

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 course 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 of 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.