried to fill the echoing silence with conversation.

“Yes, I lead a temple in New Orleans. We were planning to hold Andera’s initiation there, but I came as soon as I heard of the emergency.” Dina was pleasant. Vivian couldn’t figure whether she knew the full story behind *the emergency* leading to their current situation but decided against asking.

“And you and Naomie are sisters?” Vivian was piecing a puzzle together—the kind of the puzzle where the final picture isn’t clear until the very last piece is sorted.

“Me and Naomie grew up on the border of Port-au-Prince, a small town called Delmas. Our village was closer to the country...quieter, calmer...” She trailed off, nostalgic of home.

“Naomie was initiated two years before me even though she’s younger. The spirits were calling her, and that’s something you can’t ignore...unless you want a lot of unfortunate things to happen to you...I think the spirits are calling Andera now. It is a true blessing to be part of her transition.” Dina grinned and closed her eyes, reminiscing in her private thoughts.

“What makes you think she should answer?” Vivian asked daringly.

“I take it you don’t believe in the lwa?” Dina asked seriously, which seemed to contrast her lighthearted appearance.

Vivian shook her head in response.

“I’m sure William explained the importance of the spirits in our religion already. But when treated with honor and veneration, the spirits generously help to increase the quality of our lives. If we ignore their calls to action it is seen as disrespect. Bad things can happen. You lose your farm, your money, health...in extreme cases even your life. But any sensible Voudouisant would never let it get that far.”

Vivian had no words; she couldn't believe how intense their practice was.

“I know you're thinking *how could these people worship such merciless spirits?*” Dina chuckled. “But it's not all misfortune. So many years ago, I can't even remember now, we were attending an annual ritual in a city close by, Carrefour. That's where Naomie first met William. He was a professor at the Université d'État d'Haïti, one of the best in Port-au-Prince. Naomie was already a young mambo then, and she was engaged to an oungan...a priest. In my opinion, he was an old fart.” Dina paused to chuckle, and Vivian let out a faint giggle at her unexpected sidenote.

Dina continued. “But she and William fell in love. She prayed to the lwa to give her the answer to her seemingly impossible question. The spirits won't lead us astray if we are faithful to them. Naomie has a wonderful husband and a beautiful and capable daughter. Not to mention, that old fart fell into deep debt not even a year after Naomie left him. It turned out he was scamming innocent people with his services. The spirits will always catch up to you.” She was shaking her head in disappointment. “For good or bad, they always do.”

“How can the *lo-wah* have so much power and influence over someone?” Vivian's mind was starting to open, and dozens of logical questions swarmed around her head in regard to this illogical concept.

“I don't know if you're at all religious but just like those who believe in a single, high-powered entity believe they are always watching and judging...the same with the spirits. They can see a person's energy and true intentions and can even warn the mambo or oungan who is in contact with that person. Depending on the spirit involved, they may even cause harm to the beholder of the bad energy. I know you don't want to hurt Andera but your opposition to this

initiation can hurt you and even the child herself.” Dina grabbed Vivian’s hand in both of her own.

“So why does William insist that I stay if my presence will cause bad things to happen? Just let me leave. You can even lock me in a closet if you’re scared about me getting the police before you finish your ceremony. *Which I won’t,*” she added when Dina gave her a questioning look.

“William has always been proud of his relationship with vodou. Your disbelief of the lwa probably offends him. He just wants you to learn the truth of vodou. Think about it like this: William is not only a proud Voudouisant but also a retired professor. Now combine that with the fact that he can’t leave his house to worship publicly or teach...out of fear. He wants to, but his love for his daughter will stop him from doing anything too risky until she is fully protected.”

“I guess I never really thought of it like that.” Vivian dropped her hand out of Dina’s and let it fall to her side.

“You just have to approach it more sensitively. Don’t be afraid to open yourself to the lwa. We want you to feel welcomed.” Dina smiled.

Vivian couldn’t tell whether it was Dina’s contagious warmth, but something came over her and she nodded her head with a big grin plastered on her face. “Okay.”

Part Six

Hours had passed since they congregated in the basement, and it still felt as though the night had just started. For the first hour or so, Vivian watched in awe, mesmerized by the routine movement shared by the family, both collectively and individually. They seemed to move and sing as a single entity, arms raised to the ceiling and back down to the concrete flooring—dresses dancing as an extension of their hips. But then as she looked closely, Vivian recognized the specific part each person played.

William sat to the side, his knees cradling the tanbou drum and his hands moved with a mind of their own. His eyes were shut, and the beats of the drum came naturally to him, like all his life he'd been preparing for this single moment. And Vivian couldn't help to digress in her thoughts that indeed, all his life William waited for this very moment. Like the Christians from her childhood anticipated her baptism, signifying her commitment to the church and to their God. But the difference was William's satisfaction to watch his only daughter embrace their religion, while those Christians from her childhood suffered disappointment of Vivian's complete abandonment when she turned 18 and went off to college and never returned.

The drums were the foundation in which sound was built upon. Dina's voice rose and fell in a melody that drew Vivian in and pushed her out like rolling waves on a white shore. She closed her eyes as she listened to the mambos dominate the room with their spiritual chant, her mind conjuring numerous vivid images that she's not sure she's quite experienced before. A vibrant green-speckled-yellow field untouched by urbanization, rays of a hot sun permeating the white fuzz that drifted through the clear sky. A lone kite dancing in the wind traveling west, on a journey that no one would know the destination of. The kite's purple and pink tail rising up and down, navigating the wind and somehow also being navigated *by* the wind.

Andera didn't sing as loud as her mambos yet, but she danced with double the amount of energy they did. She seemed transcended, as if something within the music took over her motor control and pushed her across the floor. Her head tilted back, and her arm raised, and Vivian knew immediately that they their pride in vodou existed in every part of their being.

When the ladies stopped dancing, the chants were reduced to a hushed whisper and Andera knelt in front of the 21 Divisions table beside Naomie.

William's rhythm on the tanboun slowed. Naomie touched the alter with her head bowed, and Dina did the same beside her. As Naomie began her prayer, Andera pulled a small mahogany chest from under the table and opened it slowly, carefully placing its contents in the center of the table.

"Papa Legba," Naomie exhaled, "Open the gate for me. Antibon Legba, open the gate for me. Open the gate for me, Papa that I may pass. When I return, I will thank the Lwa."

Out of the chest, Andera had strategically placed chocolates, cigars, and a handful of grilled peanuts. Dina sparked a match to light a cigar and hand over to Naomie and poured two shots of rum as Andera lit the red candle that stood in a row of colorful wax sticks along the back edge of the table.

After a moment of thick silence, the cigar smoke grew dense and Naomie began to speak in Creole which fascinated Vivian. It was beautifully spoken, and her tone was friendly though it seemed that Naomie's focus was on a guest hidden in the shadows of the hot basement.

Naomie was speaking to Papa Legba, asking for his assistance in Andera's asogwe initiation. She confessed her fear for Andera's safety and her desire to see the child embrace the path laid out for her by the lwa who wish to protect her. Naomie asked Papa Legba to open the

gate so she might speak to the lwa of the Marasa in which he permits. With a faint smile of content across her face, Naomie touches each offering placed by Andera, thanking him. She took one shot of rum and left the other for the invisible Papa Legba.

Andera followed the ritual of placing the offering for the Marasa on the table. There were candied mints, cookies, honey, and two cloth dolls. She lit yellow and white wax stick candles. Naomie greeted the Marasa which appeared as twins.

William's slow steady beats on the drums became faster and more chaotic to Vivian. They grew loud and the sound reverberated through her bones. If she wasn't compelled to dance with Dina and Andera before, her body gave her no choice now. The chanting of their song became more chaotic as well and while Vivian didn't know the words, that didn't stop her from shaking the ogan in tune and letting the music control her body without holding back.

The night became a blur of moving bodies and thumping sounds under candlelight. Time seemed irrelevant in this moment as the three women danced in circles around each other.

Naomie who was still kneeling and praying to the Marasa, now stood with the lit cigar between her lips. She took in a deep draw and blew the smoke directly onto Andera's head. She took another and blew it onto Andera's right arm, which was spread outwards. She took another drag of the cigar and blew it onto her left arm. While doing this, Dina had disappeared into the shadows of the basement and resurfaced with a machete and the prospective of violence frightened Vivian to stand still. But her tensed muscles released slightly when Dina used the machete to tap the ground surrounding Andera.

Vivian couldn't help but notice the shift in energy compared to before the prayer to the spirits. The song and dance which seemed random and uncalculated before, now seemed to focus

solely on Andera. When Naomie retired the cigar in an ashtray on the floor next to the 21 Divisions table, she and Dina unfolded a bleached white sheet, slowly, without breaking the grace of their dance. Suddenly, the beat of William's tanboun stopped as he got up to grab one corner of the sheet. Their song became an acapella but was as rhythmic and powerful if not more than when accompanied by the drum. Dina motioned with one hand as her other held a corner of the sheet in a tight fist for Vivian to pick up the last corner. She obeyed the silent command, mimicking William who had skipped over on beat to pick up the sheet.

Andera stood in the middle of their four cornered formation under the sheet that was lowered then raised in a four-count, dancing with her eyes closed, a wide smile on her face as her eyes trained on something above her. Perhaps it was the gate to the spirit world, Vivian thought.

Naomie's voice was the only one heard now. She shouted something in Creole and for Vivian's sake added "Repeat!" in her course accent.

Naomie sang and William, Dina, and Vivian repeated after her. Awkwardly, Vivian felt embarrassed to sing in a language so foreign to her. This went on for eight verses.

At the end of the eighth verse, Andera dropped to her knees with the sheet over her bowed head. Dina motioned for Vivian to shake the ogan over Andera's veiled head as the others sang a new chant, dancing in circles around the girl.

Once the sheet was removed, Dina once more held the machete in her grip this time touching it meaningfully to Andera's head, then each shoulder, then gliding it down the length of her arms then spine then legs.

Vivian had no time to ponder on her moral feelings of what just happened before Naomie broke out into violent shakes. Deeply concerned, Vivian turned to Dina questionably who shook her head in delight mouthing, “Possession.”

In Vivian’s experience, possession in the Christian sense meant that a demon had entered an unwilling innocent person’s body and fought for claim over their soul. It was a natural response for Vivian to watch the occurrence horrified, stuck in her position next to Andera, who has bent over and praying intensely under her breath. William was already back on the tanboun, and his banging of the drum seemed to intensify the ripples through Naomie’s body, which fell against Dina for physical support.

Vivian stayed rigid, completely lost as to what her role was here. She felt again as she previously did...out of place. Differently than before, now she felt that her mere presence was an intrusion on the sacred event. It was a mistake for her to intervene in the family’s affairs as a personal motivation rather than professional. She was desperate to find a way out but was all turned around from the cigar smoke and candlelight after dancing in circles for hours. Her head grew heavier on her body which seemed to sink into the concrete floor. Briefly she wondered how the basement had not caught fire yet.

Suddenly, Naomie stood upright and scooped Andera up from her place on the floor in a tight embrace, dousing her with kisses all over her face. Andera received the affection from her mother strangely. She did not hug or kiss her back. Instead, she stood limp wrapped in Naomie’s arms with her eyes wide, but her facial expression was pleased. It was not her mother who held her at that moment. It was the lwa of the Marasa.

Naomie shook the asson as she guided Andera towards the tanboun, where William had paused his drumming to produce from behind him a basin of cloudy water.

“Lave tet,” Dina whispered in Vivian’s ear, “the child will be blessed now. They will reveal her met tet, *master of the head*, to find out which spirit will choose her.”

As William and Naomie carried out the blessing on Andera, Vivian assisted Dina in folding the white sheet that lay haphazardly on the ground where Naomie had collected Andera. Vivian found this her opportunity to understand what exactly was happening.

“That beaded rattle—the asson—gives Mambo Naomie leverage in the spirit world over the Marasa. They are within her now and she uses the asson to keep them there...so they won’t possess an inexperienced initiate like you or William or Andera...Or me, since she is leading this ritual.” Dina stared longingly at Andera whose head was being submerged in the basin for seconds at a time.

“Who is the Marasa?” Vivian asked, eyes trained on Naomie.

“The divine twins. Sometimes though, they will appear in three or four. They are thought of as incomplete halves...like yin and yang. They are powerful healers and protectors...and bestow good fortune. They love children and families with children, have lost children, things like that.” Dina took the folded sheet from Vivian and placed it under the 21 Divisions table.

“Is that why she gave them two dolls? Are they themselves children?” Vivian pointed to the offerings on the table.

Dina smiled thoughtfully. “They may appear in the form as children but don’t be fooled, they are *beyond* wise and can make life *beyond* miserable for those that try to scold them like they would a juvenile.”

Dina excused herself and disappeared into the darkness of the rest of the basement and Vivian turned to watch as William pat dried Andera’s head with a towel. When Dina returned with a boiling pot held between two oven mittens, William announced that they will begin the Kanzo trial by fire.

Naomie picked up the tongs that hung from Dina’s forearms and waited for the pot to be placed on the ground next to Andera who sat flush against the wall. Tears flowed from the girl’s eyes, but she did not seem sad. She looked younger, free from the confines of the basement, and held out her left palm.

Dina knelt beside Andera and prayed with her, holding her left arm steady as Naomie picked a hot stone the size of a baseball out of the pot. She pressed the stone into Andera’s palm while Dina blew cigar smoke over her. When the smoke cleared, Naomie removed the stone and dropped it on the towel that was used to dry Andera’s head. Vivian cringed as she watched them repeat the process with the bottom of Andera’s left foot. Mostly, Vivian was shocked at Andera’s reaction. She had only let out a small whimper and a lone tear which streaked her cheek, gliding past her wide smile.

The final stage of the asogwe initiation had come upon them and Vivian was relieved as she was beginning to feel extremely lightheaded and dizzy from the smoke that clouded the basement.

William pulled a key from his linen pants pocket and stalked over to the door in the floor which Vivian had first invaded when she broke in. He unlocked the padlock and opened the door wide.

He spoke to Andera in English as the three of them watched. “Andera, after have completing the rite of passage, now you will endure the final stage of your initiation...the *kouche*. You will lie down in the djevo with the holy asson and pray to the lwa. Do not neglect Mambo Ayizan because as you remember she is the patron lwa of the initiatory djevo. Speak to your met tet and find your purpose my child. When you are ready you will know what to do. Ayibobo.” He kissed his daughter’s head with pure love and adoration in his eyes.

“Ayibobo,” she repeated back to him with pride.

Before surrendering her asson, Naomie prayed in Creole to the Marasa and to Papa Legba, thanking him for opening the gate and saying goodbye to ensure that he closes it behind him. When she was sure that he left, Naomie walked over to her daughter and knelt before her.

“Mambo,” Andera acknowledged in a soft whisper, touching her forehead to Naomie’s.

“You make me so proud. And when we meet again, you will be an honored mambo.” Naomie stood up and kissed her daughter’s forehead.

Vivian thought the moment was sweet but tense. It was as if they took turns saying goodbye to Andera as they knew her. As if when she resurfaced from the hole in the floor, she will be a seasoned war veteran. But Vivian kept these thoughts to herself, knowing that it was inappropriate to speak on.

Dina kissed her niece on the forehead as well and ushered her down the steps of the djevo. William locked it after Andera and before she could ask *what next*, Vivian blacked out from the unsteadiness that filled her head.

Part 7

The Thomas residence was just as quiet that Sunday morning as it had been any other morning, the tumultuous events of the previous night just a memory away. Everyone had retreated to the upstairs bedroom; Naomie and William in their master and Dina and Vivian in what was designed to be a guest room but served the Thomas' for years as a storage room for various books, outdated junk, and broken ritual materials: tables, drums, ripped cloths, bent swords, torn dresses...

The room used to be big; a real eye catcher in the mornings as it resided on the east side of the house, its large double hung windows catching the pink and purple hue of the Virginian sunrise, when the clouds glowed orange and the sky in between seemed like a distant clear dream. Of course, over the years the clutter shrunk the square size of the room. And the boards and blackout curtains over the window constituted a permanent dusk.

Dina offered to spend the night by Vivian's side to see to it that she was unharmed from the ritual and that her fainting spell would clear. She slept on the edge of the full-sized mattress that had long been draped in plastic to ward off dust. She spent most of the night on her side, facing the wall, counting the wrinkles in the plastic that was balled up on the floor next to the bed. Beside her was Vivian, deep in sleep and sprawled out in the middle of the bed, light snores emanating from the back of her throat. The snoring kept her awake until it became white noise and the wrinkles in the plastic became sheep to count. She couldn't remember what number she fell asleep on.

The morning passed the sleeping house and by noon the wood flooring groaned for the company of those that continued their slumber. Dina was the first to open her eyes. Crust had

formed in the corners, cracking in veins as the skin around her eyelids stretched open. She stayed still for an intense moment, willing the grogginess away. When she turned on her back, she was glad Vivian had retreated back to her side of the bed. Inhaling deeply and holding that breath, Dina stretched her limbs out, toes pointed and arms pushing against the cool metal bars of the headboard. As her stiff muscles settled, she released her breath in a grateful huff.

She turned on her side again, this time facing Vivian. Since the room was so dark, she felt for Vivian instead of looking at her. With her left arm folded beneath her head, Dina's right hand rested steadily on Vivian's right shoulder. She felt her shivering profusely, and immediately searched for the duvet that was kicked to the bottom end of the bed to cover her.

Dina never reared any of her own children but often took care of the village babies in Delmas back in Haiti and from time to time, the sick children she was sought after to heal in New Orleans. Just as she would with some of the bigger children, Dina draped the duvet around Vivian who shivered wickedly in fetal position and wrapped her arm around her chest. Dina pressed herself into Vivian's back, hoping both the body heat and the solid structure of support her body provided would console the woman into stillness.

Vivian's body relaxed into Dina's embrace at which Dina let out a short sigh of relief and let her head fall back onto the mattress. But it wasn't even a minute before Vivian's shivering started up again. It wasn't until Dina squeezed her arm around the woman that she noticed the shivering had transformed into shaking and the small gasps of breath between whimpers. Vivian was crying.

Immediately, Dina sat up in the bed and turned Vivian on her back. Through the darkness, Dina could deduce that her eyes were closed but saw the glint of moisture running

down Vivian's cheeks. She tapped her shoulder lightly and with her voice still groggy from sleep, Dina called her to wake up. "Vivian. Is everything okay? You're crying. You're dreaming cheri."

When Vivian did not respond, Dina shook her shoulder with more force. She cleared her throat of all sleepiness now. "Wake up, Vivian."

Dina turned her back to reach over to her side of the bed to turn on the small reading light that was affixed to the wall. When she turned back to Vivian, the dim, yellow light illuminated peculiar shadows across Vivian's face, whose eyes were wide open.

Dina watched cautiously as Vivian's eyes darted all around the room. Her face contorted in confusion and finally her gaze rested on Dina. She didn't speak. She just laid frozen on her back her eyes staring wildly into Dina's. This made Dina uneasy.

"Do you need some water? You're probably still dehydrated." Dina scooted to the edge of the bed to fetch the water, but Vivian shot her hand out to take hold of Dina's wrist. Her grasp was tight and the silence in the room rung through Dina's ears painfully.

"What is happening?" Vivian murmured. Dina almost didn't hear it.

The frantic look in Vivian's eyes never faded and Dina began to register it as disoriented panic. She moved her free arm to pry herself out of Vivian's tight grip. Vivian's hand fell limply to the mattress with a soft thud and her gaze moved from Dina to the white ceiling behind her. The faraway look in her eyes suggested that she was no longer engaged in the present. Vivian laid paralyzed in the bed, short flashbacks of the previous night replaying in her head. None of it was cohesive and all of it scared her to pieces. She shrunk into the mattress, silent tears sliding down her cheeks, pooling beneath her jaw.

Suddenly, she jumped up from her trance which frightened Dina off the bed and onto the cold hardwood floor. Vivian threw the duvet off of her and Dina pushed herself to her feet just in time to brace herself in front of the door before Vivian could run out.

“Andera!” Vivian screamed. Her eyes narrowed fiercely on Dina. “What did you do?”

Dina took hold of Vivian by the shoulders and tried to push her back towards the bed. “Vivian, you need to relax. Let your mind and body catch up with you before you hurt yourself or someone else.”

Vivian scoffed and allowed Dina to sit her on the edge of the bed but brushed her arms off her shoulders.

“You don’t want me to hurt anyone, but I know what you did to that young child, and you won’t get away with it!” Vivian stood up again.

“What are you talking about?” Dina shook her head in confusion and backed up against the door in case Vivian tried to get past her.

“You burned her with the tip of the cigar...cut her with your machete...drowned her in that basin of water. You all are animals!” Vivian spat her words at Dina who stared back at her incredulously.

Vivian felt the room shift and craned her neck upwards to look at Dina who’d abruptly grown three times larger. Vivian threw her hands out in a fit of self-defense as she watched horridly as Dina attempted to smash a pillow against her face. Her palm, sticky with cool sweat, connected loudly with Dina’s flushed cheek.

“Get away from me, you freak!” Vivian backed up against the boarded-up window, contemplating how she’d escape through the door with Dina in the way. “Your family will kill her. I need to get her somewhere safe. Oh, God...she’s locked up in that dungeon with no air!”

“Vivian, I think you are hallucinating,” Dina said in a calm voice even though her face was burning from the slap.

“Move!” Vivian yelled as she lunged her body toward Dina who had quickly sidestepped her attack. Vivian’s head thumped on the dresser and she landed just inches from the door with a loud bang, completely unresponsive.

Downstairs, Andera had long been awake. She’d risen from djevo something like Jesus and spent the morning kneeling in front of the 21 Divisions table with the asson in her lap. She prayed to her met tet, the Marasa, and several other lwa that walk with her. She prayed for their guidance and protection through her new beginning as a young mambo. She made a special prayer of thanks for her ancestors, the mambos that came before her on her mother’s side. It was during her final prayer to Erzulie, the goddess and protector of women and children, when she heard a loud thud resound from upstairs. The echo of footsteps distracted her greatly from her prayer, but she closed her eyes tight and focused on the lwa in question.

When she finished out her prayer and thanked the spirits for their ears, Andera stood to her feet with the asson gripped tightly in both hands and stalked to the bottom of the steps. At the top was her mother and father carrying a limp Vivian carefully down the stairs and Dina rubbing her cheek behind them. Andera said nothing and watched intently.

“Andera, mon kè,” Naomie gasped when meeting her daughter’s curious eye, “go up to your room sweetie. I am glad to see you, get some rest.”

With Andera out of sight, William got to work securing Vivian to the same wooden chair from the kitchen as he had the day before. He couldn't help but feel disgusted by the wave of déjà vu that struck him. It was hard to believe that he'd just shared one of the proudest moments of his life with this woman the night before.

Naomie stood in the kitchen with Dina, who was filling a plastic storage bag with ice for her hot face. They spoke about the incident in Creole.

"How could this happen?" Naomie stressed.

"I was speaking with her last night. She didn't say much and definitely nothing that would warrant this. Do you think she'd been possessed?" Dina asked.

"Nonsense!" Naomie exclaimed, partially offended that her sister would even think of her as irresponsible enough to allow the lwa to mount an inexperienced attendee.

"I'm not saying this is your fault, sister. Maybe Vivian touched the asson? Maybe she wasn't supposed to be there? Have you heard anything?" Dina leaned against the sink, with the bag of ice pressed into the right side of her face. She was referring to Naomie's met tet and the other spirits that walk with her and warn her of any foul play afoot. "I didn't. And I slept next to her all night!"

"No, I heard nothing. For her or for Andera. It was silent." Naomie squinted suspiciously, looking at nothing.

"Something had to have happened. I know it. Her eyes, Naomie...they seemed...blank, but frustrated." There was a long pause of silence before Dina completed her thought. "Like she's trapped."

William called them from the living room. "I'm waking her up!"

Vivian felt her head moving before she could open her eyes. She felt her brain tilt to the right as a light pressure hit repeatedly on her cheek. It took several blinks for her eyes to adjust to the light in the room and for her brain to place exactly where she was.

She chuckled thought to herself. *Right back where I started.*

When her vision finally focused, she was met with three identical worried frowns plastered across the faces of William, Naomie, and Dina. She immediately assumed the worst.

"Just let me go. I don't want to die," she whimpered and struggled against the restraints around her wrists that were bound behind her. She shook her shoulders and tried to wiggle out of the chair, but with no success. Strings of curses followed as she became more desperate to be released until that blank and frustrated look returned to her eyes.

"Was she like this all night?" William directed his question to Dina.

She looked hopelessly toward Vivian and shook her head no.

Hearing the commotion, Andera appeared quietly in the room, standing behind her father. When Dina caught sight of her, she quickly pulled her out of the room and into the kitchen, where Vivian wouldn't see her.

"What are you doing, *pitit*?" Dina did not let go of Andera's arm.

"What's wrong with her?" Andera asked, not confused and silent as she was before. She was demanding an answer more than she was asking for it.

Naomie joined the two in the kitchen she shook her head at her daughter. "No."

Andera's bold resolve never faded. She repeated her question.

"That is what *we* will find out." Naomi scolded her. "You've just completed the most spiritually and physically exhausting night of your life and you are sticking your nose into matters that do not concern you." Being extremely tired herself, Naomi snapped at her harsher than she intended.

If it did, Andera didn't show that her mother's condescending tone had fazed her. "I need to be here too. I need to help her as much as you do." Her mind was already made. When she saw that Naomi's mind had not changed and Dina avoided eye contact she added, "Let me do what the Iwa has called me to do."

That certainly got their attention. What Naomi and Dina failed to realize was that Andera was now a mambo like them; inexperienced as she was, she had a right to be there. She had a right to learn from the situation at hand.

Naomi, uncomfortable with putting her daughter in the same room as Vivian, reluctantly nodded her head. "You're right." She stalked out of the kitchen with Dina following closely behind her. "Come."

As she entered the living room, the expression on Vivian's face was unreadable. It had changed dramatically from before upon recognizing Andera who looked in perfect health.

"Andera," she breathed, "you're okay?" Vivian began tearing up. She felt that her mind was playing tricks on her.

“I’m fine, Vivian.” To reassure her of the fact, Andera raised her arm and turned in a slow circle for her to see. “But I’m more concerned about you...” She trailed off as Vivian silently inspected her, still not completely sure if she was seeing correctly.

“I’d like to get you out of those uncomfortable restraints, but I need to know that you don’t want to hurt us,” Andera said.

Vivian looked at her like she had three heads as if to say, *I’ve been trying to help you.*

Andera must’ve caught on to this and corrected herself. “My family. Please don’t attack them.”

Vivian sighed in defeat and her shoulders and head slumped forward, shielding her face from the intense stares of the Thomas’ and Dina. “Okay.”

William released her arms and then her legs and Vivian sighed in relief, rubbing her sore wrists. Only a few seconds had passed when she started panting uncontrollably. Her hand touched her chest while the other helped her push herself out of the chair. She clung onto the back of the chair as she doubled over and her breathing became very quick and shallow. Vivian dropped to her knees, hunched over as everyone watched on in horror.

She only had enough breath to wheeze “Help,” before she doubled over again to vomit.

William and Andera were at her side immediately and Naomie disappeared into the kitchen. Taken aback and slightly repulsed, Dina stood with her hands covering her mouth. Naomie called her to the kitchen.

“Something has a hold of her,” Dina fretted.

“It’s nothing good either,” Naomi confirmed, running a dishrag under cold water from the sink.

Dina boiled a pot of hot water and poured it into a mug of dry herbs. She and Naomi returned to the living room to find William consoling Vivian curled on her side and Andera kneeling at her feet and praying intensely. Naomi sat her up and placed the cold rag on Vivian’s forehead who looked seconds away from passing out again. Dina stooped down on the opposite side of Naomi where William had been sitting and tapped under Vivian’s chin a couple times to gain her attention.

Vivian blinked groggily and received the hot mug from Dina.

“It’s ginger, garlic, and clove tea. Te lay ak jiwòf,” Dina said, “for your nausea.”

Vivian took a sip and grimaced at the bitter taste. Sadistically, she wondered if they would offer her any sugar to make the prospect of drinking the full mug any more appetizing. But they didn’t, so she kept sipping and gagging under their watch.

“Manman,” Andera addressed her mother.

Naomi was deep in her thoughts sifting through all the possibilities of Vivian’s sudden ailment. She couldn’t help but to think that if she was back in Haiti, that she would be better prepared for this.

“Manman, I have to help her. Let me perform a lave tet. If I can reveal her met tet then we can help her, right?” Andera pleaded.

Naomi refocused her attention on her daughter. She spent all of Andera’s life protecting her from unseen evil and while she knew the asogwe was another part of that, she wasn’t ready

to throw her into the deep end of the priestess responsibility pool. It was dangerous for Andera to work unsupervised. She had much more to learn and observe before encountering whatever force was behind Vivian's condition.

"You can't do that, Andera." Naomi shook her head.

"But manman!" Andera started.

"No, no. Don't raise your voice at me child." Naomi's tone was silencing. Andera's eyes watered from frustration. That inherent feeling of knowing she can help but not being able to do so.

"Naomie," William called her attention to Vivian who had placed the half-finished mug of tea on the floor and glowered straight ahead. "Je sa ki mal." *The evil eye.*

Naomie wouldn't admit it aloud, but she was scared. The same darkness she migrated from Haiti to escape was under her own roof. She was sick with fear for Andera's safety. They dedicated their lives to keeping the peace with the spirits around them. Why would the lwa allow this hex to torture her family?

"Dina," Naomi cleared her throat, "take the asson and Vivian downstairs. I trust you."

But it wasn't about trust. Naomi's mind was everywhere and couldn't stay still on any one thought. She knew Dina had more experience than her living and practicing freely in Louisiana, Dina had grown popular as a mambo.

"Let Andera accompany her. It's clear the lwa is urging her to be there for Vivian."

William did not ask. Naomi did not object...Naomie didn't do anything. Her head dropped in defeat. She was torn between protecting her only child and making a powerful mambo out of her.

But before she could ever come to a decision about what mattered most to her, Dina and Andera disappeared with Vivian and William wrapped her arms around her weary frame.

He kissed her temple and rested his chin on top of her head. “They will be fine.”

For the 45 minutes that they were gone, Naomie had felt hours pass her by slowly and painfully. She compulsively scrubbed the floor clean of vomit and the salty tears that escaped her eyes, down her chin and dripping into the rag she used to wipe the floor dry. She knelt before the 21 Divisions table and stared at the framed photographs that hung above it.

Marie Pierre, Crysstal Sanon, and Marta Dorvil. All mambos of her matriarchy. All married to oungans. She was married to a professor. She couldn't help the thought that maybe she was the bearer of her own bad luck. She ran away from home, had a baby with a professor, and convinced herself that they could raise the baby in the Vodou religion as if it were the same as being surrounded by family and community. She wanted to call Manman Marie and cry to her for her motherly expertise. Naomie had never felt so small and helpless. She always relied on the lwa to guide her, but now she felt alone in her trouble.

The sound of ascending footsteps snapped her out of her misery. She wiped the wetness from her face and stood up, hoping she could at least fake her strength.

Andera was the first to enter the living room, looking somber but not quite defeated. She has grit...she's tough, Naomie thought to herself with pride.

Dina followed behind her with a grave expression plastered on her face. Naomie knew the news wouldn't be good. She knew the trouble had only just begun.

Andera spoke first. “The Marasa spoke. Met Kalfou has control over Vivian’s mind. I need to save her, mambo.”

Met Kalfou was dangerous though he’d never admit so himself. He was considered a petwo lwa that guarded the crossroads as Papa Legba’s opposite. In Christian terms, he’d be Lucifer and Legba would be God. Vivian was in serious trouble to be in the hands of Kalfou.

“Save her from what?” Naomie asked, since Vivian wasn’t inhabited by the petwo spirit, she wasn’t in need of an extraction of a lwa possession. Still, her mind being warped by the harshness of Met Kalfou wasn’t anything to celebrate either.

“From her sorrow,” Dina deadpanned.

Her daughter.

Afterword

The biggest challenge I faced in writing this novella was the portrayal of the Haitian culture. I am an American-born of Jamaican descent and had very little opportunity to reach out to people with knowledge of or experience with Haitian vodou. All the intimate moments and details concerning the religion have come from days' worth of researching and weeks' worth of cross checking those facts.

The most challenging part, however, was writing Part 6, in which the asogwe initiation took place. I struggled with how I wanted to portray it in my novella because all my research on this ritual in particular gave me the same answer: it is a ritual so intimate and private that no one dares to speak on what actually happens when attending one. Contrary to the rest of the religion, the asogwe initiation, in which a Voudouisant steps up to a priest or priestess role, is a very secretive ritual.

It took me nearly a month to figure out how I wanted to write it in my novella. The story had been very inviting of estranged cultures to learn the intricacies of Haitian vodou up until that point and I didn't want to shut readers out by omitting that pivotal moment. At the same time, I was so scared to misrepresent since I am writing about a culture and religion so different from my own. Eventually, I found a near-perfect solution. While I couldn't get my hands on a firsthand account of an asogwe initiation, I was able to find the different parts that make up the ceremony. I pieced together the prayers to the lwa, the possession of the mambo, the elements of the initiation (lave tet, kanzo trial by fire, and the kouche), as well as several key aspects of Haitian vodou ceremony practices (music, dance, song, met tet, and the 21 Divisions Table and offerings). I had to remind myself several times that because I was writing a fictional piece that it was okay if I didn't get every rule down to the exact detail, for example initiates spend days in

the djevo during the kouche but for the sake of the timeline of my novella (a weekend) I could only afford to keep Andera in there overnight.

Once finishing the novella, I had a clear idea of where it was heading, and I knew the reader would be able to see that as well. In the beginning, Vivian fought against the culture of the Thomas family because she believed that they were putting their daughter in danger. After recently losing her own daughter, Vivian personally believed that it was up to her to save Andera. I always knew that I wanted to include an ironic spin that Andera would end up saving Vivian and that it would tie into Vivian's personal loss, but I did not connect with any of the ideas I was coming up with until I wrote the very last scene. By the end of the weekend, Andera was just as determined to save Vivian backed by the very culture that Vivian initially denounced.

As a young black writer, this novella stands high on my proud list of accomplishments. This is the very first of its kind in my portfolio and I have learned so much not just in fiction writing techniques but of this culture I would have otherwise known nothing about.