

## MARCH 2005

*Sak vid pa kanpe.  
An empty sack can't stand up.*

Nadine hesitated and pressed a hand against her lower back, the stairs to her second floor apartment looming steep after her long day, the entryway as cold as the late winter air outside. Samba music and the smell of peanuts, garlic, and ginger drifted from behind her downstairs neighbor's door. Then Yara, in a velvety red bathrobe, peeked out, glamorous as always, even at midnight in her own kitchen. The music swelled, and the spices announced themselves as her friend flung the door wide open.

"So late?" Yara said. "When are you going to quit that job and start cleaning houses with me? Changing sheets with no one in the bed is so easy, the money so much better. But you don't listen." She grabbed Nadine's arm, tucked it under her own, and steered her into the warm apartment. "Eat. Have a glass of wine. You'll sleep better. And I have something to show you." Yara patted the pocket of her bathrobe where a corner of white envelope peeked over the edge.

Nadine let herself be shepherded into a kitchen chair.

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How good it felt to settle her exhausted bones after a double shift. She shouldn't feel so tired—she was thirty-six not fifty. But her back complained as much as the old people she lifted on and off the commode all day long. Underneath it all Chance's recent refusal to do well in school, to come home on time, to listen to anything she had to say, sapped her energy as surely as a terminal disease.

"*Sak vid pa kanpe,*" she said. "This day has emptied me." A bowl of chicken stew, a plate of *pão de queijo*, and a glass filled to the top with pink wine appeared in front of her. She dropped her heavy purse onto the floor.

Yara sat down across from her and refilled her own glass. Nadine, still in her black winter coat, popped a warm roll into her mouth. She loved that cheese bread, crispy on the outside and warm and gooey in the middle, and Yara's stew was one of the best she'd ever eaten, but she would have enjoyed soup from a can if someone heated it up for her.

"Sister, you're a mess." Yara sipped her wine, little finger in the air, then slid the envelope from her pocket, laid it on the table next to her glass, and covered it with the flat of her palm. Her long fingernails shone gold this week with tiny rhinestones glued to them, little stars that sparkled when she gestured. How did she clean houses with nails like that? No doubt her crew of recently arrived family members did the heaviest, nail-threatening work.

"I don't look so bad." Nadine knew her short hair always looked neat. She could stand to lose a few pounds, but her body had a nice shape. Families of patients said she had a "dazzling" smile and the cheekbones of a fashion model. "I'm tired. You remember what it's like to work a double."

"That's what I'm saying!" Yara leaned forward. "You—"

"You don't need to tell me again to quit Riverview," Nadine said. "I know what you think." In the eight years since Yara

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had left the nursing home and started her own business, she'd made enough money to buy this two-family house from the landlord, hire her cousins to fix it up, and help her two daughters through UMass Boston. In fact, sometimes Nadine had to wonder if her cleaning business was all she had going on.

Nadine swished her cold drink around in her mouth. She wished she could relax—stop straining her ears, listening for Chance's footsteps.

"Have you heard my son come home?"

"No." Yara slipped a photo from the envelope. "Look, it's my grandchild. It's a boy." She pointed at a spot on the sonogram. "My son-in-law, the doctor, sent it to me."

Nadine squinted at a black-and-white smudge. "Very nice," she said. It didn't seem natural or right to be taking pictures of people who weren't yet born. She'd had ultrasound scans when she was pregnant with Henry and Chance, but never a photo to show the world. Why rush such a thing? Yara's daughter, Luiza, knew just where her baby was. Yara's daughter's body was all that baby needed.

Yara plucked the ultrasound picture from Nadine's hand and stared at it, a dreamy smile on her face. "I'll go down to New York when he's born. Until then I'll pray every day for an easy birth."

"Birth is just the beginning," Nadine said. "While you are at it, pray for a long healthy life with enough to eat. Pray he be protected from violence. Pray he find a good job. Pray he stays out of trouble. Do you know that every day I come home to recorded messages from the school? 'Your son,' then they fill in the name—'Chance Antoine'—'was absent from' and they fill it in again, 'second period, third period, any class.' What do they expect from me? Yesterday there was a real message from the assistant principal, telling me to come for a meeting."

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Her friend looked up from the picture. "Say to yourself, Chance is a good boy. He is."

Nadine sucked her teeth with a loud *tuipe*, and helped herself to another roll.

Her other son, Henry, always did his best. If he hadn't, he wouldn't be in expensive private college on a full scholarship. Chance had nothing, no plans for next year. She'd made a mistake raising him so loosely, but after all the beatings she'd endured, she vowed she'd never hit her children and had been proud of mostly keeping that promise to herself. And he had been a good enough boy until this year. A favorite with his teachers, Chance's biggest problem had been that "he talked to his neighbors." When she had asked him about it, he said, "When they change my seat to move me away from my friends, I make new friends."

Yes. Nadine wanted to smack him, then and now. And yet she wished she made friends that easily. Yara was her only real friend in Cambridge. But lately, when she complained about Chance, Yara just said, "Chance is a good boy." When she complained about Riverview, Yara said "Quit."

Yara refilled Nadine's wine to the top, where only surface tension kept it from overflowing. Nadine dipped her head and sipped without lifting the glass. She would talk about something else.

"You know that Mrs. Watkins I've been telling you about?" Nadine said. "The old lady who had a stroke—ninety-five years old?"

"The one who only wants white aides?" Yara laughed. "Good luck to her with that. The one who can't talk, but somehow manages to call you a thief. I'm telling you, enough is enough with that job!"

Hazel Watkins's tenacity reminded Nadine of the grandmothers she'd known as a child in the mountains on

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Lagonav. Once people passed a certain age, they kept on going, nothing but bones covered with loosening skin, and they still worked every day. “I don’t mind the old people. I like the feisty ones, their spirit.”

“So what about her?”

“Her son is the boys’ old basketball coach, from the center.” Mrs. Watkins had welcomed her son with an even colder version of the same hateful squint she directed toward everyone else. Nadine could not imagine looking at her boys that way, even with the way Chance was acting lately. “He told me he’s been to Haiti. He tried to speak *Kreyòl* with me.”

“Is he handsome?” Yara wanted to be married again before she turned forty and was always trying to find both of them boyfriends.

“Two months she’s been in there, and he hasn’t shown his face until today. Terrible to abandon his mother like that. She is very angry.” He had never come to feed Mrs. Watkins, rub her feet, or bring her the littlest thing to make life more beautiful—her favorite butterscotch candy, a cheerful plant, never mind the communication aid that he kept promising. “Maybe it is because he is a man—men and boys can be so selfish.” Nadine envied Yara her money, her beauty, but most of all her daughters. “You have good girls.”

“How old is he? His mother’s ninety-five! But older men can be better than young ones, more settled, more money, knowing how to treat a woman. What’s he look like? Is he short? Is he fat? Is he bald?”

Nadine tried to conjure a clear picture of him. Gary Watkins had a neatly-trimmed brown beard with a touch of gray, wire-framed glasses and a compact body. “He was wearing a baseball cap, so I don’t know.”

“He’s bald then,” Yara said. “Older men with baseball caps always are. Anyway, there is a lot to worry about with daughters too.”

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“Maybe.” Nadine listened when Yara spoke. She’d graduated from college in Brazil and studied psychology; she knew a lot about people and their secrets from cleaning their houses. “In Haiti, girls work harder, but if a mother dies the father might send her away. To live with relatives or even strangers who could offer a better life. Too much trouble to keep her if there is no one to fix the hair.” Nadine pushed away the image of herself at fourteen in Uncle Maxim’s beautiful pink American bathroom, resigned and lonely, using his electric clippers to shape her hair for the first time into the short style she’d worn ever since. She’d collected the hair in a paper bag and burned it in his gas grill. The smell caught in her throat and lingered in the air. When he came home from a business meeting he beat her—for cutting off the hair he liked to touch or using his fancy grill, she never knew.

“Chance is a good boy,” Yara said. “Say that to yourself over and over.”

Nadine swallowed the last of her wine and pressed her fingertips to her forehead. She massaged her temples with her thumbs.

“Your girls never stayed out all night or came home drunk. The school never called telling you they hadn’t come to class. Henry might be a good boy, but Chance is not, and saying something over and over won’t make it true.” He didn’t listen to her anymore. It was as if someone had cursed him. Maybe someone jealous of Henry’s success.

“Everyone has problems. Girls aren’t any easier. What’s easier is someone else’s child.” Yara stretched, yawned, and shook out her long dark hair. “I love this song!” She twirled out of the kitchen into the living room, where she turned up the music.

Nadine closed her eyes and let the music help her pretend

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that she was somewhere far away. When she got upstairs she'd put her feet up, watch her favorite show, *How to Look Good Naked*, where an enthusiastic homosexual man taught women to like their bodies. She'd take a hot bath, throwing in some mint leaves and basil. Then she'd sleep.

"I'm telling you," Yara said. "Quit that job and you'll feel like the young woman you are. You need to dance more." She cleared the dishes to a *samba* beat. The outside door slammed shut; footsteps pounded up the stairs, and Nadine's whole body relaxed. A space opened around her heart; she could breathe easily. With her son home, safe in his bed, she'd be sure to sleep well. Before she could stand up, Yara had the door open calling up to Chance. Even before he appeared in the kitchen, the thick stink of marijuana mixed with the smell of Yara's stew.

"Smells bomb in here!" Chance burst in head bobbing, pants sagging, wires dangling from his ears, eyes bleary slits. "What's cooking? *Manman*. Yara."

"Hey, baby." Yara grabbed his elbows and kissed him on each cheek. Nadine couldn't remember the last time she'd touched him like that.

Chance gave his big dimpled smile and bent to kiss the top of Yara's head. He took her hands and started to move in time with the music. He spun her under his arm. The wine sloshed in Nadine's tight stomach.

They danced a few measures. Chance helped himself to a handful of rolls from the basket Yara held out to him. She handed him a heaping bowl of stew, which he ate standing up in just a few giant bites while bobbing to the next song. Nadine rested her forehead in her hand and imagined how good it would feel to lie down on her pillow. Yara touched her shoulder. "Don't let your heart be angry," she whispered.

Angry? She was exhausted and a little bit drunk. Chance's

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phone sounded a bar of his terrible music. Yes, she was angry. Anger was necessary in many situations.

Chance dropped his bowl and spoon into the sink and rubbed his stomach as his phone played the tune over and over. Yara posed like a gangster, folding her sparkly fingers into a strange gesture. Chance laughed, gestured back, and answered his phone. “Yo.” He slouched into the next room.

“This isn’t funny,” Nadine said. “This is nothing to laugh about.”

“Chance is a good boy,” Yara said. “You are a good mother. Believe it. It’s important to believe it.”

Nadine slapped the edge of the table. “I’m not stupid.”

“You’re tired,” Yara said. “You need a new job so you have the energy to have a good time.”

She was tired. And angry. And scared. But mostly angry.

“The principal said he wouldn’t walk at graduation,” Nadine said.

“Wouldn’t walk” sounded like someone, the security guards maybe, would break his legs. Break his legs and place him at a desk. If only some strong man would care enough about her careless, beautiful boy to do that.

“You’ll talk with him—”

“Yo, *Manman*.” Chance paused in the doorway with his heavy-lidded eyes and his know-it-all smirk. “I’m outta here. Junior’s crib.”

“You’re not leaving now! It’s late.” Nadine willed herself to speak calmly, but the wine had loosened her lips. “You didn’t even wash your dish after Yara fed you! And where have you been?”

“Junior’s crib. Spitting fire.” He drummed a measure on his thigh. “But we need to redo the track.”

“Always these messages from the school. Only a few months left, and what are you doing? The principal called today. It’s very serious now.”

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Chance sighed long and loud. “Mom, chill. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Yara fanned herself with the ultrasound picture and patted Nadine’s arm, her forehead wrinkling in concern.

Nadine turned on her friend. “This is a good boy?” She shook Yara’s hand off her sleeve. “I know I would never waste the opportunity for schooling! You!” She blocked the door to the hallway and shouted at Chance. “*You* don’t know what *you’re* talking about!”

He filled a glass with water. “I said, chill.” Nadine knew not to go on about the years she spent lugging water on her head, first up the mountain paths in her village, and later, after Uncle Maxim took her to Port-au-Prince, through dusty streets from the communal tap. Once those words began to spill out, they wouldn’t stop. Chance flicked his wrist, the water flowing, and drank. She watched, clenching and unclenching her fists at her sides, breathing hard.

“You must go to school tomorrow. We have to meet with that man.”

“I already been meeting with him. Seriously, relax.” An insolent grin stretched his face. “They never keep track of seniors in the last semester. Junior has a session scheduled at a studio. I gots to be there.”

“You think you are some big shot? More special than any other person? You need to go to school!”

Music blasted from Chance’s pocket, the same tune twice. He flipped open the phone and started talking the kind of English she had never learned in her ESL classes.

“Aye, homie. You got the whip? Word? You trippin’! I ain’t trying a hike over there.” He rolled his eyes. “Yeah? You burning? Aight den. I be there.”

He knew Haitian Creole, French, English, and even some Spanish, yet he chose this ghetto talk. When she

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had expressed her concern to his white teacher back in seventh grade, the teacher said not to worry; she called it “code switching,” said Chance spoke proper English when he needed to, that kids wanted to fit in with their friends. She made it sound as though he were clever to have another language. Teachers had always loved Chance and been wary with her, until it was too late, when even they had to say, “He isn’t working anywhere close to his potential”—their words, not hers. She had failed. She had failed him and herself. She should have beaten him.

“For real?” Chance, his back toward her now, spoke into his phone. “S good. One.”

Exhausted as she was, Nadine would never be able to sleep. She gripped the door frame and avoided Yara’s pity-filled gaze.

Chance filled his glass again, drank the water in one long swallow, and set the glass in the sink next to his dirty bowl. Nadine stood unmoving between him and the door.

A flicker of shame crossed his face. He turned back toward the sink, ran a sponge around the rim of the glass, rinsed it and put it in the dish drainer. “Aight. Later.” He brushed past her, answering his singing phone. The outside door slammed.

Nadine waited, relieved when Yara’s only comment was the clatter of pans at the counter.

“I need to call Henry,” she said. She would make him tell her what to do with his brother and wouldn’t let him go on and on about Miami rice and Creole pigs and all the policies he was learning about that made the US rich and Haiti poor. Henry was a good boy. A smart boy.



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Henry took advantage of the morning emptiness of the dorm's computer room to study his little brother's disturbing Myspace page. His mother's hysterical phone call in the middle of the night had made sleep impossible. He'd never heard her so upset.

At the opposite end of the counter that stretched along the windowed side of the room sat the mountainous guy everyone called Bear. Henry tried never to look too closely at Bear's red beard, flecked with unidentifiable crumbs. The guy's smudged glasses, unwashed hair, and strong yeasty smell made Henry sick. People had a responsibility to those around them to look and smell their best—it was a matter of respect. So many kids at this school acted like it was beneath them to give a shit about their appearance. Bear's flannel shirt was ripped at the arm hole. When he typed, it gaped, revealing a slice of mottled skin and red armpit hair. If Henry had ever worn torn clothes, his mother would have scolded him until his ears hurt.

"Been up all night working on this paper for linguistics," Bear muttered. "You do it yet?"

Henry nodded. He was not a procrastinator. In fact, he was extremely proud of his paper on the development of Haitian Creole and had already emailed it to the professor. He shifted in his chair, hoping the back of his head would discourage conversation. He gnawed on a sparerib left for him in the middle of the night by his roommate, realizing too late that John-o had neglected to include a napkin. Still chewing, he looked at his fingers and considered his options, finally wiping his sticky hands on his pants, up near the waistband under his shirt, before touching the keyboard.

"You're not allowed to eat in here." Sage, that self-righteous, vegan white girl with locs, plopped herself at the computer right next to Henry's. He purposefully helped himself to

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another rib, holding it between his thumb and index finger. He'd lick them clean later. She could have chosen any of the other twelve computers. Maybe she wanted to keep her distance from Bear. He couldn't blame her for that.

"Hi, Bear," she said.

Henry angled his monitor away from her. The photos Chance had posted of himself smoking blunts, sucking on fifths of Hennessy, hands splayed in front of his face in gang signs, and especially the references to packing heat all seemed to shout, "arrest me." Their old coach had told Henry last summer that the Cambridge Police monitored kids' Myspace pages. Sage extended her already ridiculously long neck slowly, as if he wouldn't notice. When he turned his head to confront her with narrowed eyes, she had the decency to blush and straighten up. He repositioned the package of ribs to the spot between them on the computer table, took his time smoothing the foil and even longer to raise one to his lips. She breathed a disgusted little sound and focused on her keyboard.

"My boyfriend 'borrowed' my laptop and won't give it back, even though I told him I had a paper due this afternoon. He won't answer his cell."

"Maybe you need a new boyfriend," Bear offered.

Henry clicked on a music video Chance had posted—Young Jeezy. The words tore through the air. In his rush to silence them, Henry smeared barbecue sauce on the mouse. He wiped it with his sleeve. The blotchy streak on his cuff looked like dried blood. He hoped it wouldn't stain.

Sage laughed, a bubbly delighted sound.

Over winter break Henry tried to talk some sense into Chance. "Keep your eyes on the prize," he told him. "You've got a couple of classes left. Don't screw it up."

"I'm not like you," Chance had said. "I don't want to go

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to some fancy-ass college. It's cold and white enough in Cambridge, Massachusetts."

"I'm not talking about college. I'm talking about a high school diploma."

"Ma thinks teachers really give a shit if seniors go to class." Chance scoffed. "I need a couple of English credits, and Ms. Lorenzo likes me. She let me hand in lyrics instead of essays. A D's all I need, and she gon' gimme that."

Sage's keys clicked. She rolled her lips in and out, biting the top, then bottom, making no secret of the smirk she was half-pretending to hide. Henry wanted to scream, to leave, but he stayed in his chair at his sticky computer because at that moment he couldn't stop looking at the mess Chance was proudly broadcasting as his life. Henry's face twitched just below the surface, and he hoped it didn't show.

"Are you okay?" Sage had stopped typing and pretending not to look at him. She'd turned her whole chair to face his.

"Finish your paper." He closed the Myspace site.

"No, really, you look—"

"I'm fine." He stared out the window, past the computer screens, across the campus to a group of barefoot kids dancing on the lawn, which until a few days ago had been splotched with snow. The five of them joined hands around a huge tree and began to circle it. No doubt they were chanting something, some Indian mantra, but he couldn't hear it. He flash-backed to orientation when, after a yoga class, as he attempted to roll up the borrowed mat, he'd told the girl next to him, Sage, that he hated the way people said "Have a nice day" all the time. She looked at him quizzically, then laughed. "*Namaste*," she said. "Not have a nice day. *Namaste*. The spirit in me bows to the spirit in you." Everyone thought it was hilarious, mumbling, "Hammaniceday" and bowing to each other. Henry had jammed his half-rolled mess of a mat

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onto the rack, dislodging a few of the properly stored rubber rolls. Sage had reached out as if to touch his arm, but he'd jerked away. "They're not laughing AT you," she'd said. "It's funny, that's all."

Why had this school paid for him to come here? His guidance counselor had pushed it so hard. More diversity than any other small liberal arts college, the admissions materials boasted. All year he'd pretended not to be lonely, perfecting a look of contented detachment. He liked his roommate, John-o, though they didn't hang out. He liked Tiberius and Mr. Roy Washburn, the older guys from North Minneapolis that he worked with in the dining hall. In fact, sitting around with Tiberius after a work study shift was the only time he really felt relaxed, and the guy was what—forty? Older than his mother.

"You could smile once in a while," Sage said. "People would respond."

He concentrated on keeping his reply civil. "Good luck with the paper." He pushed his chair back, crushed the foil together around the bones, and stood.

"No, wait, Henry. I didn't mean to piss you off."

"I'm not pissed off."

"You sound pissed off to me," Bear said.

Henry clamped his mouth shut.

"You look pissed off." Sage smiled and reached toward him. He stepped back. Full of that pretty girl sense of privilege, she thought she could touch people whenever she wanted and they'd like it.

She tilted her head and made her blue-green eyes huge. "Maybe you could try not to look so angry all the time. You intimidate people, walking around like that. Do you want to scare people off? I mean, what are you trying to prove, really? That you're some kind of thug?"

"What?"

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Thug, a substitute for the N-word as far as he was concerned. He'd been accused of trying to prove things before—like how smart he was, which by fifth grade he knew enough to keep undercover. Wrecked his own diorama of Toussaint L'Ouverture. He'd been punched in the face for acting white. Some of the Jamaican kids said he, like all Haitians, stunk. Other folks, even teachers, still believed Haitians caused the AIDS epidemic. A kid from Taiwan had asked him if he'd ever drunk human blood in vodou ceremonies.

"Henry, listen..." Sage said. "I'm just—"

"Don't worry about it." Henry tossed the ball of bones across the room into the trash basket.

"You could recycle that foil," Bear observed.

"Three point shot," said Sage.

"Later." His African-American Lit class started in ten minutes all the way across the campus. He swung by his room to grab his books and jacket, dashed down the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator, and cut across the sloshy, partly-frozen lawn.

Brownish grass squashed underfoot. Mud splattered his sneakers. He approached the tree dancers and imagined Sage watching from the window. Damn her for always making him more self-conscious than he already felt. The stench of incense burning near the base of the tree seared his nose and throat. Three out of the five dancers actually wore tie-dyed shirts. All five chanted with eyes closed. One of the girls opened her eyes, let go of her friend's hand, and held hers out to him, a crazy disoriented smile on her face.

Sage and Bear were probably talking about him right now—look at that angry Black man walking across the campus like a thug. Sometimes anger was the only thing that made sense. What made Sage angry besides factory farming? He

tried to picture her life before college and couldn't. The girl spun past again, hand still outstretched. Three point shot, Sage had said. Why? Thinking he'd respond? That because he's Black he had to be into basketball? Fuck her. Fuck this place. Fuck it.

The girl dancer, and now the one next to her, circled and beckoned. What was he doing here so far from home? Bare-foot people wouldn't be dancing around trees at UMass Boston, and not just because there were no trees.

Fuck it. He dropped his books and extended his hand. What was he doing? He felt a welcoming squeeze from each side. The group's momentum pushed him round and round the tree. He'd be late for class. Were Sage and Bear watching? What would they say? Chance would laugh his ass off—that loud throaty contagious howl. Henry closed his eyes, breathed in the pungent smoke, hummed along with the chanting, gripped the fingers of the girls' warm hands and surrendered to the dizzying orbit. He wasn't about to take his shoes off, though.



Yara pulled up next to a dirty heap of snow in front of Manbo Sivelia's blue suburban house. "Good luck," she said to Nadine. "If you have a chance, ask her about my grandson's birth. If there's anything I should be doing besides praying?"

*You could make your own appointment*, Nadine thought. *You can afford it*. She had problems enough of her own to talk about. But Yara had given her a ride all the way down to Randolph so she agreed. "I'm going to pick up a few things for the baby," Yara said. "I'll come back for you in an hour?"

The house had been a dull tan the last time Nadine had been there. Now it was blue, her favorite color, not exactly