

Prélude

Those were the sounds which defined my existence.

The rhythm of life. That pounding, smacking, contact of sweaty flesh upon sweaty flesh. The hissing and moaning and beautiful profanity that was the theme music of my days of youth. Others may have thought it retched...a child subjected to such sonnets but those knew nothing of beauty.

In those sounds – love. In that cadence – music. So long as that undeniable pleasure of my parents existed, my mother’s wails and demands upon my father’s continence, assured that we’d be a family happy for many years to come.

My mother never shielded her tone. I was never certain whether her openness was based upon her intentions all along or rather an inability to contain the carnal affinity which my father aroused in her. Either way, I was raised on their vibrations. Fed it like a hearty bowl of grain on a cold winter morning. Their prose awakened my soul most everyday (oft times more frequent than once) and brought a smile to my face and glint to my eyes.

I missed those sounds when I went away to college and had to rather settle on incarnate poetry of my own. There were several with whom I shared my bed and although every experience was rich and fulfilling, bold and beautiful, never once had I matched the ethereal lilt of my parents.

I smeared away the tears that trailed the side of my face as my eyes remained deadlocked on the ceiling. I swallowed hard and smiled a bit though my soul was heavy and emotion was creeping slowly, threatening to take hold of my being and pull me inside.

The apartments were small and the walls like paper. They’d only recently moved into the unit next door, maybe it’d been three weeks...possibly less but I couldn’t recall. They made love often. I knew this because what was their bedroom was on the other side of mine. I listened when I could. When I could I listened and with eyes closed experienced the joy he must have afflicted upon her body. He was an aggressive lover, I could tell by the solos on the wall. I guess she liked it rough.

But tonight...

Tonight was different. Something happened earlier. There were muffled voices which carried across the room. A coherent word or two speckled about was not enough to decipher the scenario. I’d fallen asleep. I couldn’t recall when.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

The sound was steady, vastly different from the normal *th-wap, th-wap, th-wap* that typically struck in uncertain rhythm. My lids were heavy and though initially I was unaware as to what had wakened me; the gentle taps against the wall behind my bed soon clued me in. I was suddenly fully awake for I recognized the rhythm. It was familiar and a feeling not unlike panic though much more positive by definition overcame me. I searched for the remote and switched my television off. I must've fallen asleep to its tenor.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Something was missing, somehow the scenario incomplete. Frantically I searched the room. The window! Unnecessary ambience. Without haste I moved across the room and pulled the frame down swift and firm. I returned to my temporary resting spot, on my back, eyes to the ceiling, breath on inhale and out easy and as hushed as possible.

I listened carefully.

Her prose came to me. Muffled moans and staggered breath becoming louder as he stroked deeper. She called out and I imagined his flesh beneath her nails. I'd never met them; I hadn't seen her as far as I was aware. So I only imagined...imagined her face brown like my own. Her mane thick and coarse with sweat like hers was the morning after. Her legs luscious and firm and wrapped around his waist locking him there and insisting by their mere presence that he go deeper, further within.

I envisioned his face brown like my fathers. His back strong and masculine, muscles flexing as he stroked. Sweat dripping from his brow...to her...further connecting the two.

I fantasized that they were them. That my neighbors were them. That they were my parents. My parents before she died. Before my mother fell ill and died leaving my father alone and helpless. In my mind in that moment I was twelve, one of the last few years those sounds existed in my household and that impetuous call to God above was that of my mother.

I was pleased though my pleasure birthed no physical arousal. To do so would be utterly incongruous for in my mental these were the sounds of God and Earth, my own personal God and Earth eternally blessed Mother and Father.

It'd been nearly a year, the time that I'd been gone from Jacob and Zahrah's nest, since I'd ceased mourning the loss of Zahrah...my matriarch. My mother. I hadn't released her but rather only stopped. Simply stopped. No closure, no moving on. It was now my time to purge. I sensed it creeping, its presence hovering above me, breathing down my neck. I listened to her who was now Zahrah and his grunts which had become Jacob's promises to love and cherish her for all of her days...a promise he kept and continued even in her passing.

They were beside me now. I could smell her ambrosial scent and hear her weeps and moans and sighs. I could feel her mane, thick and coarse yet feathery soft; sweep the side of my face.

"Jacob," she whispered, "Oh Jacob... I love you."

I listened to every syllable, noun, pronoun, every adjective and verb. The thumping from behind the wall had ceased and was replaced by the thumping of my heart. My body shook as hers vibrated. It shook and my palms locked across my abdomen as her legs locked around his waist. A painful wail escaped my frame as a

guttural moan escaped her lips. My eyes closed tight in a failed attempt to dam the salty flow as her eyes widened to connect with his as she reached her apex and I, mine.

“*Oh Jacob!*” she cried.

“Mommy!” I wailed.

The thumping from behind had ceased long ago. My hearts pounding continued as I sat upright with a start. Frantically I sought their presence but I was alone. I felt my bed around me... it was cold. The room was dark and silent. My forehead fell against my palm and I shook my head from one side to the other and back. I reached to scratch the back of my scalp; my lioness mane had come undone. I inhaled deeply then slowly pushed from the size bed fit for a Queen, fit for me, Zella Dora Robeson. Named by my mother. Zella for my maternal great-grandmother and Dora for my aunt who passed only months prior to my birth. My surname evidently inherited from being a descendent of the late actor, athlete, and *faiseur de tout* Paul Robeson.

I staggered across the hardwood floor of my one room apartment to the bathroom. I shielded my just-brown eyes with the embedded golden embers from the light as I flicked the switch up. Stiff with layers of old paint, I offered more effort than one should have for such a simple task. I stood before the mirror, removing my hand from my face. I looked at my reflection looking back at me. My face was drenched from tears. I studied my features and saw hers staring back.

I chuckled. I sniffed and chuckled.

I sniffed and smiled and chuckled.

It was over and I knew it. I loved her in life and I knew she'd be with me in death every time I passed a mirror or spoke a word, there she was. Every time I laughed or flashed a smile, she was there.

My matriarch.

My mother.

And now after six long years I could move on. I was ready.

1 *Chapitre Un*

The ringing of the telephone vibrated inside my mind.

In moments like this I wished that I'd taken the Illinois Bell sales assistant up on the offer to add voicemail to my phone plan. For an additional couple bucks per month, I'd be able to ride this out for maybe one... two rings longer before I could roll over, snuggle my head deeper into my pillow and return to a peaceful slumber. But I hadn't. No, I decided it wasn't worth dipping into my monthly Starbucks stipend for someone to verbalize what standard caller ID would digitize. Too bad I didn't have that either.

I thought I could wait it out. Eventually they'd have to hang up; it couldn't possibly be someone important. I owned a cell phone. It wasn't anything fancy, an outdated Nokia that took up an excess amount of space in my bag. It was one of those pay-as-you-go plans. Its purpose was to keep me available to my dad. I needed for him to reach me whenever, wherever. If it were him, the Basie tune I downloaded would be

pleasantly lulling me into consciousness rather than the pesky ring-ring-ring of my landline. For a fleeting moment I thought it could be Ayinde or Darwin but they too knew the best method of reaching me in an emergency.

The ringing persisted. I buried my face deep in my pillows and let out a fierce growl. My fingers somehow managed to find their way through my tangled locs of hair to massage my scalp. I sent a silent prayer for peace, it'd been a long night and the last thing I wanted was to desert my current position.

But... the ringing persisted.

"Alright, alright, alright!" I rose from my bed, pillow in hand as though keeping that object near my side didn't make it so, "This better be good," I grumbled as I sat upright, slamming my bare feet to the wood floor. I stood and crept across my studio apartment to the recliner chair, the one my dad had for years until Mommy bought him the one he presently watches his shows in on the twentieth anniversary of their union.

I sat and stared at the phone, an old thing with a rotary dial. For how old it was I was in awe that it found the energy to screech so loudly. I stared down at the ringing phone sitting there on the cute little oak table I'd found at Goodwill a few months earlier.

"Robeson residence," I spoke in my most business-like manner, more than prepared to tell the person on the other end of the line as professionally as possible to "fk off". However there was no immediate response to my greeting, "Hello? Robeson residence."

Now my face was becoming warm. I was prepared to hang up and in a state of pissitivity, return to my bed when a small voice came through.

"He's seeing someone else."

The voice was so small, so distant I couldn't make out who it belonged to, "Excuse me?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Ayinde?"

"He's killing me, destroying me from the inside out."

"Ayinde is that you? What are you saying? Is this about Marcus?"

"Zella."

"Yes?"

Silence.

I waited but there were no words following, only the sound of heartbreak. I was fully awake now; there'd be no more slumber on this day, not before long past the time where the sun would sink below the Earth. I gave another moment for her to offer up something more. She did not.

"Ayinde!"

"Huh?"

I tugged my hair in frustration, "What's going on? Where's Marcus?"

"He left."

"What do you mean he left? You two broke up... again?"

"No."

More silence.

"Ayinde!"

“Huh?”

I tossed my head back, blinking my eyes at the ceiling, counting backwards from three. I had a sudden and incredible urge to relieve my bladder. I took the phone by its handle, the receiver cradled in the crook of my neck. The telephone cord was a hundred-footer, long enough that my old rotary could act as an awkward portable. I carried it across the room to the bathroom. I sat before I spoke again.

My tone was soft when I addressed my friend, “Ayinde have you been drinking?”

Her tone was innocent when she replied, “Yes.”

“Baby, what time is it?”

“I don’t know, maybe eight.”

I let the phone slip from my ear but caught it before it could fall. I took in a fresh batch of oxygen and withheld any desire to curse. Replacing the phone to my ear, I spoke, “Hold on.”

When I was done, I flushed then carried the phone to my bed, “Yinde, are you still there?”

“Uh huh.”

I opened the drawer of the table at my bedside and sifted through, I really needed a drag. I found the Ziploc bag in the back, there were four joints left inside. I pulled one out, lit it and sucked long and hard.

“Did you and Marcus get into a fight this morning?” I asked while managing to hold the smoke in my mouth, allowing it to slowly leak into my lungs.

“No, he went to work. He *said* he was going to work.”

“So how did you decide he was cheating?”

“I didn’t decide it Zella!”

I let out an exasperated sigh, “Fine, how do you know he’s cheating?”

“Evidence! What do you think? I found evidence! You don’t believe me.”

Oh I believed her, “I’m not saying that I don’t believe you.”

“You think I’m making it up! Everyone’s not so perfect like you!”

“I didn’t say -. Okay, Yinde how much have you had to drink?”

“I’m not drunk.”

I picked up my watch and checked the time; it was 7:48 am. Doesn’t make one much value sobriety either, but I knew Ayinde was fragile and when dealing with her one had to form their sentences carefully.

“Sweetie, what have you been drinking?”

“Vodka.”

My eyes grew large as saucers but I shook it off, “Straight?”

“Not at first.”

“I’m coming over, okay?”

“Okay.”

She hung up before I could make another utterance. I sat, my eyes on the receiver, my joint burning between my fingers. I hung up the phone and took another hit.

AYINDE DOMONIQUE PHELAN

Ayinde was one of my closest friends. I knew a lot of people but had only a couple friends. She was four years my junior and regarded me as more of a big sister than simply a friend. I was honored to be that to her.

Yinde was a freaking blast to be around; she was funny and outgoing, unique and spontaneous. But she was troubled, deeply so. She was an experiment gone too far. The daughter of a White mother who had an extramarital affair with a Black man ten years into her marriage and two Caucasian children later. The step-daughter of a White man who despite all his efforts could never seem to escape the reality that her brown skin tone was a constant reminder of his wife's infidelity. The young sibling of the two White children who didn't understand how to dismiss what her flesh tone and kinky hair represented to the family, not to mention the stigma resulting from being the kids with the "*whore mother and nigger sister.*"

Granddaughter of established racists who could never quite seem to remember her name but rather referred to her as "*the brown one.*" A young woman with no identity, no culture, no love, no home. No self esteem. The only blood tie she had was her baby brother Josiah, born five years after the debacle. The only Phelan family member with enough courage to love her as she is. Unfortunately his love alone wasn't enough.

At sixteen she escaped her lily White neighborhood and landed on her father's doorstep where she spent one tumultuous year trying hard to fit in with her new, colorful surroundings and a father that drank too much, while doing her best to escape his incestuous advances. He was shot and killed in a bar brawl over a five dollar bet. She never mourned his death.

A month later she legally became Ayinde, the name of her father's sister, an aunt she'd heard about but hadn't ever met. She never told me her birth name, she'll never tell anyone.

She's been with Marcus for two years. In that time he's gotten one woman pregnant (abortion), left her twice, and has cheated on countless occasions. He's no good for her, he keeps her buried but he tells her he loves her because he knows that is what she craves. No one can convince her to leave him because she loves him, or at least she thinks she does, and chooses to believe that he feels the same way. It scares me when these things occur. My friend is a wounded animal, starved for attention and negative is how it best resonates with her.

I sat the phone along the bedside and again rose to my feet. She'd drink herself into a coma if I didn't stop her, all so that Marcus would come to her bedside and hold her hand. So he'd promise to be there for her and swear to her that an act such as this would never happen again. She wouldn't want him to say he was sorry. She needed him to show it. Demonstrative love. My fear was that someday Marcus would decide he was over her antics and leave her to die. This struggled against my hope that he would someday leave her once and for all.

I had to pull myself together as quickly as possible; she'd already been drinking for at least an hour as far as I knew. I took a final puff on my herb before I put it out in my ashtray. I jumped from the bed, slamming my naked feet onto the faux oak, moving pointedly to the bathroom. There was no time to be thorough. Instead I adjusted the running water in my sink and took a towel from the cabinet behind me. I washed my face first then, cleared any remaining debris with a witch hazel soaked cotton ball. I pulled my underwear off and tossed them in the hamper. With my lathered towel, I took a swift bird bath or as my aunt used to call it, a hooker bath.

My cell phone cried out from the other room.

"Oh now what?"

Quickly, I pat myself dry and rushed to my phone to see if it was Ayinde calling again. It was Darwin.

“Good morning.”

“Hey, what’s up D?” I grabbed a fresh pair of undies from the drawer and performing a balancing act, held onto my phone and pulled the fabric over my buttocks.

“Nothing, chillin’.”

“Are you at work?”

“Of course but I just got the strangest call a minute ago.”

“Ayinde.”

“I guess you’ve already talked to her.”

“A few minutes ago.” I took this call as my cue to move faster. I held the phone between my ear and shoulder as I tried to dance into a pair of jeans. I listened to Darwin as I fumbled through my small closet for a thick enough hoodie and a pair of worn gym shoes. “Hey what’s the temp outside?”

“Uhm, it’s kinda cool this morning. Probably low fifties right now, not to bad.”

I nodded at the sweatshirt I’d picked out, good choice.

Darwin continued, “So what’s going on with her? Did Marcus do something? She wasn’t clear, she kinda just rambled on.”

“Oh she’s drunk.”

“She’s drunk?” Darwin’s voice raised with astonishment.

“Oh yea. Drunk,” I ran to the bathroom and spread toothpaste across my brush, “See wez Wakus is cheday.”

“She say what was that?”

I quickly spit and rinsed, “My bad. She says Marcus is cheating. Says she has evidence, I don’t know. I’m on my way over there.”

“So she’s drunk. From what?”

“Vodka.”

There was a pause. I could hear and translate the hemming and hawing coming from Darwin’s side of the conversation, “What’s... Zella it’s barely after eight in the morning.”

“I know.”

Darwin sighed dramatically, “Well alright, keep me posted okay.”

“I will. Hey, I know you gotta get back to work so I’ll make it quick. I wanna go back to school.”

“Wow. So when did this life changing decision come about?” Darwin asked, a smile in his voice.

“Last night. I can’t explain it to you but... something happened. Something miraculous and freeing and I think I’m finally ready to get back to living my own life.” I stood for a moment at my doorway, keys in hand, forgetting about Ayinde and her psycho-drama and for a moment, just a selfish moment, focused on me.

“Are you thinking about leaving us and going back to London?” he asked fearfully.

“No,” I reassured, “You know I can’t leave my dad. But I do think I’ll go up to Northwest and check out the campus.”

“Hey, good for you. You know I’m proud of you Z.”

“I know. Means a lot,” I snapped back to reality, “I gotta go.”

“Okay, later.”

I grabbed a book for the short train ride and rushed out of the door.

There was a Starbucks on the corner a block away from Ayinde’s apartment. I was in a hurry, I knew she needed me but more importantly I knew that I’d be unable to function or be any bit of understanding had I arrived without the benefit of my morning caffeine fix. And she’d been drinking all morning; a little caffeine might be just what she needed to offset the effects alcohol may have had on her.

I could hear a loud commotion as I neared Ayinde’s door. The sounds of shattering glass traveled into the hallway. Panicked, I moved my legs faster and fiercely worked the key in the lock and let myself in.

“Ayinde!” I gasped as I entered the apartment. The place was a mess. Magazines, photos, clothes, and various other items were strewn about. Menswear covered the quaint sofa. Feathers covered nearly everything in the living space. Ayinde stood wild-eyed in the middle of the kitchenette holding a glass high above her head. My jaw hinges unlatched in my amazement. I could hardly believe what I was witnessing. Carefully, I sat the drinks on top of a speaker. When I opened my mouth to speak I was surprisingly calm.

“Yinde, put the glass down.”

She glared at me but did not move. I glanced at the nearly empty Vodka bottle sitting on the counter and wondered how full it’d been when she began her binge that morning. Before I could look away, I spotted a bottle of Rum on the counter behind her, top off and at least a glass and a half shy. I returned my focus to her.

“Ayinde. Ayinde put the got-damned glass down!”

“Aargh!” she screamed, slamming the glass onto the floor in front of her.

I charged at her, balancing my way around the many busted shards of glass. I grabbed her tight, using the force of all my weight to push her away from the row of dishes she’d prepared to destroy. Her back slammed hard against the refrigerator. She was a slight bigger girl than me but I was determined not to lose the upper hand as she struggled hard against me. I pushed against her repeatedly until she finally allowed her muscles to begin to relax.

Calmness crawled slowly but steady into her eyes and her face went from anger to sadness. Tears welled up as she crumbled into my arms. I fell to my knees with my friend in my possession, rocking her, consoling for what I didn’t really have a clue. I noticed the trail of blood running down her leg.

“Oh Yinde,” I lamented, “Let me clean this up.”

“Leave it.”

“You can’t just leave it; you don’t know how deep it is. What if it needs stitches?”

She pulled forcefully from my grasp and struggled to her feet, “What are you deaf? I said leave it.”

“Fine. Leave it. But what’s Marcus going to think when he comes home and sees your leg, sees his house?”

“Hopefully he’ll feel how I feel.”

I raised my body from the floor, “But what did he do?”

Seemingly excited for the opportunity to share her discovery, Ayinde’s eyes lit up as she moved across the room to Marcus’ workspace which seemed to be the only spot in at least this section of the apartment left unscathed. His laptop sat open on the desk. I was taken aback by the rotation of photos of Marcus and Ayinde that transitioned in and out as his screensaver.

“I’ll show you.”

I moved cautiously toward the computer as she jiggled the mouse and struggled to position the cursor to highlight the block of text that she wanted me to read. It was a previously sent message from an online networking account. I read softly, audible but barely:

“Damn that new pic you put up is hot. You should email me some personal ones. When you coming to the city?”

My eyes rolled the back of my head. *This* was the “evidence” that had me out of my comfy bed way too early?

“He’s so stupid,” Ayinde spoke. Not to me specifically, sort of thoughtlessly. “He forgot to log out. Stupid!”

I stood up straight and turned to face her, my hand on my hip and my expression stern. I needed to bring her around. Things with her were bad enough. Though I despised him with every fiber of my being, the last thing I needed was for Marcus to come home to this mess and have things escalate even further. “Yinde you have to clean this mess before Marcus gets home.” I scratched my neck uncomfortably as I glanced about.

“She’s not even pretty you know. I looked at her profile. She’s not even prettier than me.”

“I’m sure. You have to clean this. I’ll help you but you have to clean this.”

“Zella you’re not listening!”

My fists clenched involuntarily. Not because I wanted to hit her, not that she maybe didn’t deserve it in this moment, but out of frustration for being caught up in this. That all too familiar feeling off defeat was creeping up, frustrating me further. I didn’t know what to tell her. It was a sin to suggest she leave him but what else was there to say under such circumstances?

I exhaled patiently, “I’m gonna head over and check out the Northwest campus, you wanna go?”

Ayinde stared at me silently, her expression refusing to give way to her feelings toward me in that moment. Abruptly she turned and grabbed a handbag and her house keys. She was already dressed, likely in what she’d worn to work the night before. She walked out the door. I grabbed our drinks and followed her lead.

The walk to the el stop was a quiet one. We walked arm in arm, less as a display of our fondness and undying affinity toward one another but more as a requirement for keeping her steady on her feet. She’d been drinking for years, even worked as a bartender four nights a week; her tolerance was high so these occasional missteps reinforced my suspicions that she’d overdone it.

I glanced at Ayinde in the cool spring sunlight. She was one of the most beautiful women I’d ever met with her honey complexion and deep set brown eyes. Her curls were a much finer texture than my own and hung at least eight inches lower. There were pink streaks throughout the front; a month ago they were orange. The tiny stud diamond in her nose glistened in the sun. The tattoo that traveled from her forearm, across her shoulder, and ended at the base of the right side of her neck was my design.

No one knew exactly what it was, not even me. It was born in a dream, one where I was spending quality time having an inaudible conversation with my mother. It was on a wall that was behind her. For that reason it was important to me. It was abstract but Ayinde found it beautiful enough when she saw the canvas I’d painted it on, to have it permanently adorn her person.

She sipped her coffee and likely hoped that Marcus would stay with her. I finished mine off and prayed that he’d finally go despite secretly fearing for her life if he did ultimately decide to move on. They’d met two years ago at one of the bars she worked and had a one night stand that had yet to end. Ayinde was looking for love and she was sure she’d found it in Marcus. I don’t know what he was in it for outside of an apparent great lay.

“What’s with Northwest?” Ayinde asked, breaking me free from my thoughts.

“I’m going back to school,” I answered while cursing silently as I watched the train pass above us.

Ayinde stopped, “Why?”

“What sort of question is that? Don’t you think it’s time? I’ve been out of school for six years because of my parents. My dad is my dad and my Mommy isn’t coming back. I gotta try to move on with my life.”

“I can’t believe you’re involving me in this,” Ayinde snatched away and turned back toward her apartment. I stood, in awe, frozen as I watched her walk away from me. I shook it off and ran after her.

“Ayinde, stop!” I demanded.

She obliged and turned abruptly toward me, “What do you want?”

“Stop it okay! You just stop it. Every time I mention school you spaz. What’s up with that? What is so bad about me finishing my education?”

“You know.”

“No I don’t know but let me tell you what I do know. What I know is I work in a print shop to supplement the minimal insurance payments I get.”

“So what are you trying to say?” she asked defensively.

“I’m not trying to say anything and you know it. Nothing other than it isn’t for me, it isn’t how I saw my life and now *I* want to reclaim my life. You still have some good years ahead of you but *I’m* almost thirty and I want something more from this world!”

“You’re trying to leave me!”

“*What?*”

“If you go back and finish your program what do you think you’ll do? Your little job won’t be enough, your little apartment on Greenleaf won’t be enough. Why would your little undereducated, underachieving friend be enough?”

“I can’t believe this.”

My words were directed at myself. Not knowing what to do my hand went to my mouth squeezing it then letting go. I stepped forward, then back, hands on hips then back down as I paced. I walked a few steps to the bus top and took a seat on the bench beside an older gentleman who was trying hard to pretend he wasn’t paying attention. Ayinde coolly moved one of her hands to her mouth and placed a black painted finger nail between her teeth and chewed, a nervous habit which resulted in the absence of nails.

I rested my forearms on my thighs, leaning forward, ringing my hands in pure frustration. I was nearing the end of my rope and at this point it was taking all of my inner strength to pull myself back up.

“Ayinde, I will not leave you.”

“You say that now.”

“You are my friend, the presence or absence of a degree does not dictate my relationships. Can you understand that?”

Ayinde was silent. Her eyes glistened but she held her head back, refusing to allow the approaching water to create a trail. I looked away from her and into the streets. I watched students heading to classes at Loyola and felt a pang of envy. The bus finally arrived. The old man offered me a reassuring look before climbing on board. I half-smiled in response.

I looked back at my friend, “You think if I finish school, I’ll return to London.”

Ayinde nodded.

And you'll be left virtually alone, I thought to myself, "Are you hungry?"

Ayinde shook her head and smirked, "Tired."

"C'mon my little princess. We'll go to my house and get some rest. I'm not going to leave you, I'm here for you okay?" she tried to look away from me but I turned her face toward mine, "Okay?"

She nodded in response.

2 Chapitre Deux

I left Ayinde sleeping soundly in my apartment.

I hopped the train for the third time that day and returned to her place, hoping to beat Marcus home. I wasn't sure what time he'd be expected to arrive, it always seemed to vary.

When we'd arrived at my house, Ayinde allowed me to clean the crusted blood from her wound. It wasn't too bad, only a scratch. Her body had already begun the process of hemostasis. It was nothing some peroxide and gauze couldn't handle. She insisted that she did not want to clean the apartment before Marcus saw it but I knew it was the liquor speaking. With sleep would come sobriety and then there'd be reality and regret to face up to.

I rang the bell but there was no response. I let myself into the front gate and then the building and climbed the stairs. I listened carefully as I approached the door. I tapped lightly. Still no answer so I used my key to gain access. The mess was everywhere. I'd sort of hoped that maybe I'd remembered it wrong... that it wasn't as bad as I thought. It was and I didn't know where to begin. I decided the most dangerous area was best. I grabbed a broom and began sweeping the shards across the kitchen floor.

With the help of the espresso shots in the cappuccino I picked up while en route back I managed to restore order to my girlfriend's residence. The last chore remaining was to put Marcus' clothes away.

"What the hell are you doing?"

I jumped so hard I nearly bumped my head on the clothes rack. I dropped the jeans I was placing on a hanger. I swore to myself before turning to face Marcus. I was certain I'd make it without crossing paths with him.

"What are you doing with my clothes?" he asked angrily.

"Sorry, I'd hoped to be gone before you got home." I said picking the jeans up from the floor.

"Gone before I got home? What are you doing in my house anyway?" he stepped forward and snatched the jeans from my hand, "And messing around in my closet. Where's Snaps?"

"She's at my house," I walked past Marcus and out of the bedroom. I moved to get my bag and keys from the counter but he cut me off, "Okay! Look, dammit. I'm not trying to be in the middle of some mess."

“Half my clothes on the floor and I walk in on you standing in my closet holding my pants in your hands and you *don't* wanna be in the middle?”

I threw my hands up in defeat, “Yinde thinks you're cheating. *She* threw your clothes everywhere along with a few other choice items. *I* was trying to be a decent friend and clean it up before you got home.”

Marcus seemed to accept this answer and backed away from me. I let out a ragged sigh and grabbed my bag and keys.

“Why does she think I'm cheating?” he asked this as soon as I wrapped my hand around the doorknob.

“Why don't you ask her?”

“Bitch, I'm asking you.”

“Nigga, screw you.”

“Let's go then. That's all I been asking you to do for the past two damn years.”

Disgusted I turned the knob and exited the premises. Marcus stepped into the hall after me.

“Keys Zella!”

In my mind I turned and chucked them at his head, watched the blood drip down the bridge of his nose. But in reality - “They're Yinde's,” I said without looking back.

“Yea right.”

I moved quickly down the stairs and out of the building. I despised Marcus.

The advertisement in the Reader for the newly released independent film gave it four stars. I had to see it, the story of an older gentleman rediscovering his love for his wife after having had an affair with a much younger woman. I'd been sitting at a table outside of the Heartland waiting for Darwin and Ayinde to arrive, passing the time by chit-chatting with Penelope, the fascinatingly androgynous waitress who always managed to serve my table.

I expected the pair at any moment. We had time; the movie didn't start for another two and a half hours and the ride downtown shouldn't have taken more than forty minutes. I stood to leave; Penelope signaled he'd be with me in a moment. I leaned against the rail and took in the floral scent of the warm evening air.

“So you're going to check it out?” he asked in that high pitched masculine voice that men who wished they were women spoke in, while clearing the minimal dishes I'd used from the table and handing me my small bill.

“Yea, yea I'm going to check it out. It sounds interesting.”

“Okay, well hey make sure you let me know how it is and if I should go see it. I hear it's awesome.”

“I certainly will. I'll see ya.”

“Enjoy.”

I entered the General Store to pay my tab. There was a short line already. I picked trinkets from the display table idly as I waited. I glanced at the woman in front of me. She was patiently waiting her turn, reading to pass the time. Being the avid reader I am, I was always curious as to what others found engaging.

“Excuse me,” I interrupted.

She looked over at me. I was momentarily stunned by her exotic beauty. She was striking. Her skin was as deep and dark as a Godiva chocolate bar. Her large coal eyes were round and innocent in appearance. She was

several inches taller than me with elegant and delicate features. Her wooly hair was cornrowed in three thick braids that dangled near the middle of her back.

“Yes, may I help you?” she asked in slightly accented English reminiscent of the dialect of the residents of my former neighborhood in the United Kingdom. I hadn’t realized until that moment that I’d been staring.

“I – I’m so sorry to interrupt. I was just curious about what you’re reading.”

“Oh, it’s *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving.” She was up. Momentarily she diverted her attention as she counted out change for Melody the cashier.

I became consumed with excitement, “Are you kidding me? I’ve been trying forever to find a copy of that book! It was one of my mother’s favorites. I thought it was out of print.”

“So you’ve heard of it,” her eyes lit as she spoke, “Impressive. Yes, yes it has been out of print for quite some time.”

“So how’d you get your hands on it?”

She turned back to address Melody. “Thank you,” she said as she took her receipt. We stepped aside allowing another patron to be waited on.

“My mum found it for me. She has a gift of sorts. She manages to find all sorts of rare, out-of-print literary works. You should stop by my shop someday.” She reached into her purse and pulled a bulky pocketbook forth. After hurriedly scanning the interior, she handed me a simple white business card that advertised her business: Lola’s Books. The contact read, Olufemilola Sahlemariam-Brown. “We’re not located too terribly far from here, just in Wrigleyville. A short walk off the Addison stop.”

I smiled, “Thanks, I just may take you up on that. I’m Zella by the way.”

“Very pleased to make your acquaintance Zella, I’m Lola,” she took my extended hand in hers and shook firmly. “Well Zella, maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Maybe.”

She tossed her bag on her shoulder as I headed back to the counter to pay. I produced a five-dollar bill and handed it over.

“What’s up Mel? How’s business today?”

“Business is business as usual. My God Z, that woman was gorgeous don’t you think? You think she’s a model?”

I shrugged, “Possibly.”

“Like that Naomi Campbell.”

I thought she was much more beautiful than Naomi. She was a bookstore owner, not a model. But she could have been in a former life.

I looked toward the door in time to see Ayinde coming through followed by Darwin. I thanked Mel and joined my friends.

The film was touching. Being a part-time aspiring screenwriter with little talent in that arena, I take great pleasure in and was very appreciative of the independent film. I like to study them and use them as guides and research for my own writing. Thus the three of us made an appearance at the Gene Siskel Theater a couple times a month.

Darwin had gotten the news that day that he was being promoted. In celebration he decided to take us girls to dinner after the film. After some back and forth, we agreed on Uno's as the prime celebratory location.

We walked the distance to the restaurant despite Darwin's objections and insistence on catching a cab. Hell, he was among the ranks of the hundreds of thousands of residents who took to the road everyday, his legs weren't really equipped for this sort of activity. But we could all use the workout. Besides that, I love downtown Chicago and I especially love it after dark. The sights and the sounds, the people, all gave me inspiration for the things I'd write and the images I'd paint. The scent of it got hold of my spirit and I became one with this beautiful live postcard entrenched with art and culture as much as divided by socioeconomic status and segregation. I had my way.

The place was bustling when we arrived. It was a complete surprise for us to have been seated in fewer than twenty minutes. We sat in a booth with Ayinde at my left and Darwin across from us. I was so happy for my friend; he deserved all of his success.

"I ran into Margot the other day, did I tell you?" Darwin asked.

I could feel Ayinde tense and roll her eyes without looking her way, "No, where'd you see her?"

"At Starbucks on Clark."

I laughed, "Figures."

"She was with Shane. They're together again? I'm confused."

I looked away into the distance when I answered, "Yea, they're trying to work it out." *Another beautiful person settling*, I thought to myself.

"She says you're painting her."

"You're painting her fat ass?" Ayinde asked with contempt, "Are you sure you have enough paint?"

I ignored her comment, "Yea, I am."

A waiter interrupted us, Darwin placed our pizza order. "You don't seem thrilled about it."

"Oh I love the idea of painting her. Despite the opinion of *some*, I think she makes a beautiful subject. But it isn't for her... the painting, it's for Shane. A birthday gift."

I looked at my nails and picked at nothing from them.

Ayinde asked, "So why are you painting her if her reason bothers you so much?"

There was a hint of something in her tone, something personal. I didn't answer. I wasn't sure why I was doing it. I needed the money of course. But from a standpoint of principles, I didn't know if it was the right choice to make. But to deny a client service because I objected to the purpose of the assignment, being a gift to a man who'd raised his hands to her and demanded her value as a woman be submitted to him on several occasions, may not have been my place either.

As though reading my thoughts, Darwin added on cue, "You can't judge her decision. He's still her husband... Jake's dad."

"I know, I know. I just hate seeing women settle. I refuse to ever settle."

"Well, everyone isn't like you," Ayinde said defensively.

"I'm aware."

"You can just stop it with the subtleties Z."

"What are you talking about?" I asked sarcastically.

“You two, please do not start. You’ve two been bickering more and more lately. You’re giving me a damned headache. Now I brought you here to continue our good time and celebrate with my girls.”

“Not to sound ungrateful,” I began, “but why’d you bring us anyway? Where’s Miko? Shouldn’t you be celebrating with her?”

Darwin looked away nervously. He scratched his scalp which I was so sure wasn’t itching.

“You didn’t!” Ayinde exclaimed. When Darwin’s eyes instantly moved to the floor, Ayinde and I both threw our hands in the air and fell back into the bench. All I could do was laugh. Ayinde allowed her head to fall to my shoulder as she shook it side to side.

“C’mon guys, you gotta understand!” Darwin said.

“What? Understand what? I understand you’re ridiculous! What was wrong with this one?” I asked.

“See Z, you be trippin’.”

“Me? What?”

Darwin’s single dimple showed through as he smiled shyly. The waiter soon placed the extra-large deep dish pizza on the table before us. A basket of deep golden fried wings were set beside it. Since we insisted there was nothing else needed, our waiter disappeared into the crowd.

For a while we were silenced by the delicious taste of the famous Chicago delicacies. Ayinde broke the monotony, speaking through a mouthful of food.

“C’mon D. Talk.”

“Alright, okay. But you’re just gonna say I’m trippin’”

“You are trippin’,” I said pointing a wing in his direction, “You might as well give us the specifics.”

“Her toenails are too long.”

I dropped my wing on the plate and sat frozen for a second. I turned to face Ayinde who was already looking at me. Simultaneously the two of us doubled over in difficult to control laughter. We were leaned into one another, laughing so hard tears streamed from our eyes. We struggled to regain our composure.

“Toenails?” Ayinde blurted. “You are *not* serious!”

“Y’all are being unfair.”

“We’re being unfair?” I asked amazed, “You broke up with a chic over toenails. Are you hearing yourself? C’mon that chic was hot.”

“I know.”

“And she had her own car, crib, and a good job.”

“Check, check, double check,” Ayinde tacked on.

“I know,” Darwin stressed.

“I can’t believe you opened up the door to let another dude get with her over some toenails. Ever heard of a nail clipper?” I asked. “You’re sabotaging again.”

“I am not. Dude, seriously. I mean, you should check out my leg. Man, she’d rub her feet up and down my leg at night and at the same time playing tic tac toe with her damn toenails. And yea, Zella I know about clippers but that wasn’t the issue. Miko *likes* long toenails.”

“Oh my goodness, you are insane,” Ayinde stated as she reached for another slice of pizza.

I shook my head at Darwin, “It’s always something D. You know it.”

"I know. It always *is* something." Darwin picked up a wing and fumbled with it as he spoke, "You said it yourself Z, don't settle."

"Oh so this is the part where you use my words against me."

"Why not? They're befitting aren't they?"

"As if it's applicable in a situation like this."

"You know what," Darwin began, his face serious as he looked into my eyes, "what is considered settling, is subject to the definition of the individual involved. So yes, my dear friend, to stay with Miko would have been settling by my definition."

I shook my head, accepting what I was being fed as though I had a choice, and returned to eating my dinner.

It was well past midnight when I arrived home. I tossed my keys on the ledge before ripping the elastic band from my hair and allowing it to fly free. I vigorously scratched the back of my scalp as I walked to my bed. I took a seat and yawned as I sifted through the drawer for my goodie bag. I removed the half smoked joint that was mixed in with the others. I lit it and inhaled deeply. Instantly my body relaxed and was able to unwind.

Darwin had insinuated that I was judgmental, that I held the decisions of others up to my set of standards. He didn't vocalize it directly. But he did insinuate it. So did Ayinde. I ran my tongue across my teeth. Maybe they were mad because I was wrong... or maybe they were mad because I had a point.

I let the drug dangle from my lips as I stood and shimmied out of my jeans and socks. I sat the burning stick on the edge of the table temporarily so I could pull my sweatshirt over my head. I loved this time of day, the end of the day. Standing free from the confines of clothing in my own home, at ease from my herbal relaxation. I took the weed to my lips again and puffed as I walked to my bathroom, then ran me a shower. Leaning my back against the edge of the sink, I puffed until the remains threatened to singe my fingertips. I stepped in my shower and washed the dust and city fumes from my figure.

When I was done, I dried my body and wrapped the plush towel around my wet hair. I walked, nude, back into the main room. Thirsty, I took a bottle of water from the refrigerator, cracked it open, and turned it up walking to my bed. I stretched out on my back and looked up at the ceiling.

It was an old building that I lived in, a recycled residence. There were several unidentifiable brown spots on the ceiling and many nights I'd lie in bed awake and play connect the dots. Some nights I'd form mysterious constellations or reproductions of infamous pieces of art. Other nights my visions were much simpler. Frequently I could form the structure of my mother's face. That was my vision on this night. Follow the trail from point A until the image was realized.

A soft *thud* shook me from my trance, my vision dissipated. It was them, they were at it again. Most every night they found their way to one. Before my experience a few nights back I hadn't minded but with each soft blow to our mutual wall, I was buried deeper and deeper beneath a blanket of emotion. I would tune them out... I would try.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

My nipples hardened and I became sensitive where I was previously unmotivated. I fought to resist being pulled into their world. I shook it off and focused in on the quickly fading dots on my ceiling.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

The contact became harder, more intense. Her voice was muffled but none-the-less audible. My hand rubbed the length of my thigh. It was unconscious, a natural inevitable reaction. I inhaled deeply and tried to ignore their sounds, their rhythm against my wall, the melody of her stifled sonance. My eyes closed tight and the world around me was erased. All but their sounds.

I tried to sing it away. It was a song my mother would sing to me as a small child, “Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques, dormez vous? Dormez vous?”

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

“Sonnez les matines...”

Thud!

Thud!

And then I felt it... their presence, they were again beside me. They were loving each other on the bed that lulled me to sleep at night. I couldn't see them but I knew that they were there. I was afraid, afraid to open my eyes for fear that she and I would come face to face. Fear that this experience was real and she did again, truly exist. But I feared not opening my eyes for if I did and she was not there I may die... right there on the spot, from a broken heart.

I tried to sing, “Sonnez les matines...”

My voice cracked. Warm tears tickled the sides of my face as they streamed from my lowered eyelids. I longed to scream, to cry out and demand that they stop. It's over! It's done! I cannot take it anymore!

Th-wap!

Th-wap!

Th-wap!

A fire was building deep inside and I feared that at any moment I would explode. I loved Zahrah, my mother, but I did not want to experience this any longer, didn't need it. A scream was inside and it echoed against organs and intestines, reverberated off kidneys and tap-tapped at my lungs until no more could be handled. I needed to escape it!

Th-wap!

Th-wap!

Th-wap!

And the scream grew bigger and stronger, inflated further by each and every continued expression of love coming from the other side of that damned wall, until I shot forward on my bed and set it free –

“Stooooop iiiiiiiit!”

... the sounds were no more. I hadn't noticed that they'd ended... when they ended. I was only relieved that their lovemaking on this night was relatively brief – and it was over. I looked around the room which was dark with the exception of the illumination from the street lights.

“Dammit,” I spoke softly to myself.

I felt tainted. I jumped from bed and went into the bathroom. I splashed cold water upon my face then stood, bent at the waist, resting my weight on my hands that clutched the sink's edge.

“Something's gotta give.”

I grabbed an elastic band from the counter top and forced my mane into it. I went to my closet and pulled a tee-shirt and a pair of flannel pants from a drawer and covered my body. I took a seat on the bed, one foot beneath me, the other resting against the floor.

I reached for the drawer thinking I needed another hit but paused before opening it. I turned and slid from the bed and landed on my knees. And there I said a little prayer for my friends and their troubles. And there I said a little prayer for the soul of my deceased mother and the lost soul of my living father. And there I said a little prayer for me.