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Fallen Angels

(Excerpt from *The Loneliness of Angels*)

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Ruth

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Ruth smooths the plastic of the memory table as if she is trying to undo wrinkles in time. Below the plastic, the faces of her youth stare up at her along with those of her two brothers, their wives, their children, along with the faces of the young people she had taught for over three decades. All of them had inhabited this house that had been left to her by Maman and Papa in their will since she was the only one left by the time they passed away, the boys long gone and married with lives and houses of their own. The boys had left without looking back. They came around for the odd dinner, a family gathering, sometimes alone just to say hello and swap news over a strong cup of black coffee. She spent many years listening in the front room with its see-through lace curtains, passers-by peering through at her and her guests from the latticed steel of the front gates that interrupted the otherwise solid mass of brick wall encircling the property. These days, visitors are scarce.

Ruth thinks of how she started the memory table ten years ago, when the house had suddenly seemed to loom large all about her, when the rooms crammed with furniture but empty of human voices had suddenly filled her with gloom, with the thought of her life ending and having very little to show for her presence in the dusty bowl of the eastern half of the island she had refused to leave even as she watched her students grow up and depart, some never to return.

Her fingers pause on a row of faces—students she had considered to have the most potential. Among them is her niece, Catherine. Her awkward smile reveals that she had once worn a retainer to straighten a pronounced overbite. She had a dimple like a tear in her right cheek, extending itself below the lower sweep of her cheekbone and disappearing into the curvature of her smile. Ruth's gaze pauses fondly on the photo. Catherine has changed since, of course. She can tell from her voice the odd times she calls. The girl has acquired the calm composure Ruth had wished for her in the moment that she saw her at the airport, thin and waif-like, clutching the padded handle of a small red valise, her eyes terrified at the chaos and smells inundating her from all sides. Catherine had been eleven when she had been sent to Haiti by Fritz. Rose had been gone three years already. *A waif of a girl*, Ruth thinks to herself, *a waif of a girl*.

She moves her fingers across the row and stops at the photograph of a young man she had introduced to her niece. She thought then they might make a good match despite a decade's difference in age, that the one would serve to anchor the other, but she had misread Romulus, headstrong and ambitious, as afraid of his shadow as a mouse. But it had been there all along, this fear of his, the self-loathing. Perhaps she had misread Catherine as well, and Lucas, both of whom she had given and lost to the world.

Romulus had had a crush on her, as so many of the students did. She was well aware of their misplaced attentions but ignored those she had to. Romulus had fallen into that category. It may have been the reason she had introduced them to each other while Catherine was still a teenager and Romulus not yet the addict he would become. She couldn't be sure of what she had been thinking at the time. She had been so much younger and unaware of all that she had come to understand in recent years. She peers at the photograph. It was there, buried in his large brown eyes that seemed to hunger for a world he might never have reason to see, a fleck of fear that gave him a startled expression. Over the years, his eyes had hardened; the edges of his mouth had grown sharp. She hadn't seen him in the flesh for ten years or more. The photos she saw of him in the papers showed him sneering with an edge of sarcasm but the eyes never changed. The fleck only seemed to grow larger with time.

Ruth spots the other photographs of Romulus in her collage and sees the shadow of doubt that seems to cloud his every appearance. It is an almost tangible thing that draws her forward towards the photographs, an invisible force, something sickly and thick. She closes her eyes against the energy, shakes her head as if to loose a fog thickening in her mind. You cannot enter, she thinks, you cannot enter. And the force pulls away, taking with it its sticky fingers. She should remove his photos but some piece of loyalty remains lodged within her as if Romulus were her own child in need of understanding.

She watches her hand sweep across the plastic. Blue-green veins trace the outline of rivers across the surface of the taut, palm-frond brown of the backs of her hands. Rivers, she thinks, all of them, rivers crossing her own life, bringing with them the peculiarities of their

journeying, some leaving sediment and treasures in their wake, others pulling away something of her own grounding, some corner of her heart.

Her heart is in pieces these days, without true direction and motive. She is simply waiting. Waiting for Lucas. Waiting for Catherine. Waiting, even, for Romulus. She gazes down at Lucas's photograph at thirteen, the year before Catherine came to live with her. Charismatic already, his brown eyes flash their mischievousness like the startled eyes of a lizard. Lucas had always been her favorite and she considered him a son even though she had not borne him. He came to her at three, left by his father, a former love-interest—if she could even call him that. The man had left him and gone, never to be heard from again while Ruth became the woman they called *mambo* though she had not been initiated in a *vodou* cult and does not truly know the secrets of that parallel world. She is of Haiti and not of it, following the threads of practices that seem imprinted in her cells that bear no resemblance to the Catholic rites with which she has been raised nor the *vodou* of the people whom she supports. They call her *mambo* because they do not know what else to call her.

It is almost time to take the photographs from below their plastic frame and store them away, for Catherine, perhaps, for those to come.

It is strange to her, this knowing. Ruth has never understood quite how she knows things before they are to happen. She knows she is going to see Lucas, Catherine and Romulus soon, though she has seen none of them in the flesh for years. She knows too that she will see them in the opposite order of her preference: Romulus first, then Catherine, then Lucas, and that somewhere in the midst of these reconnections, she will lose her life.

Ruth stands to her full height, the tips of her fingers resting against the table, at the bottom of the kaleidoscope of multihued faces. There is no way of undoing the future since the past cannot be undone and the present is only a slow pendulum between the two states in time. She can only stand and wait, try to ready herself for the fulfillment of her greatest cause, the birthing of a new spirit guide in the world.

Ruth lifts her hands from the table slowly and then smooths the front of her pale mauve housedress (it matches the cloth she has wrapped around her head), pulling down on the seams on both sides of her hips. She is seventy-seven years of age and proud of her looks. The present is all she has, she decides, and she had better take care of it. There may be something she can do today to make what is to come easier to bear, some small gesture that might tip the scales and save them all.

Her thoughts are growing desperate these days. She feels the anxiety mounting from her chest to her brain, gnawing at her like a small animal desperately seeking a way out of a mesh cage that lets air in yet keeps it locked up. She has been lucky to live an independent life in a land in which women are forced to stand on their own two feet very early but not often given the right to guide their own destinies.

Ruth turns her back on the memory table and faces her front door. She listens to the noises drifting in from the street: the creaking of steel-reinforced wheels below huge loads of cane being pulled and pushed to market in wooden carts, the shocks of the SUVs as they bounce in and out of holes in the road, their drivers leaning on their horns to get mules out of the road. She hears the men with the mules singeing the air with their switches made of string and narrow wooden shoots of bamboo. She imagines the heat of the road creating waves in the atmosphere, the burden of despair hanging halfway between earth and sky. Somewhere beyond, a woman is singing. It is a song Ruth has heard before. She strains to make out the words but all she captures is an impression. It's the national anthem, so rarely heard these days. The woman's voice is full, high and light despite the heaviness of the air. Ruth thinks she is singing about a new day, a new world, as if that world were here with them, below the surface, just waiting for them to awaken and peel back the veneer hiding it from view. It is a voice filled with hope. The voice burrows through the brick separating Ruth's house from the road, through the walls of the house keeping the interior cool, through Ruth's worried mind. It tells her that everything is coming to its inevitable conclusion. Ruth feels relief for the first time in weeks and acknowledges that now is the time of preparation. She must get everything ready: for Romulus, for Catherine, for Lucas, when each of them will have returned, each in their own way.

In fact, it was for them she had begun the memory table when Lucas left the island in search of something she could not provide. It is only now that Ruth is beginning to understand that Lucas had left all those years ago in order to flee *her*, to flee what it meant to be associated with her, to flee the responsibility he would need to shoulder.

But Lucas had gone the way of the bottle. Ruth had realized it the last Carnival she had attended when every time she glanced at her adoptive son she saw him swaying back and forth on the balls of his feet with a paper cup in his hand filled with unadulterated *clairin*. He would smile at her, his eyes glazed over, not truly taking her in, until his friends took him away into the revelry, into the haze of dancing, half-naked bodies filling the wide streets.

It was not unusual to be drinking at Carnival. Everyone did. What was unusual was that Lucas had seemed not to notice the celebrations around him. He had let himself go as if, for one day, he could unmask himself without risk. Ruth had watched him and understood that the paper cup in his hand was an everyday affair that had been hidden from her view in the house, that she had not been attentive to Lucas' descent. Her lack of attentiveness is something she will have to answer for up above when she will be knocking on the doors of the heavens to gain admittance. She wonders if it will lose her the cost of entry, if she has failed in all she has tried to do.

She turns her back on the noises from the street and faces the memory table once again, bending towards the photos of all those she has loved throughout her life: Maman, Papa,

Fritz, Max, Yolande, the twins, the children who had traipsed through her garden and past the round table in the foyer which had for so many years stood empty, graced only with a clear glass vase of cut flowers she had grown herself, wading in rain water she collected in empty oil drums that sat rusting in the concrete yard down at the back of the house. All those lives, Ruth thinks to herself, all those threads of existence passing each other without care for their connectedness. It was too much to consider. She had done her best through the years to engineer meetings. It had taken her half of her life to discover how to be a crossroads rather than only assist others through their difficult moments. It had only been in the last decade or so that she had understood how to stand in the middle of chaos and be quiet as a stone.

Where had she been when Lucas had been on the threshold of his own madness? Dormant, forgetful, fretting about her lilies or crocuses, wondering when the coconut man would come to unburden her trees of their fruit, thinking ahead of the next gathering she would host. There had been a lost moment for which she could no longer account. She had not been fully awake and Lucas had slipped through her fingers like sand until there was not a speck of him left for her to save. Where was he now, her Lucas? Her fingers trailed the table and stopped atop a postcard showing three women dressed in traditional garb hitched up on their full hips to show off their curving thighs, their ample flesh. They had million dollar smiles. Across their narrow waists, Ruth read: *La cubana: La ricchezza di Havana!* Cuba. It was Catherine who would have to find him. And even then, would he return?

Ruth withdraws her hand from the memory table and moves quickly past the rounded tabletop and into the hallway. She has a million things to do before the next meeting and she must be presentable.

There is no time for guilt, no time for tears. She must move beyond self-recrimination.

No time, no time. So much to do.

Romulus

March 7, 2004, Streets of Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Romulus pursues his path with driven intent. *Focus*, he thinks, *focus*. He speaks to himself in a colonial tongue, a language he learned in order to get by in the world. Without it in America, *ou banan*: no one with nowhere to go. You might as well be left hung out to dry, as the Americans like to say, like a sheet of banana leaf.

As soon as he is out of the prison walls, and far enough away so that the men he had been jailed with cannot see him, Romulus begins to run, homewards, not thinking about who might be there to greet him or if he will be welcome. He does not stop to think about

his disheveled appearance, his sunken cheeks that make his eyes seem if as if they are bulging out, frog-like.

He has lost many pounds in the prison, pounds he cannot afford to lose from an already slight frame. His shirt is torn in places, missing buttons. Still, he runs. How could his sister turn him away? Blood is blood, as his father had always said, despite his own lack of attention to matters of loyalty. Blood comes back to blood always, like rivers to their beds.

There is an indescribable stench in the air. Romulus is used to the smells of rotting garbage and he has gotten used to the putrid odor of disintegrating human waste. But what he smells in the air now is even more overwhelming than what he has endured in the prison. His eyes trail the spumes of smoke rising from behind the crowded buildings on both sides of the road. He is startled as he looks left and right, to see rubber tires piled high, burning in the middle of what had been open roads. In one alleyway, a car sits, torched, stripped of its tyres, its windows smashed. Grocery stores that had been off-limits to the poorest of the poor stand looted, usually full shelves empty, products strewn on the floor rendered inedible. He falls into a demonstration, bodies pushing against him from all sides. As he emerges from the other side of the crowd, he sees a charred body at the side of the road. He cannot tell if it is a man or a woman. The form is carbonized. What might have been an arm points upwards, a black branch emerging from a charcoal trunk.

A few feet beyond the first corpse, another lies on the ground. This time, the man looks like he has been stoned. Half of his face is smashed. An eye stares out at Romulus, hollowed from its cavity, blood pooling out from the deep wound, staining the broken cement of the road.

Romulus finds that his run has slowed to a fast walk as he navigates the debris in the roads as best he can, avoiding the waves of demonstrators emptying from the houses of the *bidonville* and spilling out into the street. His mind reels at the thought of what has been going on outside the jail walls. He has been safer in there than out here, he realizes, and wonders if there is anything to return to, any home left standing, if his sister is still alive.

“Romulus,” he hears his name called out. He continues, thinking the voice is in his head. After all, hasn’t he gone mad? Anything could be going on up there. He keeps on.

“Romeo,” the voice calls again, more insistent this time, more distinct. It is a man’s voice and Romulus realizes then that the voice is coming from behind him, from the direction he has just left.

He tries to keep on but as his feet move forward, his head turns back. He walks forward like an ostrich, his feet moving, his long neck peering over his shoulder, his eyes too curious to stay on course.

Romulus has always been prone to curiosity. It has always led him to the wrong places rather than to the right ones. He has always left a party not to get an early night’s sleep but to

get to the next one, afraid to lose out on an experience he might hear about secondhand. He thinks it is in his nature, that he cannot help himself.

In the moment of turning his head, Romulus has a sensation of an energy slipping away from his being. The feeling is like a small wave washing over him. It leaves a tingling in its wake and a sense of foreboding, of loss. But Romulus cannot fathom what it is that he could be losing though he knows it has everything to do with this moment of turning around, with the need to hear his name called out more pronounced than his desire for freedom.

“Romeo,” the voice says again, using his stage name to good effect. Romulus sees the lips of a square-jawed face mouthing his name. The man’s high cheekbones seem to be holding up great folds of skin that embrace his chin in a swath of thickness. The folds stretch and tremble as he speaks. “Romeo, brother-man. Where are you going?”

Romulus thinks about his sister’s house out in the country, cradled by those of neighbors they had known all of their lives who had practically raised them both out of the crib. He looks at the man who towers over him, thick and elongated cords of muscle binding his arms and legs and recognizes a police officer who had assisted the drug runs. Romulus recognizes him from the meeting in Miami that had led him home and then to prison. He remembers that the others had called him Marc or Marco. Romulus had never considered that he would run into him again.

Marc advances towards him, all muscled power. Romulus regrets having stopped. Marc is bad news. Romulus knows he is going to be swept away into something beyond his control and yet he stands still, refuses to turn away and walk on. He should keep on walking but he is used to being swept away. It has become a way of life. Romulus tries to think of the fact that Marc knows him only as part of a drug chain, as a first class junky, not as the person he has become in the prison: swept clean, penniless, with only the shirt on his back to show for wealth. He has to maintain his cool as he had in that meeting when he had been wearing a designer suit and worn dark glasses to cover up the fact that he had been high even as he had made the deal with people he had never frequented in his life as a musician, people who were far below him on the food-chain in the social order of Haitian life. Marc knew nothing of the face on the wall hovering above his eyes before sleep and the whispers of sacred secrets she imparted from a world far away.

Marc’s face does nothing to promote trust with the jagged scar that runs down the length of his left cheek as if thunder had visited him there and felt his flesh wanting for demarcation.

Still, Romulus moves towards the man as if he might present salvation. The truth is simply that the fear of returning to a place he can no longer legitimately call home has taken stronger root than the desire to continue running towards the place his youth remembers. He does not

realize yet that he is running nonetheless from one hell to another. Sometimes, one hell was sufficiently different from another to seem like a worthy reprieve.

“*Sak pasé?*” Romulus asks, forgetting without truly forgetting, the chaos surrounding them, the burning pyres of car tires, the crowds emptying into the streets chanting, “*Libeté, libeté*” a rallying cry not heard for years. The mantra of the dispossessed had escaped ready definition over the years as the times changed: leaders fleeing and returning while the masses remained, prisoners to a land once rich, a land rich still with the echoes of their ancestors’ knowledge, their murmurs sounding out in the barren hills imitating the cries of their children at their births. Some of them had no intention of ever leaving. They watched those who left and returned with mirth, sometimes with condescension. Journalists mistook the hard glints in their eyes for murderous envy while their anger festered for expression. Most of them simply wanted their piece of land, their corner of the universe beneath the benighted stars promised to them after the Revolution. They were frustrated by the constant denial. It was for their children that they abandoned shacks and stands, some of the wealthy at long last joining them in solidarity to announce that the future might be different—that the next generations might not have to survive in misery. It was a wonder really, Romulus thinks from his vantage point, that the masses had any energy left at all.

“*Yo lagé ko ou nan laru a? Ki bagay sa-a! Ou pa gen limouzinn ou?*” Marc laughs a wide laugh, baring red-gummed teeth. His head tips backwards, forcing the muscles of his wide neck into half-moon arcs that form an elongated v-shape emanating from the clavicles of his collarbone at the base of his neck and ending just below each ear on both sides of his jaw. His laughter ripples out in waves, making frowning passers-by heading out to join the manifestation wonder at this merriment. These are difficult times, after all.

Romulus feels only shame rising up from his solar plexus like bitter bile. Shame upon his past fortune, shame upon his family name. He keeps to himself that he had been heading to his sister’s home, lest Marc extend that shame to her and to her household.

He walks towards Marc and feels, suddenly, as if there might not be a turning back, that he might be letting go of his past forever. It was like that feeling in his head when he had taken too many drugs, the black abyss of non-return.

He should never have turned around.

Romulus had known moments like this before: moments in which the past seemed to recede deeply and the future seemed like a wide open space before him in which he could fall head first, without a care. He had learned that that feeling could be deceptive. It could mean nothing at all. At any moment, there was nothing but the present with which to contend. And yet, from moment to moment, what one decided to do could alter one’s life so completely that one would want to go back and undo each of those moments as if they were knots on a string. He would yearn for a prior clarity that it would turn out had never been. But sometimes he

made decisions that altered not only his own life but the lives of those for whom he cared, his wives, his children, his band-mates.

Even though those in his inner circles doubted the extent of his affections, Romulus did care. He had simply never learned how to trust love. It was an emotion too painful to consider even though he fathomed the complexity of its workings and could at times identify such an emotion beating within him. He was afraid of loss and so love had taken the shape of his departures. Romulus was an expert at leaving things and people behind and accumulating more as he moved forward. He was like the children in the fable of Hansel and Gretel, leaving houses and cars in his wake as the children had left morsels of bread as they walked through the forest. For Romulus, the world was that forest and waiting at the end of the path, the blistering heat of the witch's oven was the anger and disappointment he engendered in others and would do everything to avoid. It never occurred to Romulus that others did not see him as an innocent in a hostile world but as the witch hidden in the woods, waiting to strike. Deep down, as destructive as he was to himself and to others, he sought to be found. It was this yearning that delivered him to Marc, even though Marc's smile was no more convincing than a scorpion's.

“Ou t'ap pralé?” Marc asks with false caring.

Romulus feigns ignorance of his motives and smiles sheepishly. Marc wraps a thick, seemingly protective arm around Romulus' diminished frame.

“Et ou menm?” he asks Marc while he thinks of the last time someone had put an arm around him. His thoughts vaguely drifted to Brigitte, his third and last wife, the only one who had looked nothing like the woman who had appeared in his dreams all of his life, who persisted her haunting in his hallucinations. It had been Brigitte who had prompted Romulus' illegal return to Haiti by locking him out of his own house. If it hadn't been for that, Romulus would never have agreed to become a carrier. He would never have seen Marc standing in the darkness of a room that contained some of the key figures of the drug traffic crossing Haitian borders. He could have had another life. Of this, Romulus was convinced.

“Ou pral wè,” Marc says as the two are encircled by a group of young men Romulus has mistakenly assumed to be on their way to the march heading towards the square in front of the Presidential Palace where the statue of the unknown slave stood blowing his eternal bronze conch shell as if to mock them.

Freedom. Emancipation. These were words that had lost their meaning after the corporations from the North had come in and set up their sweatshops. Freedom meant freedom from the whip but not from the sounding of the work bell two hours later than expected. It meant freedom from the scorching sun but not from the constant buzz of sewing machines in concrete rooms built to shut out sun. Two hundred years after emancipation they were simply not free.

Romulus does not know the country well enough anymore to identify the group ferrying him along under the protection of Marc's heavy dark arm. He feels suddenly like a child, captive and subservient, afraid of what might happen if he chooses to break away, running, again, towards home or what was left of home. His father had died many years before. His mother had died when he was still a child. In Miami, he had heard about the paramilitary dressed from head to toe in futuristic-looking black gear, anachronistic to medieval-like Haiti, the Haiti he had known as a child and resented more than anything. As a child, he had wanted to be a part of the modern world he saw advertised in the French press and on the news beamed in from the outside world. He yearned for the pleasures recounted by Uncles who floated in and out of the country with unceasing levity, thick gold rings and bracelets shackled to their fingers and arms like spoils of war. These were Uncles who fell beyond the circle of his mother's approval. Romulus had to seek them out on his own, surreptitiously. They were dangerous men. Men who had links to the government, if one could call it that. Men who talked of themselves as existing beyond the laws of any land and who seemed successful in doing so. Romulus had wanted to be one of these men, not dangerous per se, but certainly beyond the law. He had learned that wealth was the key to obtaining this sort of dubious freedom. For him, music had been the way to wealth.

They walk against the flow of the crowd, lost in it for long stretches and then, they are suddenly alone, walking up into the hills above the capital where the houses of the rich gleamed like white and pink shells rising fresh from the ocean bed. Romulus begins to feel nervous. He knew these homes well once. He had even owned one of these houses. There were relatives and friends of his father's who lived there still. What did these men want? He had heard of the *chimères* spreading panic in their wake. He had heard of the kidnappings and ransoms for money demanded of the wealthy or *diasporas* like himself. The *diaspos* were always surprised by such turns of events when the tables were turned on them in country. They did not realize that their survival elsewhere constituted wealth here. They did not realize that for those on the ground, wealth was relative, that they had become part of the elite in a country in which the elite was usually defined as mulatto, or white, and callously uncaring.

Romulus wonders again what he has gotten himself into. This is a rare thought for him, one that surely stems from his sobered state. It is a rare and new condition. Already, it escapes him. For the first time, Romulus begins to understand that addiction is a state of mind and not necessarily wrapped up in a pill. He is addicted to his fear of being forgotten. He craves recognition of any kind. This is what has brought him in the fold of this unlikely group, men clad in discarded Nike-wear from the factories, brightly colored short-sleeved shirts, and baseball hats advertising Canadian baseball teams. He has been brought there by his fear of refusal at his sister's door and yet, as he feels his legs grow leaden as they make their way to the

upper reaches of Lalo, it is a new fear that grips him, the fear of harming in full consciousness, one of his own.

As if sensing his reluctance, Marc's hand grasps his left shoulder more forcibly. Romulus wonders if he has imagined the heaviness growing from Marc's arm dropping into his body like a poisonous lead. He wonders when the journey will end as he watches the men around him trudging in front and in back of Marc and himself like a convoy. Some of the men are speaking in low whispers to each other while they look ahead, determination outlined in their posture and the straight ahead doggedness of their heads, eyes fixed on the goal lying before them, in those hills that still sing their foliage in green bursts of color that have disappeared from so many of the mountain ranges that ring the city.

They pass tall wall after tall wall, some topped with coils of barbed wire, others with the more colonial, uninterrupted lines of jagged, broken bottles: green, amber, clear, cemented to the top of the walls. Romulus recognizes his old house and cringes as they pass it. He does not own it any longer and doesn't know who lives there at present. They pass the UNICEF headquarters and its half-moon entrance filled with a line of high-end jeeps. It is surprising, even to someone of Romulus's background, to note how well-equipped their saviors are—but they would have to be, to make it to the outlying areas where roads were pitted and broken or altogether non-existent. The men point at the jeeps and comment to themselves. There is laughter in the ranks for the first time. And then, a few houses later, Marc's arm stops propelling Romulus forward and falls away. It is the moment that Romulus has been waiting for, to breathe again, but his stomach is clenched, disallowing the expansion of his diaphragm. They are in front of a house he had known long ago.

Marc smiles upon seeing the light of recognition in Romulus' eyes and the men move forward in unison. Unlike the other houses, the portal to this one has been left unlocked. The men move one by one in an organized single file past the gates and into the yard. There is familiarity in their movement. Romulus feels as if he is experiencing his own disturbing *déjà vu*.

Romulus feels his hand on the vined gates as he follows Marc and the other men into the yard. His hand has performed this action before, pushed the gate open confidently and ushered him into another world, a world so unlike the broken and sullen streets that greeted most Haitians like so much useless ash, day after day. He has walked down the flat white slabs shaping a snake-like path to the front door across the lush flowers of the manicured front garden with awe, his leather school bag bouncing up and down the length of his right thigh all the way from the private school for boys he attended in the city until he set the bag across his legs in the tap-tap that brought him up into the hills when such service had been available and reliable, the streets not so far gone as to need American technology to be tackled. Unlike

then, there are no black speckled orange lilies craning their necks towards the path nor the pink leaves of fallen bougainvillea strewn across the stones, making a scratchy, papery noise as the wind lifts them away; nor are there roses in full bloom, their thorny masts forming barriers alongside the walk and heady perfumes letting him know that more treasures lay ahead behind the heavy oak door of the house where he was often awaited as if he himself was a treasure.

If Romulus had had cause to pause and think on love over the years, in the absence of his mother's arms, and in the silence that enveloped his father's occasional appearances in his life after he had left home at age sixteen, he would have remembered his times in this house as defined by such a thing. But since love had so far eluded him like a glass vase kept out of grasping hands on a high shelf in his grandmother's house, he could not attach the word to the place; it was so far out of reach. He could only feel warmth enveloping his mid-chest section as he moved forward across the stones that had been re-shaped by the many feet that had rubbed away their harshness and left behind telling grooves of movement and hospitality. The owner of the house was as retiring as she was welcoming and only the stones revealed how many guests had quietly and ceaselessly beaten a path to her door. Was this what the men before him were doing? Had done already, in another time? Romulus could only wonder. They seemed so out of place, so ungainly, so unrefined. The owner of the house is nothing if not refined.

If, then, love is not the word that came to mind when Romulus thought about this house and its once lush gardens, it is another word that pronounces itself a close synonym to his mind and in his memory: music. It had been here, in the sound of the bougainvillea flowers scraping past his feet, the rose bushes and the tall, wild grass, that he had begun to understand the meaning of the word *symphony* and the conjoining of sound and scent to create a language that only the spirit and heart might be able to decipher.

She had been his piano teacher and for a time, in his adolescent years, years before he had drifted away into the fog of chemically induced visions, his muse. She had been the first woman he had loved without recognizing the feeling as love, and left, never to be seen again, as his mother had left him some forty years prior, without a trace. It dawned on him fleetingly, as he advanced, that he himself was the trace his mother had left behind; the thought, hollow comfort.

Although it had been the murmur of something akin to love that Romulus had felt then for the woman everyone called *Tatie* Ruth, Romulus had had no designs on the woman to whom he would dedicate his first songs and senseless pop lyrics. He barely took note of the fact that *Tatie* Ruth had been in her thirties when he had taken lessons from her, still a relatively young woman. He had taken no notice of the curvature of her bare legs shaped by long walks in the mountains when the air was clear and crisp, legs that spindled out from beneath her skirts like the long stems of the most hardy of flowers. She would adjust

a thin sweater on her shoulders, push back her reading glasses, and peer over his head at the notations on the weathered sheet music she allowed him to take home so that he could continue to practice, either at the Uncle's home with a piano or in the large hall at school where gatherings were held on holidays of the Catholic calendar. He had no knowledge and no interest in the female form it seemed, in those days, or perhaps it had simply seemed to him that Tatie Ruth was beyond the reach of his eleven years. He kept all of his energies for the music as if he was an athlete in strict training remembering only much later in his years how inebriated and inspired he had been by the pollen of flowers in the garden and by Tatie Ruth's thick French perfume.

It is this sensory memory that strikes him as he walks into the foyer, the tiles radiating cold, stunning him into this past, his beginnings, a time that had been so innocent and free of all the madness that followed on its heels.

"*Sak n'ap fê la-a?*" he asks Marc. "*Ou konen Tatie?*" he continues, a childish innocence punctuating his words.

Marc leaves the questions hanging in the air and gestures towards the others to take their positions. He sweeps Romulus back towards the front door.

"*Sak gen la?*" a thin, reedy voice wafts in from the back of the house.

Tatie Ruth. Even after all these years, Romulus recognizes her distinctive Kreyol. *Soigné*. Careful and peppered with French intonations. She would be in her late seventies now, aging, bent by gravity.

Marc gesticulates at Romulus for him to speak. The men are positioned in the darkness of the receding contours of the round foyer like foxes around a chicken coop, biding their time. He hesitates. Marc gestures more menacingly. This is no rehearsal. What has he gotten himself into?

"*Tatie,*" Romulus begins, "*Romulus ki la, wi.*"

"Romulus!" she exclaims, voice quivering slightly, emotion audibly catching in her throat. He hears her moving hurriedly through the halls of her house to the foyer. "You came back." He sees confusion in her face. "Are you back at the house?" she asks, referring to his old house up the road, the one he had lived in once with Ellen. He had hardly seen her the two years he had lived there, trying with difficulty not to continue the drug habit that had destroyed his first marriage and prevented the possibility of successful marriages thereafter.

Romulus has no answer for her. He becomes suddenly self-conscious of his attire, of the soft layers of dust clinging to his perspiring skin. It is hot. He feels tired, wan. What can he be doing here? Why this the gathering place? He has the impulse to tell her to run back, run back, to keep out of sight but he knows it is too late. He is always too late.

"They let you out?" she says, her voice weak.

“*Wi*,” he says finally, because there is nothing else he can say. How did she know? Did everyone know? “Yes. They let me out. I’m out.”

She emerges in one of the arcs leading from the foyer to the rest of the house. There are three such arcs. She stands in the hollow of the farthest to his right, the men forming a half-circle in the dark. She is still slightly too far away to see them all gathered there, foxes in the den. *Go back, back*, Romulus thinks, hoping she will turn and ask him to follow her to another part of the house, perhaps to the back kitchen for a strong cup of *café*. Then he could tell her about Marc and the men and the need to find shelter in her yard or elsewhere. But she stands there like a ghost, waiting for him to speak, and Romulus realizes that she has been waiting for a long while although he is not so sure that she has been waiting for him in particular. Does she already know what is about to happen? She must have heard about the jails being opened by the rebels. Romulus is certain now that she has been waiting for them.

“I’m sorry,” she says, “It’s just that . . .”

Je sais,” he responds, ashamed for himself and for her. This was no way to greet an old friend. She had lost nothing of her mystique with her wide robes and flower-imprinted dresses. She was stooped slightly and held her back with one hand against the pain radiating there to her right hip. Her hair was held back in a tight bun and though they stood some fifteen feet and years apart, he could smell her perfume more strongly than ever, making him wonder at the firmness of his pre-addict memories. They were like ghosts standing before each other, each remembering the other as they had been in another life, incredulous before the changes that time had wrought. Still, they could not see each other clearly. The foyer was dimly illuminated from light streaming in from the arcs. There were no windows here. Romulus could make out a table in the center of the room, a walnut table with a sturdy clubfooted stand. A thick plastic seemed to cover the span of the table.

He would think later that it had been an odd detail to note at the time—the thick plastic covering nothing like the delicate embroidery that usually graced Tatie Ruth’s tabletops, embroidery she taught young girls who were hired help in the neighborhood to make so that they would have some kind of a trade. Tatie Ruth had a way of spinning dreams and the young she taught, like he had, had a way of taking those dreams into wider realms and making them come true. What a failure he must be in her eyes, Romulus thinks, forgetting for the moment the men still hidden in the shadows. What a failure.

Then, simultaneously, as if propelled by an invisible shift in gravitational pull, they advance towards each other. Romulus stands closer to the table with its plastic covering. He can see now that the plastic keeps a series of photographs locked in place beneath its weight. Tatie Ruth advances into the circle of awaiting men. He thinks that he sees her smile at them

in recognition, a smile quickly dissolving in apprehension when she seems to take in that they have purposefully hidden in the shadows.

Their eyes catch and Romulus senses that he is being forgiven a betrayal. Tatie Ruth smiles again quietly, sadly, and then makes a small circular gesture of hand tight against her waist as if to say to them, *come, come, I have been waiting for you.*

Later, only minutes later, minutes that seem to stretch into an unbearable knowledge of infinity, a futile knowledge that each stroke of action would never abate through time, leaving everything simultaneously changed and unchanged, Romulus falls into a black hole of amnesia. A temporary blackout that would help him to survive the day as he has survived so many others. This time, however, he is sober and he still cannot believe the sight before his eyes: was it she who had fallen or he? Was it Marc who had used the machete or one of the skinny young men in the troupe too impatient to wait to be led through the house's many halls to a treasure they must have assumed lay there, beyond them? Was it their feet he heard running back up the walk, leaving the front door wide open so that light inundated the dark foyer suddenly like a blast of thunder in a storm, or was it himself fleeing the scene, a long stain of blood streaking the plastic cover on the foyer table as if a painter had begun to transform the white of a blank canvas into art? Was it his fourteen year old face that he saw looking expectantly up from a jaggedly trimmed black and white photograph beneath the plastic? Romulus standing amidst the bougainvillea in his Sunday best, his sheet music in hand? And then, again, his twenty-four year old smile cut from a newspaper and placed next to a picture of a young woman who eerily resembled his visitor in prison, that face hovering above him on the walls. Picture upon picture: brown, yellow, peach complexioned faces. A map of Tatie Ruth's inner world laid out for all to see, as if she was afraid that she would forget them all or that the disappearance of the actual people from her halls meant they would never return. There too, there was a photograph of an unsmiling Marc in short pants, exposing knobby knees, skinny fingers poised over piano keys.

In this way, she kept them captive to time, to memory, to echoes of another world which resounded with the sounds of music and laughter, sounds she hardly heard anymore, sounds replaced with the ringing of bullets and cries of despair and more often than not, a silence more piercing for its meaning: the absence of ready love.

Blood speckles the bright faces and white teeth. Was it hers or his? There is a wild rush of sound in his ears, making a small whoosh as the liquid particles hit the solid surfaces in random syncopation. He's heard the sound before, usually before hitting the ground after a particularly bad hit. This time, he has to remember his sobered state. It is difficult to mark a difference. He wonders if he has ventured close to death. His own? Hers?

The pictures beneath the plastic smile ingeniously at him, furiously, as if he could have stopped the chaos. It is vertiginous to look down at so many faces from up above and to feel the sensation of falling at the same time towards some unknown depth.

As Romulus' body convulses in a cold sweat against the clamminess of the linoleum floor, he hears some of the men walk through the house under Marc's supervision. They seem unable to uncover the treasure they have sought.

He hears them scramble and swear beneath their breaths. *We shouldn't have killed her so fast*, one of them says. He hears them curse him as they step over his body and traverse the foyer on their way to other parts of the house. Romulus finds that he cannot open his eyes. He cannot move. For a moment, he thinks he hears her call out his name. He thinks he can see her in his mind's eye but he cannot move towards her, cannot embrace her. It is too late. All he wants to do is lie there and let life seep out of him. He is a coward too, not wanting to see what has been done to Ruth. Not wanting to see what has already been done. He cannot think ahead to what might happen to him if he is found there, in a house turned upside down with despair, a woman's dead body lying not far from him. His body aches; his mind feels on fire. He cannot move. He feels as if he could be dying. A familiar feeling. He lets his mind drift away from this body, from the house and from the other men. He thinks about his childhood, of his absent mother and brooding father. He wonders how it all could have been different.

He dares not open his eyes. He does not want to see the sight of blood, his own or another's. He does not want to see the ghost's face mocking him for his cowardice or Ruth's frozen in disbelief at what he has become.

The only thing Romulus is sure of before his head hits the ground is that he has not heard her scream.