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## Fire and Flour

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# *FIRE AND FLOUR*

by

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of the  
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*Abstract*

*Fire and Flour* is the result of over 30 hours of oral histories conducted with my family in Martinique. I was awarded the Schiff Fellowship in order to pursue research for my creative writing thesis, and used the money to fly to Martinique to conduct my interviews in person. A creative “novella”, *Fire and Flour* compiles and remembers a history of deep personal importance.

## *Chapter One*

All but two members of the Monlouis family suffocated to death on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1902. The Montaigne Pelée had been vomiting thick mouthfuls of ash for two weeks. Saint Pierre, nestled between the roots of the volcano, continued its metropolitan business as usual. During the Saturday market vendors wiped soot from their squash. On Sunday women covered their faces with silk handkerchiefs and prayed fervently for fresh water unpolluted by ash. No one stayed outside to gossip on the steps but hurried home, crossing themselves repeatedly. Monday morning the ocean was suddenly sucked one hundred meters out to sea, leaving silver fish slapping in panic against the black sand. A crowd formed along the stone wall of the marina. Where had the water gone? The ocean seemed to have been called back toward the bright edges of the earth. There was talk of sending someone out across the sucking sand to investigate, to coax the water to return. But before the townspeople reached a decision the ground shivered and popped like a dog trying to shake fleas. The ocean roared back across the sand and into the city, sweeping wailing people against the storefronts. Fish were flung through open windows; the main square was covered in putrid Sargasso grasses that immediately began to rot in the sun. A little to the North, the pits of the Guérin sugarcane refinery were suddenly filled by the ocean's surge. There was no time to climb the ladders, no time to evacuate the furnaces that would be tombs. One-hundred-and-fifty-nine men and women were trapped and drowned in a thick soup of molasses and saltwater, mud and jungle debris.

Town authorities were very clear: though the goings on were strange and terrifying there was nothing to fear, and absolutely no reason to evacuate. To illustrate this with perfect clarity,

Martinique's governor—Louis Mouttet—moved his entire family into Saint Pierre that evening. Some people, unconvinced, left that night, taking boats to Guadeloupe. Others packed suitcases and began the journey to Fort-de-France, to the South. But most stayed behind, trusting that the earth, their mountain, their home, would quiet eventually. The Montaigne Pelée had stirred before, merely finding the cold side of her pillow before settling back into deep sleep. Surely this time would be the same.

The morning of the Feast of the Ascension, my great-great grandmother—a Monlouis by birth—woke up to an eerie stillness. Her four green parakeets normally chattered as the sun rose, demanding bread crusts, a bit of conversation, a finger to nibble. Today there was only silence. She walked downstairs to the living room to discover the birds lying dead at the bottom of their wrought iron cage, eyes open. It was in that moment she knew her children could not stay in the city, no matter how many times she was reassured otherwise by her husband. She quickly put together a wax paper packet of ham and butter sandwiches, a glass jar of milk, and two bars of chocolate. The children's tiny suitcase was filled with their most practical clothes, all their shoes, a boar bristle brush, and a few picture books.

She sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the rise and fall of their thin chests through the fabric of their pajamas. Their ribs, no thicker than the yellow pencils they carried to school. Marie's mouth was parted in a little wet "O", her forefinger in the gap where one day her front teeth would grow. Fernand was even smaller, his knees pulled to his chin to form a crescent of sleepy boy. They trusted her.

She reached out, and stroked their foreheads with the back of a cool hand. It was time to leave. The Monlouis children would stay with their older half-brother in Fort-de-France—then the island’s second-largest city—until the mountain went back to sleep, veiled in her thick fur of greenery and mist. The children were bundled into clean clothes with scarves knotted around their faces to protect their soft lungs from the burning air. Marie carried a letter explaining their situation and was instructed to present it to whoever seemed in charge upon their arrival in Fort-de-France. Her husband was still asleep when she grabbed Fernand, Marie, and their suitcase and lead them quietly out the front door. He would not approve of his children leaving the city, but the image of the dead parakeets propelled her out into the dawn. The regular departure of boats had ceased but there was one scheduled for Fort-de-France—the next largest city after Saint Pierre—in half an hour. It would be the last boat to leave Saint Pierre.

The three ran through the empty streets. Everyone was locked away in their houses, windows latched shut against the burning fumes that rolled down from the volcano. Dead cats lay curled in grotesque loops of singed fur. Twice the road lurched under their feet and left the little family winded on the ground.

As they approached the water more and more people appeared. A throng had gathered, lined up along the dock in an attempt to squeeze onto the boat, already dangerously low in the water. The captain was shaking his head, saying that there was no more room left on the boat. But his voice was drowned out by the shudders of the boiling mountain and the mounting hysteria. My great-great-grandmother elbowed her way to the front of the crowd and lifted Fernand into the air like a kitten. He and Marie were pulled onto the boat—there

was just enough room for two small children. The engines churned the water, stirring the black sand into dark clouds that mirrored those pouring over the lip of the mountain. The children leaned back over the side towards their mother, still sleepy. She pulled the scarves down from around their nose to kiss their cheeks, hot with tears and volcanic fever. I will see you soon, she promised. The boat pulled away from the dock.

As my great-great grandmother ran back to her house the Montaigne Pelée split open like a punched mouth, releasing a rolling grey cloud of gas and burning rock. It set the jungle on fire as it howled towards the metropolis, crackling with electricity. A few minutes later and each of Saint-Pierre's 28,000 residents was dead. By the time the lava arrived the city was still and quiet. It crept through doorways and up flights of stairs, eating away at the church pews, melting windows, swallowing corpses with a hot gurgle. Saint Pierre was removed from French maps the next year.

## *Chapter Two*

Fernand and Marie arrived in Fort-de-France as orphans. Their half-brother and his family took in the two children, just as their mother had predicted. My family's seat on the island was subsequently displaced from the Northern tip to the center, in the new capital of Fort-de-France. It was there, 90 years later, that I met my great-grandfather Fernand, legendary survivor of the volcanic eruption.

I was five years old and irreparably plagued by nightmares about fire and soot, dream-lava pushing through the cracks of the floorboards in my childhood home. I'd wake up shrieking that I was on fire, writhing in a rapidly cooling pool of my own urine. These dreams were my grandmother's fault; she'd relished stuffing my head with stories of the Montaigne Pelée, taking special care to dramatize the race to the last boat with sound effects simulating the screams of the unlucky burned. She claimed it was natural for a Monlouis to be afraid of fire, that she was merely encouraging a healthy respect for the mountain that blistered our family history. My mother was infuriated by these superstitions, and hoped that meeting my great-grandfather Fernand might appease the ferocity of my ancestral fear so we could both sleep through the night once again.

Papi Fernand was intimidating. His square jaw looked like the tools used to crack crab shells. He was blind—both eyes were milky blue and leaked viscous tears into his beard. He would sit on the porch of his house every day, all day while my great-grandmother Emilie brought

him cups of black coffee, almonds, and pears. He listened to the radio constantly, and if ever my cousins or I made too much noise on the porch he hissed sharply through his front teeth, stark white against his brown skin. My mother plopped me down on his lap and explained my symptoms while Papi nodded slowly, and twisted a bit of my meaty cheek between his fingers. He explained that he too had suffered from the same dreams. There was only one cure for fear of fire: soak me in a bassinette filled with seawater and *bois d'Inde*—a spicy, fragrant leaf found all over the island—and scrub the bad dreams out of me with a brick of charcoal originating from the same tree. My mother rolled her eyes at this witchcraft. She was a pharmacist, a woman of science. But she followed Papi Fernand's instructions with great care, and I haven't dreamt of fire since.

No one in the family knows what happened to Fernand's sister Marie, including Papi Fernand himself. Even the family's most inquisitive and long-lived historian, my great-aunt Denise, didn't have a lead. She is one of Fernand and Emilie's seven children. I visited her when I was twenty-two and hungry to piece together a cohesive history of my family. I hoped to extract a morsel of information about Fernand's missing sister before the jaws of her dementia snapped shut for good. I was nervous to see her, it was the first time I'd visited Tatie Denise without my mother. The three flights of stairs to her apartment were painted yellow, and I almost stepped on a flaccid little gecko in front of her door. I'd brought rum and chocolate, and my hands shook as I rang the doorbell.

Tatie Denise made me coffee and apologized for not having any food in the house—her nurse came to feed her a special diet every day. She claimed it was a diet constructed for the sole purpose of keeping her alive longer than she wanted, and opened my rum offering with

relish. We sat on the balcony of her apartment, listening to the wind move through the tops of the coconut trees. Talk of the Montaigne Pelée is considered bad luck for the Monlouis', and Tatie Denise crossed herself with hands knotted like wet rope before giving me any information.

The half-brother that greeted Fernand and Marie in Fort-de-France was not a Monlouis but a Régis. Walk into any cemetery on the island and you'll find at least two Régis graves covered in tiger lilies or bright, fake silk roses. Fernand joined the French military at 18 years old and lost contact with his adopted family while he was stationed in Vietnam, then Tunisia. But Marie stayed very close to the Régis family that never quite belonged to her brother. She was swallowed up into their family history, and disappeared from ours quietly as if exiting a stage.

Fernand married my great-grandmother Emilie on a hot, heavy, humid day in September. They were both very young—she was just seventeen, not much older than I was when I remember examining a picture taken of their wedding day. It was at my home in California, on the anniversary of Emilie's death. My mother—Emilie's favorite grandchild—had made a little shrine in her honor. Inside a circle of candles sat Emilie's favorite bracelet, a bowl of thick rice pudding flecked with cinnamon, a tiny pair of white lace gloves, and the wedding photograph in a silver frame. I picked up the picture and looked at it so closely my breath fogged the glass. Emilie's hair was pulled back in a sleek knot at the nape of her neck. She wore a crown of frothy orange blossoms and her full-moon face was tilted downwards. I stared at her black eyelashes resting on round cheeks—cheeks both my mother and I inherited. There are the same tiny lace gloves, delicately encasing her hands. One hand is on

my great-grandfather's shoulder and the other tugs at the hem of his jacket, a startlingly intimate gesture. I put down the photo and picked up the gloves, careful not to drag their fingertips through a candle. They were so tiny that I couldn't fit them over my knuckles. But no matter—I'd learned what I needed to. Recognizing myself in the photograph of Emilie made me feel connected to my family in a way I'd never accessed. I was a light-skinned child, an ambiguous, yellow-brown much lighter than my black mother. I had a spray of freckles and thick, curly hair in which many a comb broke over the course of my childhood. I recognized neither my mother nor my father in my own round face. Meanwhile, my younger sister looked distinctly like my Czech-English father—tall and thin with high cheekbones and a prominent nose. In contrast, both my maternal grandparents were black; my grandmother dark like cinnamon, my grandfather mahogany.

Holding the photograph of my great-grandmother was proof of my fitting-in, of my relation to the mysterious, sprawling family tree rooted so far from the eucalyptus-scented Californian home of my childhood. My seventeen-year-old great-grandmother on her wedding day looked more like me than my mother and sister do. Tall and full of curves. Straight-backed and with a crowded mouth of clean, confident teeth. I hoped that one day I might pose for a photograph like that one, smelling of orange blossoms and having shed my baby weight, my awkwardness, knowing exactly who I was and where I belonged.

Tatie Denise had the same copy of her parents' wedding photograph on the wall of the living room. I'd noticed it as I entered that morning. I asked her about it now and she shushed me—I'd interrupted the flow of her story.

Fernand and Emilie had seven children together. Georges, Nano, Hubert, Luke, Marcelle, Denise and Lillian. Today all but two are dead—to cancer, to a car accident, to an aneurism, to the sleep that creeps up when your work is done. A few months previously Lillian was buried during a beautiful ceremony bursting with bird of paradise flowers. Everyone wore bright colors and ate somber cakes from limp napkins. Lillian had been Denise's last living sibling on the island of Martinique, and by far the most pleasant of them all. Nano, the one remaining brother, still lives somewhere in France and has not returned to Martinique since the day he left 53 years ago—not for Marcelle's funeral, or Hubert's, or Luke's, or George's, or Lillian's.

Here, Tatie Denise paused and stuck out her chin defiantly. My throat felt tight. The woman in front of me was small and tough, like a piece of gristle—a necessary joint. Her coffee cup trembled in her hands as she paused for breath. I looked at her enlarged knuckles and realized her rings would never come off. Her fingers would need to be severed in order to recuperate the jewelry. It comforted me to imagine her taking the jewels with her into the earth—precious metals and this precious woman.

It began to rain with one heavy rush as it often does in the tropics. It hammered the galvanized roof and the sound seemed to press us down into our plastic chairs on the balcony of that tiny apartment. I saw goosebumps rise on Tatie Denise's arms and helped her out of her chair and to the edge of her well-made bed—a child's bed.

She instructed me to fetch an orange cardboard box from the closet. It was full of photo albums, loose pictures, dried flowers, a friendship bracelet knotted in faded pink string. She

remembered most of the faces and half of the names. There was my grandmother on her wedding day to Hubert. There were photos of Papi Fernand in his sharp military uniform stationed in Tunisia—where my grandfather Hubert was born. We pored over each piece of paper until Tatie suddenly snapped the lid shut on the box. It was naptime.

I helped tie her hair up in a bright silk scarf—blue for sweet dreams she told me. It smelled of patchouli and cooking oil. Just as I was about to leave the room she caught my wrist and asked me to rub her feet as she fell asleep. I agreed, thinking it was a strange request to make of a near stranger. I knelt by the end of her bed, a bit scared. But her tiny feet were warm and the thick, rough skin of her heel seemed to soften in my hands. I understood, then, that rubbing someone's feet was an act of humility, and the best way to say thank you for the time and memories she'd bestowed upon me. Tatie Denise started to snore lightly, her pulse trembling at her paper throat. The bone in the ball of her left foot jutted out at a right angle and I cupped the sharpness in my hand, marveling at the malleability and durability of the human skeleton. Here was proof that a repeated motion might shape you over time.

I backed out of Tatie's room quietly, unsure whether or not to leave the apartment completely. I decided to stay and clean her fridge, throwing away a box of stale chocolates and some rotting lemons. Outside it continued to rain, the fat drops breaking open the heat of the afternoon and shaking the hibiscus bushes in the communal garden. I made a cup of tea in a pot on her stove and watched the clouds scud across to the West. By the time Tatie Denise woke I'd prepared some rice with a big nub of melted butter, steamed white yams with bay leaves, and hotdogs sliced into little rounds and browned in her only pan.

She shuffled out of her room in her housedress and her slippers. I could see she'd brushed her hair. It was pulled back in a tight bun with squiggly black bobbypins discreetly holding it together, exactly the same way my mother and I fix our hair. This made me smile.

We sat down to eat and she didn't touch her food, but reached across the table to take my hand. She turned it over a few times and examined my palm before asking if I had a boyfriend. I replied that yes, I had a few different ones. This made her smile genuinely for the first time during our entire visit. She pushed her plate of hot food towards me and motioned for me to eat it while she began to tell a proper Monlouis story.

### *Chapter Three*

Fernand was an extremely strict father, and Denise was the eldest of the three Monlouis girls. She always got in trouble for things first. While her brothers wandered around the island at whim, going swimming, horseback riding, attending parties and flirting with girls, Denise was held to a rigorous standard of behavior. She wasn't allowed out of the house after eight in the evening, wasn't allowed to go on adventures to the waterfalls, or swimming in Grande Anse with her friends. Most of all, Denise was not allowed to interact with boys outside of school. This proved particularly difficult because Denise was extraordinarily beautiful. She had high cheekbones and sharp, inquisitive eyes shaped like the sugared *dragées* handed out at first communions. Her black hair fell past her shoulders in a storm of curls. By the time she was seventeen, all the boys admired her deeply. She constantly had one or two of them in tow to carry her books, fetch her water, buy her magazines and ribbons. Roger's family owned a patisserie, and every morning he brought her warm croissants stuffed with bars of dark chocolate. Pierre had a guava tree and packed wicker baskets full of the soft, pungent fruits for her to enjoy during lunch. Emile sketched her portrait during recess.

Her father caught wind of these flirtations quickly. Denise arrived at the garden gate escorted by an entourage of fawning young men, each waving goodbye soulfully while she trotted up the steep driveway, winking at her sister Lillian before ducking into her bedroom to avoid her father. Fernand considered her behavior unacceptable and launched a subsequent campaign of reformation. Denise's reddest lipsticks were confiscated, a stricter curfew was imposed, and the most risqué scenes in her favorite romance novels were

censored in bold strikes of black ink. Her father began to walk her to and from school every single day to shoo away any potential suitors. Meanwhile Denise's four brothers—younger and older—all had girlfriends and continued to go out dancing late into the night. Denise was livid—the unfairness of it all overwhelmed her and she went straight to her mother to complain about the double-standard. Emilie, trying to appease her daughter's fury, made the mistake of explaining that this was the way things always had been, and they way they would always be. She told Denise about Fernand's youthful flirtations with the most attractive young women in Fort-de-France. He'd been famous for flitting from beauty to beauty, behavior that earned him the nickname "*Petit Papillon*". When he fell madly in love with Emilie and they were married, the moniker gradually fell away into memory.

This was the last straw. Denise straightened her spine, took a deep breath, and marched straight into her father's study. She demanded that the unfairness stop; she should be allowed to behave in the same way her brothers did. Fernand replied that as long as she lived under his roof, she would have to abide by his rules. Denise marched out of the study with her head held high.

That evening, she phoned Roger. Above his fathers' patisserie were a honeycomb of small apartments overlooking the bay of Fort-de-France, each furnished with a tiny bathroom and a wooden desk. Rent was cheap, she'd saved up money from her job teaching tennis over the summer. He told her about the rent, the number of stairs, and offered to pick her up the next morning in his miniscule Renault. It was perfect. By eight Denise was waiting outside the gate of her childhood home, one neat yellow suitcase tightly packed with all her belongings in the world. Her father watched her go from the kitchen window, drinking his

morning coffee with a tightly downturned mouth. Emilie covered her daughter's ears with wet, tearful kisses before tucking some money into her skirt pocket and trudging back up the hill to her house. She didn't talk to Fernand for a week afterwards, so angry was she that he'd driven Denise away—their first child to leave home.

Denise unpacked her diminutive suitcase in her new apartment. She covered the shelf above her porcelain washbasin with bottles of perfume. They refracted the morning light across the blue tile of the bathroom. She pushed the bed into the opposite corner of the room, so the sun from the window would wake her up naturally in the morning. The one light bulb was covered by a white lace shade that cast funny, geometric shadows on the simple wallpaper. Her clothes fit in the dresser with room to spare. That afternoon she walked to the flower market and bought three sprays of jacaranda. She tucked them in an empty milk jug and placed them on the little desk. This was home.

The next day she threw the best housewarming party the island had ever seen, and every handsome boy in Martinique was present.

Tatie Denise finished her story and looked down at the cold plate of food she'd pushed towards me. The heat of memory faded from her cheeks and left her looking like a paper doll, a coat hanger for her oversized dressing gown. I thought of her two daughters, my cousins once removed—Yvonne, the concert pianist, and Sandra, a kindergarten teacher. I wondered if they knew their mother was once the most beautiful woman on the island of Martinique. I wondered if they knew she was ready to die. I swallowed my cold rice and did the dishes while Tatie Denise picked at her hot dog. I helped her to the couch, brought her a

book and her medicine, and kissed her cheeks in farewell. The walk down the stairs seemed much longer than the walk up. I paused on the first floor and stared through the window of Roger's darkened patisserie. It was the last time anyone would hear the story of *Petit Papillon*.

## Chapter Four

Hubert, Tatie Denise's younger brother, was introduced to my grandmother on Easter Sunday in the big pink cathedral in the middle of Fort-de-France. Their mothers presented them with the kind of calculated informality born of fervent premeditation over tea and cake. Monique wore gold-framed sunglasses that pointed at the corners into sly cat's eyes. Her white cotton blouse exposed freckled shoulders. They shook when she laughed and Hubert imagined biting her warm, golden skin. He was shy at the best of times, but this red-mouthed siren with a Bible tucked under her skinny arm was too much, and words failed him completely. But Monique talked enough for the both of them, skipping lightly as they walked to the docks to watch the ships coming in to port. She loved reading, especially American romance novels to practice her English. Her favorite foods were *kouing-amann* pastries and maple syrup—a bottle of which her brother had sent all the way from Montreal, where he was studying to become a lawyer. She herself was going off to study at La Sorbonne in September, and was looking forwards to returning to Paris, where she'd done most of her growing up. Her father was a senator but she didn't care much for politics. Monique missed Paris mostly for the art. She'd been a debutante at the Crillon Ball but hated it because she was the only black girl and they didn't have nude stockings in her color and everyone had teased her for it.

Hubert listened to all this information with rigid, schoolboy-like attention. The two stopped to buy little pork pâtés in flaky dough and a jug of half-frozen soursop juice. They sat down on the end of the dock and Monique kicked off her red pumps and dangled her feet above

the water. Clouds of minnows congregated to look at her beautifully arched pink soles and Hubert wished he could be one of them, just to stare at her without blushing.

Hubert had already finished his studies and was completing a medical residency in Paris. He'd already done the mental calculations—it was a 20-minute train ride to La Sorbonne, he'd get off at Cluny and be able to meet her after class.

And that was exactly what he did, every day for the three years that she completed her studies. They watched back-to-back films in the enormous theatres on the Champs Elysees, stumbling out into the cold at 2 am for a hot chocolate at Angelina's before parting ways, kissing fervently under the bare chestnut trees. The window of Monique's little apartment was covered in crawling lilacs come spring, giving the impression of permanent twilight. She had a worn red couch and a bureau covered in lipsticks and a little gold clock that struck every half hour. That first April brought heavy storms. Water rushed noisily down the old pipes while the lovers baked potatoes in the little stove. Steam rose from their teacups and the trees in the park shed broken twigs and clusters of white petals. During the summer Hubert brought her ranunculus and fresh baguette and they walked by the Seine eating mint ice-cream. They kissed constantly, that first year. Monique studied feverishly while Hubert edited her essays and plied her with white wine until they fell onto the crocheted blanket and fell asleep reading *La Boheme*. At Monique's graduation she wore white-framed sunglasses and a necklace of gold beads, her hair pinned up in an elaborate nest of glossy curls. Her best friend Juliette took a picture of them all: Hubert standing next to her, with Fernand and Emilie on either side. Everyone is happy—it was a rare sunny day and life beckoned, invitingly.

The young couple married and moved back to Martinique. Hubert opened his own private pediatric practice. His office was in the center of Fort-de-France, a building pink like the inside of a shell with a spiral staircase and a gold plaque reading, “Docteur Hubert Monlouis”. He bought a house high on the mountain overlooking the bay, in a wild, jungly neighborhood full of stray cats and fruit trees. It was a two-minute walk up the hill to his parents home. The houses and the plot of land between them formed a sort of compound: Hubert and Monique’s was made of white stucco, flat-roofed, the interior tiled in red clay that radiated cold even when it was hot and humid outside. The second—belonging to Fernand and Emilie—was surrounded by a thick copse of shiny-leaved cinnamon trees, lianas, and explosions of feral orchids. Hubert dug a trail and some little stone steps into the red earth, a path winding up through the trees to connect the two generations.

## Chapter Five

Heloise arrived at the young Monlouis household in mid-September, on the first real day of the rainy season. The ribcages of the giant ferns lining the driveway shivered under the force of the downpour. She trotted up the steep slick of asphalt as her umbrella buckled and sagged. Rivulets of mud snaked down the hill and through the yard, carrying petals that stuck against the patent leather of her church shoes.

This was just an interview—my grandmother Monique was very clear about that. Hubert was away, doing a round of pediatric visits on the other side of the island in Basse-Pointe. He often left for days at a time, moments my grandmother relished for their quiet and their privacy. Pascale, their only child, was still very young. Hiring a “da” could relieve Monique from the domestic duties of cooking and cleaning. She’d never quite learned to enjoy the chores of wifehood—Hubert had lost several kilos in the four years they’d been married. He was often the one to grill fish on the weekends and prepare a fresh sauce, some rice, a few carrots to go with it. Monique could only make *blanc manger coco* from a premixed powder, a gelatinous coconut pudding with fresh lime zest grated over the top. She’d already hired a housecleaner, but she need to someone to cook for Hubert and take care of Pascale during the day. Heloise had answered her advert in the newspaper, the first person to do so.

Monique poured hot coffee for her in the kitchen, adding a spoonful of condensed milk. It was evident that Heloise was not much for talking. She answered Monique’s questions in the shortest sentences possible, barely divulging that she was seventeen years old, had no children, and was not married. She’d grown up in the Lamentin region of the island, and

helped raise three younger siblings. She was adept at changing diapers, making yam mush, and was prepared to care for Pascale and any other children that might come along. No, she'd never exceeded the obligatory three years at the local high school. And could she cook?

Heloise nodded slowly. She reached down and pulled a basket up onto the table, folding back a clean napkin to reveal a brioche. It shimmered like a bar of buttered gold. Next to it nestled a jar neatly labeled "*confiture de coco*".

Monique lifted the bread to her mouth. It smelled and tasted better than anything she'd had in a very, very long time. The scent filled the kitchen, and filled her mouth, and filled her stomach. The loaf was full with the familiar sweetness of fresh butter and new yeast.

Monique thought of the white-faced baker's boy to whom she'd given her first kiss, flour in his eyebrows and his pores and probably his lungs. She took another bite. And the jam! It was thick and sweet and dark with telltale flecks of vanilla.

Heloise began her work at the Monlouis household that evening. My grandmother was unabashed about hiring all the help she needed in order to balance a thriving career with a healthy, prolific family. Heloise was the necessary ingredient to her success—the salt that had been lacking in her first years of marriage. Her presence seemed to flick on a lightbulb in the Monlouis household. It was like having a sun in the kitchen cooking breadfruit with pork as if it was the most ordinary thing. But really, the whole world rotated around her.

Within a month, everyone in Fort-de-France was whispering about the new cook in the house on the hill. Heloise woke at four in the morning and kneaded bread into elegant braids while the sky turned milky rose—a little sliver of moon caught in the dawn like a child's fingernail clipping. The neighborhood murmured and stirred as the smell of bread drifting through their last hours of sleep. They'd wake with mouths full of water, wondering what excuse could warrant a trip to the Monlouis kitchen. It was said that when Heloise cooked fish with green figs in coconut milk, men on the other side of the island turned their noses to the wind and smacked their lips. During her weekly visit to the hairdresser Madame Dupard, the Monlouis' neighbor, gleefully suggested that Heloise had sold her soul to the devil in order to perfect her *crème brûlée*. These rumors only increased the demand for Heloise's creations. The grocer offered to trade a month's worth of carrots for a single *tarte tatin*, while the priest at the local parish offered a private Bible study session to Monique and her girlfriends, provided they dine together afterwards.

Distant relatives dropped by unannounced, just to say hello. They carried baskets of pungent yellow guavas spiked with stubble, or a few pounds of fresh coffee, a jug of fresh cane juice. Neighbors, friends, and acquaintances knocked on the front door, faces obscured by armfuls of *alpinia* or blue jacaranda. The latter were Heloise's favorite flowers, and guaranteed entry to the white house on the hill. My grandmother claims that even the *matoutou*—colorful land crabs—climbed sideways out of the creek to push through the steaming kitchen compost, searching for leftover tart crust. This detail in particular fascinated me as a child. During our visits to Martinique I placed leftovers along the edge of the ravine to try and tempt out the enormous *matoutou* but without success. They only wanted Heloise's magic food and by the time I was born she was long gone from the house on the hill.

Every baptism, communion, funeral, birthday, deathday, and holiday provided an excuse to visit and taste Heloise's food. The once still home became filled with the rustle of starched skirts, the patter of children racing across hardwood, the tinny, joyous shiver of *zouk* music. Visitors exchanged pleasantries with my grandmother over silver pots of coffee and cake cratered with soft prunes; Heloise was still exceedingly quiet. She preferred to stay in the kitchen, singing funny creole songs as the house cat—Minou—wound round her ankles and Pascale banged music out of pots with a wooden spoon.

For the first time since they'd left their childhood homes the Monlouis' dined on traditional French-Creole foods: spicy peas, pork, and patê for Christmas; steamed cockles in garlic aoli for the New Year. Easter was by far the most important. A month beforehand Heloise spent a Sunday afternoon in the mangroves setting traps with tins of catfood. By the end of the day she had collected a burlap sack full of thirty odd crabs, all different shades of green, yellow, blue, pink, and red. Their shells rubbed against each other and made a clicking, murmuring sound as they flailed and blinked in the sunny passenger seat of the tiny Peugeot she'd borrowed for the occasion. At home she tossed the crabs into a cage made of chicken wire Hubert had set up in the backyard. Heloise purified the flesh of the *matoutou* over the next month, feeding them celery and big leafy bunches of parsley, rondelles of crunchy carrot, and an enormous quantity of the spiciest peppers she could possibly find—peppers so hot she used gloves to push them into the crab cage. This mixture seasoned the meat while the animal was still living. On Easter Sunday, each crab was dropped into a pot of boiling water before being served whole, crouched on the gold-rimmed plates as if planning

a spectacular escape. Instead, they were devoured whole, their soft flesh dipped into homemade mayonnaise or melted butter.

Heloise lived in the house with the family. Her small bedroom was decorated with movie posters, fresh flowers, a large full-length mirror. She had the weekends off, and liked to go dancing. Sometimes, with Hubert's blessing, she borrowed the Monlouis car and drove to the interior of the island to pick up her younger siblings and treat them to a day at the beach. After these outings she returned marginally more talkative than usual, excited to share stories of coconut ice-cream flecked with lime rind and cinnamon, the size of the waves and sometimes the handsome boys she'd met playing volleyball. Monique was only 24, close enough in age that she missed the unfettered, childish freedom that rolled off her in waves after those weekends. The two women became fast friends. They shared private moments in the kitchen while they made up the week's menus, skirts pressed between hot knees and hair tied up in crisp linen knots. Their fingers buried into little bowls of spicy peanuts while they argued about the merits of *potage* on a Sunday, Chinese fans flicking uselessly at the heat. On Saturday nights they completed their weekly shampoos in separate bathrooms and met in the kitchen, heads heavy with plastic curlers. Monique poured two glasses of clear rum, and they played dominos. The winner got to use the dryer first.

A year passed. My aunt Pascale turned five. Monique became editor in chief of her publishing firm, and Hubert's reputation as a pediatrician of great skill kept him travelling constantly. But the young couple was learning a lesson about the fundamental impermanence of all things—particularly love. Hubert's quiet wasn't as charming as that first day on the docks. He often went for weeks without asking Monique a single question,

without speaking a single word, even. When guests came over Hubert sat in his office and smoked tarry cigarettes, their blue smoke curling out the window to tint the air with his absence. But every month or so he'd appear at the kitchen table with a glass of rum and an idea—he valued his wife's entrepreneurial intelligence and used her as a sounding board for his quiet, practical dreams.

One such project was “*Operation Mille Cocotiers*”. Hubert had become obsessed with fixing the erosion problem at his favorite beach in the South of the island, Sainte-Anne. The goal was to plant one thousand coconut trees to hold together the fine, sugared sand and provide some shade from the ferocious southern sun. Monique created posters, sourced volunteers, and raised money with a bake sale that recreated famous old-time Caribbean sweets. The young couple collected coconuts from all corners of the island, filling their car over and over again with the fragrant, sticky globes and driving them the hour and a half to the south. They spent whole weekends burying the seeds along the edge of the beach. Hubert and Monique liked to swim in the ocean afterwards, share a quiet picnic, and make the drive home in the dark, with little Pascale's strapped on Monique's lap. The project took several years, and gradually became the only time they spent together.

Mornings were the only time the little family was routinely under the same roof. Dawn came early to the house on the hill, brought on by the rumble of the garbage truck or the cacophony of cheerful parakeets breakfasting in the lime tree. Heloise's presence created a comfortable morning routine: Monique woke up the earliest, and was writing by the time Hubert emerged from the bedroom. Heloise set out a porcelain dish of almonds and a sliced pear for his breakfast. He ate them standing up, reading the newspaper over a strong,

miniscule cup of coffee before spending an hour or so wandering through the garden, feeding the dogs, stopping every few steps to pluck a tender weed from the red earth. Many years later I liked to trail behind him on these morning walks through the same garden, pretending to pick weeds just as he did, my chubby fingers digging into the soil.

The well-oiled chatter of my grandmother's Olivetti typewriter rang through the house while he finished his rounds, showered, and went off to work in his neatly pressed white doctor's coat. Monique left her study after three hours to eat a handful of apple seeds, a trick she used to fill the hollow of her stomach. She claimed they swelled inside of her, making her feel full and killing her appetite.

I was fascinated by this particular quirk of hers until the second grade when my class studied Johnny Appleseed. We learned that apple seeds contain cyanide, and can be poisonous when ingested in very large quantities. I returned home that afternoon troubled; I'd seen my grandmother eat the apple seeds by the handful. My mother helped me call her long distance, California to Martinique, to ask how she could eat so many apple seeds and still be alive. She carefully explained that she was descended from a great goddess of the earth, and was therefore immortal. The apple seeds could not hurt her. This made perfect sense, and explained why her skin was the same color as the volcanic soil of the island to which she belonged. To this day, Monique continues the same routine—apple seeds for breakfast.

## Chapter Six

In May, Monique became pregnant with her second child. She began to spend more time in the kitchen with Heloise, reading piles of manuscripts at the big wooden table, sampling every jam and bread crust, relishing the meaty pearls of pig's tail used to flavor stews. Two months into the pregnancy, Pascale's hand-me-down baby clothes were unfolded from their tissue in an idle moment of looking-forwards-to. Hubert and Monique made plans for the repainting of the crib, and discussed converting one of the spare bedrooms into a playroom for the children.

Monique was two and a half months pregnant when a chair was accidentally pulled out from under her at the office. The fall was embarrassing and painful, almost staged in its absurdity. She collapsed down on the wooden floor with a little, involuntary gasp. Even as her secretary rushed to help her up by the elbows she trembled and whimpered, knowing her baby had burst like an overripe plum.

That night Heloise went out into the back garden and ripped handfuls of fragrant *bois d'Inde* leaves from the trees. She drew a bath for Monique, and piled clean towels next to the sink. The little blue bassinette—once used for Pascale's own baths—was filled with boiling water and cinnamon oil, and she soaked washcloths in the mixture, wringing them out before placing them carefully across Monique's eyes. Tears leaked out from underneath. Heloise rubbed my grandmother's cramping stomach with thick, red oil. Under her patient pressure, the bathwater became blushed with blood. It was drained and replaced, drained and replaced

again. Monique cried and shivered, holding Heloise's hand with both of hers, bird-boned without their ordinary rings and bracelets.

Hubert was away, and both the women were grateful for it.

Heloise guarded the next pregnancy closely, feeding Monique spoonfuls of potent potion every morning despite her vague objections to such opaque witchcraft—*sorterie quimbois*. But it was with secret relief that she entered the second trimester, relishing the nuisances of weight gain and the snug fit of her linen trousers. She and Heloise began to take walks together every morning, shuffling up the road to the top of the hill. The turquoise commuters' bus passed them, stopping to collect ladies balancing baskets of bananas or school children books tied in leather straps. From the top of their walk they could look out on all of Fort-De-France—see if there were any clouds moving in from across the ocean, or whether a cruise ship had docked down in the port. In certain seasons the hot, dry sirocco winds swept a fine sugar of foreign sand across the island, and all became hazy. In others storm clouds piled over the interior of the island in ominous peaks.

On the way back down they often collected sprays of bougainvillea heavy with rain, or pulled at the leaves of a traveller's palm to sip water from the fresh, surprising hollows inside. The bus overtook them as it picked its way back down the hill, wheezing and gasping like an old metal armadillo.

Monique continued to work throughout the pregnancy, and Hubert encouraged her. She loved her career, the network of powerful women she surrounded herself with at the office,

the money she made. The couple shared living expenses between them, but the rest was free to be used in whatever way they desired. They bought a plot of land in Sainte-Anne and built a wooden house with a dry, desert garden that sloped straight into the blue light of the sea. There was room for a stable, and two horses, and a tiny tin fishing boat that Hubert took out for hours and hours at a time. Every month Monique and her friends would gather at the house in Sainte-Anne to drink white rum, play cards, and pool their money to invest in the stock market. Every year they withdrew money from their collective investments to fund an entrepreneurial endeavor; once it was a book about the history of all the street names on the island of Martinique, the next year they founded a scholarship for women to pursue vocational educations as plumbers and electricians. Monique's group of friends was made up of successful, intelligent women who dreamt with appetite. Heloise would join them in order to cook and dole out little tidbits of valuable advice.

Several months later my grandmother gave birth to a baby girl, my mother. Anne-Valerie was born fat and warm, like a perfect loaf of bread with a full head of hair. "Anne" was Monique's choice, a very sensible name—not easily mistaken for anything it wasn't. "Valerie" was my aunt Pascale's choice; she was reading a series of picture books about a little girl named Valerie who had great adventures. It was a good name, and my grandfather proudly weighed his second daughter on his own pediatric scales, exclaiming that all the brioche Monique had eaten during her pregnancy had become this perfectly round, squirming bonbon of a child.

Anne-Valerie's baptism was an excuse to cook extravagant foods. Heloise's shrimp tart, a whole tuna grilled above an open fire, sea urchin scrambled with hot pepper and butter. The

cake was a towering, crystalized mountain of *profiteroles*, garnished with sugar roses and little pink bows and miniscule birds spun in caramel. Anne-Valerie was the confection in the midst of it all, wearing the same floor-length dress Pascale had worn before her, and Madame Monlouis as well, many years before. I would wear the same gown for my baptism, as my cousin Pierre peed in the Holy Water and our family packed a tiny Parisian church on a rainy day in February.

My grandmother returned to work the week after my mother's birth, bored with staying in bed and eating fruit. Heloise helped pump her thick milk into glass bottles, feeding Anne-Valerie every hour or so with the same care and attention she put into her cooking. She would melt a tiny spoonful of condensed milk into the tepid breastmilk, a trick that caused the mewling bundle of fists and feet to double in size within a month. Anne-Valerie was a robust and demanding child, intelligent and with the appetite of someone twice her size. She was darker skinned than her sister, but lighter than either of her parents. My mother's first memories were of Heloise's arms, the smell of the essence of orange flower used to wash her face, the rasp of a boar bristle hairbrush through her thick nest of curls. Heloise kept Anne-Valerie company, playing with her and distracting her from pulling the cat's tail, letting her bang on pots and pans or play with big bowls of dried red beans. By the age of four she could carefully tie together bundles of bay leaves to flavor stews, make a perfect soft boiled egg, and fillet a small fish. She had Heloise's kinetic intelligence, an instinct for chocolate soufflés, the fine finger-work necessary for shelling tiger prawns.

But Anne-Valerie was a quiet child. She didn't string words together until worryingly close to her second birthday and continued to be silent and withdrawn until the age of five. It wasn't

that she was shy—in fact Anne engaged readily with strangers, peers, and her parents. But while other children her age chattered happily, she remained contentedly mute. Hubert, a pediatrician, was concerned with Anne’s slow speech development. He was familiar with the timeline for these things, and Anne-Valerie’s silence was not normal. At first, my grandmother rolled her eyes and told him to let the child unfurl at her own pace. Monique observed Heloise and Anne in the kitchen together, communicating through a series of silent gestures. They had developed the sure intuition of two people who never spent a waking moment apart; they did not need words. But Anne could not spend her whole life over a pot of caramel. It was time for her to leave the kitchen; it was time for an intervention.

## Chapter Seven

There was an easy solution. The most talkative person on earth, my great-grandmother Emilie—Hubert’s mother and Fernand’s wife—lived directly up the hill through a swath of hairy cinnamon trees. The flight of steps cut a windy, scenic path to the second house on the Monlouis compound. They created a routine: Every morning Anne-Valerie would make the trek through the fragrant forest, imagining all sorts of fairies and animals playing in the fragrant leaves. She wore her hair in two tight braids, pulled back on top of her head in stiff ropes shining with oil. Anne had a special pair of shoes dedicated to this walk, and was often spanked for forgetting to wear them and ruining her tiny patent leather Mary Jane’s. My great-grandmother Emilie was called Mami Gatée by the whole family—“Gatée” meaning to spoil or pamper—and for good reason.

Anne looked forwards to the days spent with Mami Gatée. Every morning Mami would wake up and clean her immaculate house, dusting out the bad dreams and shaking the carpets in the sunshine, maybe organizing her cutlery drawer or polishing her beautiful wooden furniture. She prepared a simple breakfast for Fernand, always the same thing: a little silver dish of walnuts, two prunes, an apple or a pear, and a steaming bowl of hot coffee and chocolate mixed with condensed milk. Anne-Valerie sat at attention and watched as he ate, sometimes receiving a sliver of fruit and a tug on one of her braids. Since Papi Fernand was blind, she often attempted to sneak a prune out from under his nose. He would always catch her just as the prune was about to reach her mouth. Sometimes, she’d reach out and *pretend* to take a prune without actually grabbing one. He always knew, and let her hand pass idly to her mouth without moving a muscle.

In the morning there were a few lessons, some reading, some math, perhaps a little gardening. But most of the day was spent talking, and talking, and talking. Anne and her grandmother prepared lunch together, something easy like grated carrots with fresh garlic and vinaigrette and a filet of fresh fish.

After lunch, every day of the week, a group of Mami Gatée's friends would come over to play dominos and chatter incessantly. Anne-Valerie had to stay for this and soak it all in like a shy little sponge. She heard the click of the ivory dominos, and was allowed to eat some cake, but most of all she had to listen intently for at any moment one of the friends could fire a question at her and she better be ready with an answer. Tante Adele, Tante Marie, and Tante Melodie they were called. They always came to Mami's house because she had the largest porch and an endless supply of snacks. Tante Adele wore knee high leather boots with stiff, fine laces that crisscrossed back and forth under her big skirts. To this day, my mother is not a fan of this popular shoe fashion.

Inevitably, the women would broach a that was inappropriate for Anne's tender ears and she'd be dismissed into the garden to play, just out of earshot of the peals of old-lady laughter. It was a wonderful garden full of gem lettuces, carrots, beets, and thick tufts of fragrant parsley. There were enormous green calabashes hanging over the fence from the neighbors yard, and Devil's Ivy snaking around the cinnamon trees. Every corner of the garden was moist and full of lizards—*anolis* they are called. Once she spotted one or two lizards flirting around the mouth of a broken clay pipe Anne-Valerie would sprint back to the house and tug on Mami's sleeve. She wanted sugar, because sugar was the *anolis*'s favorite food. Mami would give her a spoonful of brown sugar in a tiny saucer set aside for just this

purpose. She would mix the sugar with a little tepid, clear water and make a soup to bring back to the lizards. Anne would set the dish down and back up, far back enough not to disturb the lizards. They would streak across like little fluorescent comets and stop, completely still, noses dipped into the sugar water. Then, if she was lucky, she could creep up close enough to watch their tiny tongues lap at the liquid. Neighborhood boys liked to catch the lizards and tie their tails together but Anne-Valerie just wanted to feed them.

Every night at precisely eight pm Mami Gatée would move through the house and close all of the blinds, creating complete artificial darkness inside. It was bedtime, and nothing anyone could say or do could dissuade her from this routine. In fact, it was Papi Fernand who required the blinds to be closed, and Emilie respected his wishes. I remember once asking my mother why the blinds had to be closed if Papi Fernand couldn't see—it couldn't possibly make a difference to him as a blind man. My mother stared at me in amazement; it was a good point.

Anne-Valerie finally started talking during that year's sugarcane harvest.

Before cutting the cane the entire field must be burned. The flame strips away the dead and dry leaf matter while the heat loosens the waxy coating on the cane. The fires burn so quickly and with such intensity that there's no time for the fibrous stalk to burn properly—just the leaves. The ash from the cane fires fills the air with a hazy, snow-like swirl of fine soot. It's the closest thing Martinique has to snow.

That year's cane burning was a particularly magical time of year. The haze rained down into Mami's vegetable garden, covering the leaves of her precious vegetables in a soft fur. She and Anne-Valerie dedicated their mornings to cleaning the bright little lettuces with damp paper towels. For reasons unclear, the ash inspired a flood of commentary from Anne-Valerie who was enthralled by the smell of burning sugar. She imagined the whole island was slowly turning into a smoky caramel, melting in the sea. It was as if the heat had peeled back her shyness, burned away what was left of her babyhood and left this sharp, sassy girl. She chattered constantly to Heloise who smiled and nodded, stirring béchamel on the stove. Anne-Valerie began asking for more things, tasting and commenting in the kitchen where before she'd simply watched. Language arises out of need, and the girl needed to be seen.

When she started school a year later, Anne-Valerie was sent home after the first day with a note written by her teacher. It explained very clearly that she had not stopped talking for the entirety of the class, very disruptive behavior for the rest of her peers who seemed particularly prone to catching her contagious chattiness. Monique was secretly so pleased that she didn't say anything to Anne or the teacher, and sent her daughter off to school the next day with a smile and a tug on the braid. This behavior earned Ann-Valerie the nickname "*Moustique*"— "Mosquito". It would be the beginning of much mischief.

## *Chapter Eight*

Stephan, the youngest and last of the Monlouis children was born on a rainy Wednesday much like the one on which Heloise first arrived. His arrival book-ended Anne-Valerie into a state of permanent childhood anxiety. From that moment forward, she was insecure in her middle-ness, constantly preoccupied by the fear that she wasn't receiving enough attention. It was groundless—both parents loved upon their children boundlessly. Anne-Valerie was particularly intelligent, the kind of cleverness that cuts. Monique prized this quality above all. She was deeply gratified to have produced three beautiful, intelligent, healthy children—much as she'd been gratified to build her career with such care and success.

Now that she'd done her part in birthing them, Monique threw herself wholeheartedly back into the business of publishing and editing; her late nights at the office were only surpassed by my grandfather's. Always prone to silence, he became a ghost. His absence was amplified by the momentary, dreamlike appearances he made at bedtime, or in the doorway of Anne-Valerie's room very, very early in the morning. Hubert stopped home briefly between long shifts at the hospital. Weekends he often spent volunteering his pediatric skillset at orphanage where he cared for 60-some lonely, clamoring children. It was yet another project he'd dedicated his life to. From the age of five Anne-Valerie recognized the irony—her own father seemed more interested in parenting children that did not belong to him.

But Heloise was there, always with a spoon to lick or a ribbon to tame Anne-Valerie's firework of snarly curls. The child converted her middle-anxiety into a series of mounting antics. She had what Heloise called "a bad bone", a penchant for pulling hair and scrapping

on the playground, locking the cat in the cellar or cutting up fat, gentle moths with sewing scissors. Anne-Valerie carefully constructed an impish—almost cruel—personality, constantly demanding snacks and cuddles from Heloise with an entitled stomp of her heel. At dinner, she would go so far as to call Heloise *maman*, turning ferociously liquid eyes towards her own mother with all the finesse of a pinch under the table.

Pascale, Anne-Valerie, and Stephan did not get along particularly well. Their childhoods were filled with bitter squabbles and sulky, impermanent truces. But between the three existed a rare and vicious camaraderie. Pascale would corroborate Anne-Valerie's wild tall-tales she spread around the playground, while Anne reciprocated by terrorizing any girls giving her older sister trouble, once going so far as to cut off an enemy's braid during recess. Stephan was the baby, happily allowing himself to be towed around like a stuffed animal, dressed up as a princess, or blamed for any accidents. Heloise loved all three, but had special room in her heart reserved for Anne-Valerie and her deep pockets of trouble.

Half the island was invited for my grandmother's thirty-fifth birthday celebration. There was to be a big party in the garden, tables and chairs clustered on the patio, little yellow lights and garlands of bougainvillea. Heloise hired two of the neighborhood girls to help serve food. Their mothers—friends of Monique—volunteered them willingly, hoping a little bit of Heloise's magic might rub off on them in the hot kitchen. They wore starched aprons over their Sunday dresses and had their hair in many smooth braids, tied with pink bobbles.

The guests began to arrive in the late afternoon, shaking out black umbrellas full of rain and serving themselves cut crystal tumblers of rum. The brave ones added a splash of fiery

ginger syrup made by Mami Gatée. The more traditional guests muddled brown sugar with a spray of lime zest. This *'ti ponche* was a routine prescription for existence on the island, a product of fibrous blue sugar cane and many mysterious ferments in oak barrels. It cut through the limp humidity that suffocated the appetite, and marked the beginning of any celebration worth attending.

With *'ti ponche* came *boudin creole*, a simple steamed blood sausage bearing little resemblance to its grilled French cousin. It was one of Heloise's specialties. In preparation for the party she'd spent days slicing perfect cubes of stale bread, green onions from the garden, and fiery scotch bonnets. She softened the paste with warm milk, stirred in cassava flour and let it congeal in a big bowl, well out of reach of the cat.

Heloise got her blood from the finest butcher—my grandfather drove her to the Saturday night market for the express purpose of picking up the plastic jars of pig's blood, still hot from the animal's gaping throat. They raced back up the hill in the little tin-can Peugeot, trying to reach the kitchen before the blood cooled. Heloise insisted that the best *boudin* was made with warm blood, and no one disputed her claim.

She whisked the blood into the bread mixture, and stuffed the fragrant paste into clean, empty intestine—like limp bluish stockings.

The *boudin* wasn't cooked until the last minute before the party—Heloise tipped the sausages into boiling water just as the guests gravitated towards the tables. They settled down, nibbling roasted peanuts and hot beignets of salted cod and spring onion—slipping swollen

feet from Sunday shoes under the table, clinking ice cubes and fanning themselves with napkins in a quiver of anticipation. The blood firmed within a few minutes and each shivering, spiced pocket was heaped onto the serving plate. One of the little waitresses tried to pick up the plate, and her cinnamon-stick arms trembled under the weight of the sausages. Heloise divvied them up between two platters, clucking gently.

Each of the serving girls carried a plate in a firm, two-handed grip. They walked around each table, offering every guest a sausage, snipped from its neighbor by a pair of heavy silver scissors. The delicate surgery created a tiny opening at the top of the intestine casing just wide enough to squeeze the hot blood paste onto a torn sliver of bread.

The table went quiet as everyone ate. Heloise, leaning against the stove in the kitchen, smiled to herself as Madame graciously accepted compliments on the food and bounced Anne on a slender knee.

It was the most successful birthday party of my grandmother's life, which she still refers to as bathed in some strange magic. Each guest took home a little waxed packet of leftovers, dizzy with alcohol and dancing, murmuring again and again how good, how good, how good it all was.

That was Heloise's magic.

## Chapter Nine

The busy house became quieter after Hubert's affair became public knowledge. The parties, the birthdays, the first communions drifted past like flower petals, sinking to the floor without a sound. Monique focused on her work, trying to go limp in the face of her heartache.

My mother spent her adolescence motoring around on a dusty blue scooter, sneaking out to dances and friends' houses, trying on her sister's over-sized high heels and practicing being a back-up dancer for the French pop singer Claude François. She rode the horses with Pascale and Stephan at the beach house in Sainte-Anne, became a windsurfing champion and travelled to South America with her cousin Sophie. Hubert—when he was around—took pains to educate his children about money, about recognizing fevers, about how to climb the immense coconut tree in the back garden. He employed them for "*Operation Mille Cocotiers*" and attended judo practice and made very good tomato and swiss cheese sandwiches. Monique assigned reading lists and bought jewelry for her daughters, helped with homework and drove them to Sunday school. And yet, there was a distance creeping between them, worming into the cracks left by long afternoons alone in the house, or a forgotten piano recital. Monique and Hubert were distracted by their own dramas, and Heloise watched as the family became an archipelago, islands related but separate.

Pascale left for university in Paris, Anne-Valerie left for boarding school in Guadeloupe, and Stephan began military academy. Monique woke up one morning to an empty house, shared her morning coffee with Heloise, and filed divorce papers that afternoon. When Anne-

Valerie returned to Martinique for Christmas vacation, her mother was waiting with a new fiancée, Jean Mancho. Short and white, cheerful and characterized by a rich, purring, Marseilles accent. This was the man I would one day call my “Papi”—he is the only grandfather I’ve ever truly known.

Anne’s fourteenth birthday party was disco-themed. The girls wore glittery eye shadow and flared jeans with chunky heels they’d stolen from their mothers’ closets. Heloise had baked an elaborate cake scented with orange and drizzled in a thick, tart marmalade icing. After dinner she covered it in sparklers, transforming it into a shimmering tower of trembling cream. Everyone sang and clapped and screamed, and while Anne cut slices for her friends Heloise tugged on Monique’s sleeve.

She was leaving, she said. She was going to get married because she was in love, and it was time to go.

Heloise had already packed her bags, gathered her pans, her *moule a madelaines*, her spice rack, and left her orange cookbook on Anne-Valerie’s bed, all wrapped up in silver paper. Anne was a bridesmaid at her wedding, several months later, and helped prepare all the food for the reception afterwards. Meanwhile, the house on the hill was left to my grandfather while my grandmother and her new husband Jean moved to an apartment with a terrace and a view of the ocean. They could eat breakfast there and watch the enormous cruise ships pull into the bay like colorful, monolithic sea snails.

Their *boudin*, they learned to order from the grocer.

(But life went on.)

## *Thanks*

Thank you to my mother, who always comes to sit on the edge of my bed to tell me stories right when I'm falling asleep. It's very annoying, but it makes for wonderful dreams—fertile ground for this thesis. Thank you to my uncle Stephan, who fed me countless oysters and beers from the icebox while we talked late into the night. Thank you to my grandmother Monique, for impressing upon me the importance of fire. Thank you to Rosie Tical, for creating the most beautiful gold jewelry in the world, a constant reminder of where I come from. Thank you to Professor Peltason, who understands the fluidity of a “deadline”. Thank you to Ms. Wandke, my third grade teacher, who grabbed me by the shoulders when I was ten years old and whispered “You should write a book”. Thank you to my sibling, Charlie, who once crawled into my bed and asked in a very small voice, “Who are we?”

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