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This thesis is a collection of six short stories centered around the friendship of two characters, Ray and Thomas. The narrator, Thomas, is the chronicler of the stories, which tell of their friendship from a young age to when they are adults. The first two stories demonstrate Ray leading Thomas into trouble and Ray's personal struggle with his father. The relationship between Ray and his father is further explored in the third story from Ray's perspective. Then the fourth story is about Ray and Thomas as adults and how their friendship has finally come to an end just before Thomas leaves to study in the US. The fifth story tells of his return after two years and coming to terms with Ray's death which occurs while he is away. The final story explores what Ray does while Thomas is away studying. All stories are unified by the Caribbean/Central American experience and setting in Belize.

RAY AND OTHER STORIES

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

RAY

1.

Ray and I got suspended from school for a whole week and we were the only two kids around to enjoy it. To be clear, it was *because* of Ray that I got suspended but we never talked about it. His fuck-you attitude made him insensitive and I tried to convince myself that I was used to it, but I still got mad at him for making me a part of his antics. Ma never stopped reminding me of it either: You continue with dat bwai and I go beat the trouble outta you!

It didn't matter that I didn't listen to her, because my curiosity was focused on why Ray seemed to do the most random things. And there was a part of me that wanted to believe he had a hidden objective under every delinquent action, like everything he did was carefully constructed. But it was difficult for me to understand him at the time, especially since he never betrayed what he was up to, leaving me to guess at it.

On Friday, the day we got suspended, just before he flashed his tilly, he dared me to spit on a girl's head from the second floor balcony of the school building. Do it, Tommy, he said.

No, they'll know it's me, I said.

Not if you hide as soon as you spit.

Standing outside in front of the Standard Four classroom downstairs was a short, black-haired, coolie girl who stood still while she talked to her friend. I aimed and felt the saliva gathering in my mouth, then released it and jumped backward against the wall of my classroom. I heard her friend let out a cry of disgust, then the coolie girl too. Everyone else gathered around to see what happened, then they all started laughing.

Who did this? said the coolie girl. She had her head down and she leaned forward and had her arm up with the foam of my saliva on the web of her hands.

It Thomas!, said the geeky chiney girl pointing at me from where she stood on a mound of white sand some yards away from the front of the building where she had a good view of both floors.

Just then Ray ran downstairs and unzipped his pants and took out his tilly while everyone was still laughing. He waved it at all the girls who looked on with disgusted faces and the boys cheered him on with more laughter. A couple of teachers heard the commotion, and probably thinking it was a fight, ran over like hombres con machetes. The first thing they saw was Ray's tilly and the saliva on the Coolie girl's hand – God knows what they thought. The geeky Chiney girl standing on top of the mound of white sand began jumping and continued pointing at me on the balcony.

It Thomas, she yelled. It Thomas, it Thomas, sir!

They took us to the principal's office and she got so pissed that the sting of her two-foot white rope on our palms was not enough to make her satisfied. I tried to tell her that all I did was spit on the coolie girl's head, but she wouldn't listen and swung the rope harder for opening my mouth.

2.

When I arrived home that afternoon, my mom called the house phone and said, *te voy a dar un nalgazo* when I get home from work. I wanted to call Ray's house but I wasn't sure if he was being beaten or already had been. I called anyway and he answered, *Bwai* my ma no at home. She went to the market.

My ma no at home either, I said, but she call and say she a beat me when she get home from work.

No worry bout it, she a forget by the time she reach.

I can't be sure a that. The last time I wait for she reach home, she beat me harder.

Listen, put on a jeans pants over four or five short pants that have thick cloth. You no a feel a thing.

That stupid, Ray, I said. No amount of layers of cloth could soften the blow of my mother's beating. I had a feeling Ray knew that and he was only making fun of my predicament.

Better than nothing, he said.

I figured he was right and it wouldn't hurt any more if I tried to layer up. So I tried to put five short pants on, but I could only get up to four without it looking too obvious.

My ma arrived home and didn't tell me anything when she walked in; the woman didn't even look at me. She went straight to her room and put her purse down on her bed and then I heard some shuffling; the light clink of metal was banging against her wooden door where they hung. Then she came out holding a folded leather belt in her hands.

Vengate, she said, te voy a chingar!

I turned around and stuck my ass out to her, but she went straight for my back. Feeling the first bite of the belt, I arched my back and stuck my belly out and tried to run away but she grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and continued to swing the belt, aiming for my ass but getting me on my leg and behind my knee. Each time she hit, it came with a word, Next. Time. You. Want. To. Give. Trouble. Pause. She switched to Spanish, which meant that each hit would come with a syllable. Re-cuer-da-te de es-te nal-ga-zo.

3.

My mom had to work, so she left me at home by myself during the day. I prepared food, she said, if you want eat, take it out from the fridge and heat it in the microwave.

She left me with chores for each day: sweep and mop the house, dust and wipe down the shelves, water the plants, cut the grass with a machete, and clean out the shed at the back, the one with rusty zincs, old bicycle frames, and other smaller items that I had forgotten existed.

Ray came over first thing after my mother left on Monday, his smile gleaming in the heat of the sun. So your ma beat you? he asked.

Yes, I said. She beat me bad. What about you?

I run before she could get me the second time. I gone hide in the backyard until dark. By the time I come out she already calm down.

It always seemed to me that Ray's chances of suffering the consequences were slim. No matter what deep hole he had dug for himself, he continued until he dug himself out. He wasn't great at explaining things, but he was good at thinking up excuses on his feet. Once, when he got caught stealing sugar cane from Mr. Oye's yard, he told the policeman that his mother's diabetes pills made her sugar go down too low, so he had to run out and get the first sugary thing he could get his eyes on. The policeman saw the impossibility of Ray and gave up. No matter how you look at it, it was a score for Ray.

What your ma have you do during this week a suspension? I asked. He looked at me like I had asked him something completely foreign.

Nothing, that why I here, paña.

I finished the chores before lunch with Ray's help. The incentive I gave him for cleaning out the shed, and there had to be an incentive, was if he found anything he wanted, he could keep it. For some reason an old bicycle frame excited him. He hung it on his shoulder, ran home and was back before I realized he had left. As we continued, I noticed that he pocketed a few small nuts and bolts from an old toolbox, and placed to one side a torn bicycle seat.

After we were done I gave him a glass of water and a bowl of escabeche. He finished eating before I did and then sat on the sofa and watched cartoons.

Where your pa? I asked him.

In Honduras, he said.

When he coming back?

He say he a stay there for a month. He left last week.

You get away from real beating this time, then? I said and then laughed. I knew his dad was a no nonsense man and that he wouldn't have escaped as easily had his father been the one to unleash the beating. I finished eating then sat on the sofa. I could tell he wanted to ask me something; his mouth kept opening and his breathing uneven. Finally he said, You no feel hot?

You want me put the fan on? I said.

No, I mean, it really hot these days, he said.

It better than the rain last two weeks.

I know so, he said, but it good time to go swim in the river.

You crazy, I said, the river too far to walk. In actuality I didn't feel like being there. The air around the river could be silent sometimes, like an abandoned house. It happens when there's no one around. It could get chillier than the water, and the wind carried with it a lonely and suspecting sound, the kind you hear nowhere else but at the river. A unique loneliness I always got.

We don't have to go to the river, he said. And I saw that he knew he had the conversation in his hand, manipulating it like clay.

There is a pool in the bush back there, he pointed in the direction of the forest not too far past down the street from my house.

Belmopan no have no pool, I said. Belize no have no pool. What we have rivers for?

Not like the rich people pool or the one you see on TV, he said. They dig it out with a backhoe and the rain full it up.

I don't know what made me want to go, but I could feel the desire swelling up in me. Maybe it was curiosity, or maybe it was boredom. I didn't want to stay at home. I wanted to get out and do something. The only thing holding me back was that it was Ray. I didn't know what he was up to and I feared not knowing until it was too late, the very last second when you know you're in deep shit but you can't do anything else but wade in it.

Tomorrow I need you fu come to Market Day with me, he said, like it was part of the same conversation.

Why I need fu go with you? I asked.

I have to go buy vegetables for my Ma, and I need some help fu bring back some of the bags. I help you today with cleaning out, so you have to help me.

The fucker. I realized that I couldn't say anything except that we would have to be back before lunch.

Don't worry, paña, he said, we wa be quick.

5.

The next day he came over with the same gleaming smile under the hot sun soon after my mother left. I put my shoes on and closed the door and we walked to the market. Now that I look back at it, the mile was a long walk but somehow as kids we never realized it. We passed the Chiney shop, a field of grass as empty as a tablecloth, the museum, which was one big lonely building in the middle of another field of grass, and then the telephone company's tall tower that stood next to their headquarters.

Market Day was on Tuesdays and Fridays, and as usual it was busy with food and fruit vendors, people selling clothes, shoes, furniture, electronics, pets, and anything that could be sold from a stall. Buyers packed the parking lot worse than any fish market. Body heat, humidity, hot sun; multiple bright colors from fruits and vegetables and from the traditional clothing of the Mayas and Garifuna, and the not so traditional of everyone else; the scent of spices in the air mixed with the smell of sweat and used clothes; voices in debates and laughter drowning out the sound of cars, trucks, and generators.

No one seemed to mind, but I did. This was a world in itself, and it was overwhelming my five senses, making me dizzy and causing me to lose my sense of direction. Ray grabbed my shirt and pulled me into the middle of the crowd. He looked at me seriously and said,

You see the rings that stuff in the big box by the chiney lady stall? I looked and there was a chiney woman with her hands clasped behind her back pacing around under the tent in her stall. Displayed at the front was the box with an assortment of silver rings and bracelets and earrings.

I want thieff one a them rings, he said. I looked at him, puzzled, then angry. I felt stupid for pointing out the obvious in my mind: we wouldn't be taking bags of vegetables back home.

It wa be quick and she not even wa know, he continued. All you have to do da act like you want buy something over the other side a the stall.

No, I said. He looked confused, dazed almost.

Why? he said.

Because no, I said. I started to walk away, but then I looked back in hopes that he was following me, that maybe he knew his defeat and couldn't help but go back home. But no.

He already had his back turned and walking towards the chiney lady's stall. A small part of me wanted to stand from afar and watch him, see what he would do. But then out of nowhere the image of him pocketing the nuts and bolt and his excitement for the bicycle frame came into my mind and I felt sorry for him. I really did.

He was approaching the ring box and the Chiney lady was eyeing him. I battled with the decision within a few seconds before I began walking then sped up past Ray and went across to the other side of the stall where I began touching the yo-yos, whistles, and keychains, and saying things like, I like this, and, how much? The Chiney lady rushed over to me and scolded, No touch!

Admittedly I was mesmerized by a few of the items. So much so that I didn't notice that Ray was already gone. I told the Chiney lady thanks, but she didn't say anything, and as I walked away I glanced at the ring box trying to find an empty slot.

I walked around for ten minutes before Ray found me and dragged me out of the crowd and onto the street. We crossed it and sat in the drain sharing a bag of shilling water.

You get it? I asked.

Yes, he said.

I could see it?

Wait til we get home, he said. I insisted and then he pulled it out of his pocket. It was a shiny silver ring with the figure of a fish curved into the circle. It was light in my hand and the crevices in the outline of the scales had smudges of dirt in them.

What you wa do with it? I said.

Come with me, he said. I going da the pawn shop.

The room at the entrance of the pawn shop was like an empty cave. I could hear my footsteps echo on the tile floor. The man on the other side of the glass and burglar-barred counter didn't look up at us until Ray was in front of him.

What you want? the man asked.

I want sell this ring, said Ray. He pulled the ring out of his pocket and showed the man.

Where you get that? the man said. You thief it?

Ray sucked his teeth and said, No, it no matter where I get it. You want buy it or not?

Make me see it, the man said. He opened a little glass door over the counter, barely enough to fit two grown hands through. Ray hesitated and said, No, you a want keep it.

I need fu see how much it worth if it real silver, the man said.

It real silver and I pay twenty-five dollars for it, said Ray, but I wa give you for twenty. The man laughed and said he would give him ten.

While they debated, I looked around the room and didn't notice that a little old man was sitting beside the entrance on a chair at a small and lonely table reading the

Guardian, his head bobbing like if his neck didn't have enough strength to hold the weight. He saw me looking at him and said, You no belong in school?

I thought about what Ray would say, something like, you no belong in a coffin? but I couldn't muster the boldness to do so. Instead I said, No school today, mista.

He told me to come closer and pointed at something in the newspaper. When I got closer I saw that it was a picture of a bald-headed man with a big-lipped smile.

You have no school today, he said, but I still teach you something. You know who this man?

No, I said.

This your prime minister, he said.

I no care, I said.

Bwai, what wrong with you? You want I lash you? Ray was coming back from the counter and was headed for the door.

Who you want lash? he said.

The two of you, said the old man.

I want you try, said Ray, you no my pa!

The old man raised his voice and said, Come ya! I backed away and held open the door while Ray yelled back, Fuck you, puto!

We shot through the door and ran in the direction of home, listening to the fading raspy curses of the old man in the heat.

When we got back to my house I asked him how much he got for it.

I hungry, he said.

5.

After lunch that afternoon, we watched TV then went to the pool. I was less excited about going to the pool and said as much to Ray. He scolded me and said that he would throw me in the water. I said if he did I would gouge his eyes out. I don't know why I said that, but it was all that came to mind. He was surprised and didn't say anything else. I felt ready to go.

The pool was nothing significant. In fact, it was muddy and hidden behind some bushes in an unrecognizable lot full of cohune trees, and it was surrounded by mounds of dirt that were dug out from the hole. We stood on the mounds of soil feeling our feet sink into them and our slippers sticking to the clay like glue. Ray's hands were in his pockets fumbling at the pieces of metal I could hear clinking.

The heat on my back felt like the pinch of a needle, and somehow the wind carried with it the same mystery that floats around the river. I didn't want to swim, but Ray was looking at the water contemplating, probably hoping that the life that existed at the bottom of the water was nothing more than microbial. I asked him if he was getting in.

Hold your horse, he said, I no want to get a nail in a my foot.

You know how deep it? I asked.

Shut up, paña, he said, if you want know why you no get in yourself?

I didn't say anything. He took off his shirt and pants but kept his red brief on. Without the bagginess of the pants his legs looked like sticks we used for holding up clotheslines, and his ribs looked like a scrubbing board. He grabbed a long piece of

branch from the ground of one of the many trees around us and stuck it in the water, shifting it around waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, he pulled the branch out and threw it aside. Leaning sideways on a mound, he stretched his leg into the water feeling around for footing.

I feel a piece a board pan the bottom, he said. He put his other leg in and stood up, the water reaching his chest. Da wa long piece a board, he said as he began jumping on it.

Come in, Ray said.

You crazy? I said. The water dirty.

It hot and the water nice. Come in. You could go shower after this.

My hesitation didn't last long, but even after taking off my clothes it was long before I got in the water. The bottom felt slimy, and the water felt warm. Every time I lifted up and exposed my skin above the surface of the water, I could feel the silt run down my arms and chest, rushing back toward the dirty pool it came from.

We were too scared to move about too much, or do the stunts we would have done at the river. Instead we just bounced on the board and splashed around the water. We got bored very soon, then got out and sat on a mound, still in our briefs, waiting to get dry. My skin tightened with the heat, and some dirt was still stuck to me.

I feel sleepy now, Ray said.

Me too, I said.

Ray got up and put his clothes on, and then I began to put mine on too. It was unpleasant, trying to put on my pants and my shirt over my dirt-stained body, and it felt worse because I was putting them on slowly. I looked at Ray hoping he would say

something funny about it, but he just stared at the water, the same way he did before we went in. He stood on the mound with his hands in his pockets, staring down at the pool as if still hoping there was nothing in it. He was quiet, the way everything was quiet in the afternoon, with nothing but the hot sun beating down on you and the wind caressing the trees like invisible fingers through hair.

He looked so pensive that, for a second, I thought he was going to cry, but he didn't. Instead he took something out of his pocket and fumbled around with it in his hand for a while. It seemed shiny but I couldn't catch a good look at it while trying to get my left foot into my pant leg. I figured it was one of the nuts he got from the shed in my yard, but I couldn't tell if it was rusted or greased up. Ray looked at it for a little bit then threw it in the water, like it was just some small rock you'd throw in to see how the ripples move.

I don't think he saw me looking at him; I don't think he cared. We left the dirty pool and before we split ways to go home, I asked him what he wanted to do with the money from the ring.

Nothing, paña, he said.

He didn't come over the next day, and the day after that I saw him walking down my street with a bicycle rim in each hand. Just the rims. New shiny silver rims. He didn't look serious, and from where I watched through my screen door, he seemed almost smiling. I didn't hail him or yelled out to ask what he was doing. I watched as he walked and kicked some loose pebbles on the road, then he got to the path that went between two houses and a backyard that led to his house on the other street.

CHAPTER II
VILLALOBOS

Ray and I were looking out through the screen door of the kitchen when I noticed a black man among the Hispanic workers.

“He black”, I said, but it didn’t seem like Ray heard me. It was summer and it was easier than I thought to convince my mother to let me go with Ray to his father’s citrus farm to spend a night. So, I went to Ray’s house early in the morning where we left in his father’s truck. I wanted to dose off during the fifteen minute drive, but the rocky terrain kept me awake; also, Ray kept elbowing me.

Now, staring out through the screen door, the fog was still cold on our shoulders, I still let out a yawn as I saw Mr. Garcia by the compound gate giving orders to the entire group of workers. The orders: More bush-hogging and fertilizing, I assumed. As they began scattering to the tractors I noticed that the black man had a huge lump of skin on his face, between his left cheek and ear. It looked like someone had thrown shit at him and it stuck there forever.

“Who that?” I said.

“A new worker”, said Ray.

“How come he look like that?” I said.

Ray didn't reply right away. He glanced down at me like I'd said something stupid. I cowered and looked back out at the men who were on the other side of the compound, now loading the trailers with sacks of fertilizer.

"No look too hard", he finally said.

"I mean, weh he from?"

"He da no Belizean," he said. "You no hear him talk? He talk Spanish just like the rest of them. No accent at all."

"You think he da from Guatemala or El Salvador," I said, "like the other workers?"

"Can't be," he said. "Guatemala and El Salvador no have any black people. I think he da from Honduras."

Mr. Garcia was heading back to the kitchen and we sat back down and continued eating our bowl of oats.

"Your Pa da from Honduras, right?" I said.

"They have a lot of black people in Honduras," he said. "You no listen ina Social Studies class? Weh you think Garifuna people come from?"

I didn't say anything. I wasn't up for a history lesson, and Mr. Garcia was already opening the screen door.

"Hurry up and eat", he said as he poured some hot water from the kettle into his coffee cup. The spoon banged about the porcelain like a jingle after he poured several spoonfuls of sugar, instant coffee, and powdered milk in it. "I have to go to Spanish Lookout later," he said, "I need a piston for the bulldozer."

Ray smiled and continued eating hurriedly. He said that his father had been working on the bulldozer for the past month and a half. We were going to work with him today on it, so I was excited. I had never been close to one before, and the thought of crawling over the big machinery with tools and grease made it sound like a cool summer job. But Ray was always angry about going with his father to the farm and he'd complain about it ceaselessly, never once explaining why. I told him I didn't understand when he got to play with the real tractors rather than the ones we pushed through the grass and dirt.

He smirked and said, "You no see him like I see him." He said it felt boring and lonely when all his friends were back in the neighborhood and he had to be out there. So he welcomed any trip that took him out of the 900 acre landscape of citrus trees.

"Thomas wants to know who the new worker is," said Ray. He got up and took his empty bowl to the sink, leaving me to scowl at his empty chair.

"Villalobos," said Mr. Garcia.

When Ray sat down again, I shot him a glance, daring him to ask more. Before he could, Mr. Garcia continued.

"From Honduras."

Ray glanced at me, *I told you.*

"He have a big mouth," said Mr. Garcia. "I hope he can work as much."

Mr. Garcia's accent sometimes made me want to laugh. He spoke better English than I did, but his accent twisted his serious words into funny ones. In his truck on the

way that morning, he spilled his coffee a little and he said, “*Chit!*”. I could only assume he meant *shit*. It didn’t get any better when he weaved into Kriol either.

I scooped up another spoonful of oats and kept it in my mouth while I tried to swallow the previous one.

“Come to the garage when you are done,” said Mr. Garcia.

He left the kitchen, letting the screen door slam on Ray who followed behind. I kept looking out into the compound. The sun had yet to begin its daily stomping, but as the tractors trailed out of the gate, the workers were already damp with sweat.

Villalobos stood on top of a bush hog holding on to the frame support. He stood out to me. Never mind that he was black and that Spanish was his native language, which was a complete wonder to me. I had never seen a black man speak Spanish before. It was the attention he placed on his lump of skin. He kept scratching it, and then tilted his head and rubbed it on his lifted shoulder. Before he was out of sight, he smiled and let the sun shine off him like he was making a triumphant entry, except he was going to work.

We left the farm just after lunch, after we had spent the morning taking what I learned was the “piston”, out, and after Mr. Garcia identified the part in a parts handbook and made a few calls to some auto parts stores.

The sound of the tractors going back again to work faded into distant hums in the orchard. I sat in the backseat of Mr. Garcia’s pickup watching the orange trees stand at attention in perfect rows as he drove by on the dirt road. After a while we got out to the

highway and we passed several villages, each bustling with life, until we got to the agricultural landscape in Spanish Lookout.

The first group of Mennonites I saw wore Western hats and blue and black jumpers. The others drove around in Chevy or Dodge trucks, hauling trailers of cattle or smaller machinery tied down on the flatbed.

It never stopped amazing me that visiting Spanish Lookout was like visiting a new country. Houses were separated by large acres of clean cut green land, the roads were well-maintained, their vehicles were newer, most every conversation overheard was German, and similarly, most everyone was white - blond hair and blue eyes and all. It was beautiful.

When we pulled into the auto parts store, Mr. Garcia had Ray bring in the bad piston, and I followed behind. The store looked more like an office: air conditioning, clean tiles, counters and windows, all their products neatly categorized, and soft conversations peppered with the clicking of the cashier's machine.

Everyone, both customers and employees, wore short-sleeved buttoned-up shirts tucked into their blue jeans which ran down fitting perfectly over their brown boots. I noticed that they dressed the same Mr. Garcia always did. He had cleaned up before we left, though, and got rid of the grease stains. He really did look a lot like them. He was even white, except the sun had given him a serious tan. But the hair on his arm, mustache, and head was golden, fading towards white.

He sat on the stool in front of the counter and spoke to the employee, opening with a joke in his heavily accented English. I stood behind him, smirking at his attempt.

“Why we never clean up like him?” I said to Ray.

“Because we no have extra clothes,” he said.

“I feel silly looking dirty like this,” I said. I pointed at the oil stains on my hands and faded green t-shirt.

“You look like a *paisa*,” he said. I punched him in the stomach, and he pushed his bigger body on me, almost tipping me over. The employee must have looked at us because Mr. Garcia turned around and scowled us with his look and index finger.

“You dirty too”, I said after Mr. Garcia had turned back.

“I no care,” said Ray, “At least I no look like a *paisa*.”

I was about to punch him again when Mr. Garcia turned around and asked for the piston.

“What that lump of skin on Villalobos’s face?” I said after Ray had handed him it and he turned around again.

“I no know,” said Ray. “And no ask about it, either. No be disrespectful.”

Just then a young Mennonite entered through the front door laughing with a few of the employees who were stacking items at the first aisle. Ray and I were now standing a few feet away from the counter, and as the young Mennonite man came closer, he looked at Mr. Garcia and paused, then mischievously came up behind him and smacked his hat off his head.

I expected him to turn around and smack him for smacking his hat, or at least curse him out and demand an apology. My heart even began racing waiting for it. But the

young man only ran two steps away when he looked back at Mr. Garcia and stopped with a look of embarrassment.

“Sir, I am so sorry,” he said. He reached for the cap on the ground. “I thought you were someone I knew.”

Mr. Garcia smiled and accepted the cap.

“It’s ok, son”, he said.

“I am really sorry,” the guy continued profusely.

“It’s ok, really,” said Mr. Garcia. “People get me confused all the time.”

“If there is anything I can do for you,” said the guy, “just let me know.” He went to the refrigerator and took out a cola and gave it to Mr. Garcia. “It’s on me,” he said.

The guy’s servile attitude kept Mr. Garcia smiling throughout the time at the store. He even too us to get ice-cream. Along the way back to the farm, he went into a long monologue about the respectful nature of well-disciplined young men.

“There is not enough of that in the world,” he said.

We returned while we could still hear the hum of the tractors way out at some distant orchard. The clinking of metal in the garage where the assistant worked echoed out into the center of the compound where the sun licked the light brown dirt, hurting my eyes. Mr. Garcia, Ray and the assistant were already getting started on the bulldozer, but I couldn’t shake off an intense isolating feeling. The hot sun, the wind blowing through the orange and patch of bamboo trees outside the fence at the edge of the river, the sound of the water current rushing downstream; I didn’t welcome it.

I was glad when I heard the tractors coming in through the gate, signaling the end of the work day. Villalobos again was standing atop the bush hog, triumphantly entering. After they parked the tractors in the garage across the compound, the workers scattered like tired athletes to their lodgings.

Except for Villalobos, who stayed behind at a trailer and was ripping off the inside plastic of the empty fertilizer sacks, gathering them up in a pile.

Mr. Garcia walked across the compound toward him and Ray motioned for us to follow. We stopped following when we got closer and then we picked up stones and threw them at random targets. Ray said it was just so we looked distracted.

“Leave that for the other workers,” Mr. Garcia said in Spanish.

Villalobos’s Spanish was faster than Mr. Garcia’s, so it took more concentration out of me to understand what he said.

“They were tired from lifting the sacks and throwing the grains at the trees all day,” he said, “so I said I would help.”

“You don’t help anyone,” said Mr. Garcia. “You do your job and they will do theirs.”

“I am already off the work hours,” he said, “I don’t mind helping.”

“You are still on my compound,” Mr. Garcia said. He looked at Villalobos in the eyes and pointed downward at the ground.

Villalobos placed the sack he was holding on the trailer and then left. When he walked past me I looked up at the lump of skin and Ray hit me on the shoulder.

“No look pan he,” he mouthed.

After Mr. Garcia had his evening coffee on the bench outside the kitchen, he told us to get ready to go to the river. I smiled and nudged Ray hoping he would share in the excitement, but his blank expression suggested something else. The day wasn't too bad, and I was still left wondering why Ray was so angry about coming here all the time. Going to the river in the evening didn't make it sound any more lonesome.

"No everyday like this one," said Ray when he grabbed the towel and soap from the shelf in the room.

"But this one pretty good," I said.

"I want go home tonight," he said.

"Why? We could have fun."

He remained silent and melancholic for a while, even when Mr. Garcia came in and we walked down the hill of the bank of the river and took off our clothes and put them on the large rocks.

The sun wasn't shining on us anymore and there was a darker shade at the river, which made it cooler than the water. The sound of the rushing water and the touch of the smooth river rocks reminded me of Villalobos. He didn't look mad when he walked away from the trailer earlier. He had seemed pensive. He also looked like someone resolved to sleep.

Ray and I raced where the water was deep and where the current almost seemed stagnant. He boasted that he could hold his breath longer than me and dived from one

side of the river to the other, and I climbed and jumped from a low hanging branch that stuck out over the water.

I heard brambles the crunch of leaves and rocks and we both looked up. Villalobos was coming down the river with a towel on his shoulder and a loofah and bar of soap in his hands. He smiled at us and greeted Mr. Garcia.

“How is the water?” he asked us.

“It’s cool,” said Ray. His accent betrayed his lack of fluency.

Villalobos then tried conversing with Mr. Garcia, but he just grunted as he scrubbed the grease out of a pair of jeans he had splayed on the rock.

“Enjoy,” said Villalobos to us, and he walked a little way down the bank where he sat down with his feet in the water, letting it run over it like a liquid massage.

“Ray,” said Mr. Garcia, “soap yourselves.”

Ray went and I stayed playing in the current, diving to the bottom to pick up some rocks and letting them loose again. I had been swimming against the current for some time, and forgetting to give myself a rest, I swam out to the middle of the river.

My arms were the first to get tired, and then with just my head above the water and my stomach submerged, I felt the pressure intensifying and I couldn’t take deep breaths. I began sinking but splashed about the water as hard as I could, barely keeping my face from going under. I was panicking, but I kept silent as much as I could until a soft shout, *Help!* escaped me. My sense of direction was gone and all I could see behind the veil of rushing water was a fuzzy outline of trees and a dimming sun. It was a terrifying moment that seemed to last for too long and I thought that this couldn’t be the

end, which only gave me further resolve to hold my breath, even for a fraction of a second more. Then I felt a tight grasp around my arm that lifted me halfway out of the water. There was relief. There was water running down my face and body. There was Villalobos, walking in calm strides toward the riverbank where he set me down.

“Are you ok?” he said. He looked me in the eyes to make sure. I was shivering and I nodded. He smiled and then turned to Mr. Garcia who was rushing toward us.

“He is ok,” said Villalobos. “It was just a little water in his ears.” He smiled which made the moment feel less serious than it was, but my heart was still pumping with fear.

“What happened, Thomas?” said Mr. Garcia. His voice was deep and he was angry.

“I no know,” I said.

“Go soap yourself and stop playing around,” he said. He looked at Villalobos and gave a small nod, maybe, or I imagined it, then he turned around and went back to scrubbing his jeans.

I was confused. Maybe it did not look as serious to them as it did to me in the water. But the feeling was real: I could have drowned. I wrinkled my eyebrows looking at Mr. Garcia. Not even Villalobos’s smile could make me feel any better with that thought. I thanked him and he nodded.

“What happen?” said Ray when he gave me the soap.

“I get tired,” I said.

“Stupid,” he said.

“You stupid,” I said. “None of you come try help me.”

“You woulda be arite”, he said. “The current mi going to take you right to the shallow area where you could stand up.”

I shook my head and finished bathing. I wanted to go home now. But none of us said anything for the remainder of our time there. I could tell that Mr. Garcia was angry, just by the way he scrubbed and dipped his jeans in the water washing off the soap suds and wringing them out. We took his folding of his jeans as a cue to leave.

When we got back to the house, Mr. Garcia changed into some clean clothes while we put on ours. Before it got completely dark he told us that he was leaving and would be back later during the night.

“Ray, reheat the beans,” he said. Ray nodded.

After he left, the crickets sang louder and the voices of the workers echoed from their lodgings. Mr. Garcia scolded Ray when he asked if the generator was going to be on, so we sat in the candlelight staring at the black screen of the small TV on the shelf. Ray talked about what he would be doing if he were at home. I didn’t say anything. He picked up the dusty radio from the kitchen table and began playing with the controls.

“I think my Pa mad,” he said.

“Mad at me?” I said. “Why?”

“Because of what happen down by the river.”

“I mi tired. That da what happen.”

“No because of that,” he said. He finally turned the radio on and brought down the volume to let the buzzing shrink.

“Then what?” I said.

“I no think he like Villalobos,” he said. He extended the antennae and turned the frequency knob. There was a short whiff of a man’s thick voice mumbling between the static. Ray continued turning the knob.

I didn’t ask why but Ray answered anyway.

“My Pa no like help unless he pay for it.” He fussed at the controls. It was all static.

“I mi think it was cause he black,” I said and chuckled.

Ray shot from his chair toward me and slapped me on the back of my head.

“I di joke,” I said as I rubbed my head.

“No joke ‘round ‘bout thing like that ‘bout my Pa,” he said. He continued turning the knob on the radio. There was still nothing but static coming from it. I looked away through the door into the darkness. I imagined that I’d be sitting with my own father on the sofa watching the news and not understanding a word.

“Make we try the roof,” he said. “Maybe we could get better signal up there.”

We climbed the ladder at the side of the house and sat at the peak of the roof, watching the stars pop out from behind a few dissolving clouds like opening curtains. For a while, neither of us said anything. I lay down and kept looking up at the sky. The dark blue sky was almost completely taking over.

After some time, I was getting bored and the wind was getting chilly. The zinc roof cracked and echoed as I shifted my weight. Martin held the radio closer to his ear as he adjusted the frequency.

“Make we get down,” I said.

“Not yet,” said Ray. He lifted the radio higher and kept adjusting.

“Come on, man. Your Pa wa come back soon and he no sound like he woulda like it if he see you up here with his radio.”

“I can’t take it here anymore,” said Ray. “My Pa bring we out here to the farm in the middle of nowhere. No TV for we to watch. We can’t even go socialize with the workers ‘cause they all tired, plus, they can’t talk English for shit. We surrounded by bush. No one single lamplight, just candle in the dark.”

I wanted to tell him stop blaming the workers when it was his Spanish that was terrible. I thought better of it.

“Let’s just go eat and sleep,” I said. “The night wa go faster and then tomorrow we go home.”

“It early yet. Da just past seven,” said Ray. “And I need fu hear some sound of civilization.” There was a clearer sound coming from the radio.

...hermanos y hermanas, tenemos que...

“Bloody AM radio da all Spanish and religion,” said Ray. He stood up and kept adjusting.

“What you expect fu hear?” I said. “He never play all Spanish music in his truck?”

“I want hear something I could understand good. I feel like I deh in prison.”

...y cuando ayes El Señor, no ayas Amor como...

“Even if da politics”, said Ray. “I just need something fu distract me.”

...*la sanctidad*...

“Ah!” Ray held the radio tightly in both hands and screamed into it.

...*El Gran Pastor esta buscando a las obejas*...

“You try switch it to FM radio instead?” I said.

“I no fool like you. Of course I try,” he said.. “Can’t get anything for shit.”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s just go sleep.”

“Ok,” said Ray. He turned off the radio and suddenly the crickets were louder than ever. The wind came again in a small gust and the dogs barked.

“I rather hear the static anyway,” said Ray.

“Oyendo radio?” I heard the voice coming from somewhere near the gate as I was halfway down the ladder.

“Si,” I said. Ray came down after me. I looked into the dark and couldn’t make out the person.

“How are you doing?” he said in Spanish, and when he came closer I saw that it was Villalobos. Hidden in the dark, I tried looking for his disfigurement.

“Good,” I said. I understood and spoke Spanish better than Ray, but he came up behind me and continued the conversation.

“How are you?” he said. It was terrible, and he wasn’t very confident. I always teased him *Spanish boy can’t talk Spanish*. He’d get annoyed and called me *Paisa*.

“I am fine,” said Villalobos. “It gets very quiet here at night, doesn’t it?”

“Si,” said Martin. We were standing awkwardly in the dark, until Martin went to the side of the house and leaned against the wall. I did the same, and Villalobos stooped

to the ground to pick up rocks and lightly toss them absent-mindedly. The candlelight didn't flood through the screen door this far, and I still wasn't able to see the lump of skin on Villalobos's face.

"Your father is a very strict man," he said, and he laughed. I wanted to agree with him, but I wasn't sure if I could with Ray around.

"Yeah," was all Ray said.

Villalobos scratched at his face, at what I imagined was his lump of skin and he rubbed it against his shoulders. I wanted to ask him about it, and I was going to, but Ray was looking at me.

"So you are from Honduras," Ray said finally.

"From Tegucigalpa, yes," Villalobos replied.

"How did you come here?" said Martin.

"Too long of a story," he said. "Just like everybody else, I needed a job."

"What is that on your face?" I blurted out. It was a spur of the moment, and I took the few seconds of silence after he replied as an opportunity. Ray shoved me to the ground and said to shut up.

"Perdon, perdon," he began saying.

"It's ok," said Villalobos after a burst of laughter. Ray and I were quiet, waiting to hear what he would say.

"It's a tumor," he said.

"What is that?" I said.

"It's just a big mole," he said.

Ray grew somber, and didn't say anything at all. I didn't know what else to ask. But Villalobos got up and turned to the night and looked up in a deep and pensive way. He looked much like he did when Mr. Garcia spoke to him by the trailer earlier the evening.

He told us goodnight and went back toward the gate.

"See da just a mole," I said to Ray when Villalobos had closed the gate.

"Da no just a mole," he said.

"What you mean?" I said.

"He could dead from it," he said.

"How?"

"Like how my uncle Rene dead. Cancer."

"But they could do surgery, right?" I said. I was struck by the severity of it, and as I looked out toward the darkness where Villalobos disappeared, I couldn't imagine him dead.

"If he get enough money," Ray said. He turned around then went inside. I stood leaning against the wall, listening to the darkness and the crickets and the silence. Then I heard the static from the radio inside, and then the soft hum of Mr. Garcia's diesel engine pickup coming from somewhere up the road.

I went inside and lay down on the bed next to Ray.

CHAPTER III

THE CHEATING GAME

It never occur to me to look back. Way way back, I mean.

I make the decision long ago that I would not be the man my father was. Once upon a time through my childhood eyes, he was tall and stocky with a thick voice. A no nonsense man. I can't remember ever having back-chat him. He had that kind of authority, you know, the kind that he carry around like a red glow that make me keep my distance and watch what I say. All work, no play.

I remember that man clearly, even though when I look at him now I see him old and weak. His voice sound like he talking through his nose, and his skin peeling from old age. Every time he attempt a laugh now, he cough until the joke turn into a life or death situation. Like his body fighting back that foreign reaction and losing mightily.

He used to take me out with him in his truck everywhere. Sometimes to his work at the farm, sometimes just for a day trip with him to a village or town where he had to run errands, and sometimes just right down the street to the Chineyman shop where he woulda buy chips and ideal and we just sit down in the truck and no say nothing to each other until he drive back home.

But that long ago time I am referring to, the once upon a childhood time, I suppose, when I start to put two and two together, come clear like we talking now, Thomas. Clear like day, I think you would call it.

My mother had gone North to Orange Walk to take care of her sister for the long weekend. Dengue fever, I think it was. Since she never want to get me sick nor miss school, because she never know when she would be back, so she left me home with him, my father. I beg she to take me with her. Please, I say, please. She was too busy getting her clothes pack to pay me much mind, so all she said was, No. My father was not at home yet, so I get a little bit dramatic and start get the tears flowing. Now, my mother was the loving one. If my father had a red glow around him, my mother was the opposite; she had a bright blue glow. The loving type. So I get a real surprise when she reach behind my head and give me a good head smack.

So after I watch she leave in the taxi, I wait til my father come home and take me with him in the truck.

It wasn't my first time at this woman's house, but it had been a while. And it was the first time he make me clean up good. Shower and everything. His truck smelled like grease and oil, a smell I associate with hard work even up to today, but he had the windows open like he was trying to get rid of it or hoping that the smell no stick on me. We only had a short conversation in the truck. Ray, he say, whenever you see people after you no see them for a long time, what should you do? I no know, I say, but fraid that that was the wrong answer. He never get mad, though, he just say, No, you tell them you happy to see them again.

And so it was, when we get there across town that evening, right there in she living room I tell she that I happy to see she again.

Your pa tell you fu say that, nuh? She said and then she laugh and pour a cup of Kool-Aid for me. I was a good boy and naïve, and I think she recognize that, so I never feel anything but a gentleness when she speak to me. I sit down on the sofa and she give me the remote and say, Find some cartoons if you want. My father looked at me, and the only meaning I could get out of it was that he never want me to watch TV for too long. All work, no play.

I never pay attention to where they took off, but when my Kool-Aid was done and I wanted more, I looked around and see that she bedroom door close. I went to the 'fridge and pour me some more, then sit back down on the sofa and continue watch cartoons. I was so focused on it that I never even consider that it was abnormal for a man and a woman to be alone in a room together. They were in there for a very long time, and I woulda much rather be in the comfort of my own house waiting, but the longer I had without my father, the better. So comfortable I was feeling that I drop asleep.

There was a lot of hollering and cursing when I wake up, and I realize that I was not on the sofa anymore, but in somebody bed with the lights cut off and the door shut. I peep out the window but never recognize anything except that it was somebody back yard. It come to me that I was still at Ms. Ledonia house and maybe my father had taken me to a guest room because it never had the vanity with the big mirror, nor did it smell like perfume and baby powder, like my mother room. I gone to the door and crack it open to see if my father and Ms. Ledonia were up, but nobody was there. The music get louder, though, and the hollering and cursing sound more intense than in the room, so I realize that it must be right nearby. The front door was open but through the screen door I

could see light outside and some shadow movements where the shouting was coming from. I notice Ms. Ledonia room door open and the light off, so I sneak in there so I could peep through her window to see what was going on.

The details escape me now, but a group of about five or so people, including my father was sitting around a big wooden spool playing dominoes, from the sound of the tiles knocking each other, and some money to the side close to my father. The quarreling was coming from them, alright, and their arms were waving back and forth, and they were so big that a swing of the hand must have been like the rush of a bull. My father was not the one shouting, but he looked like the one the other men were shouting at. Ms. Ledonia, though, she was shouting back at them with her screechy voice.

You no come in my yard and act like you all man! she say.

I no like play with cheaters, say another man.

And this man di thief we, say another.

You can't handle wa game, then haul yo' rass! Say Ms. Ledonia. She cross her arms and that was it. She sit down on the steps at the front door and the man they continue play.

A while pass and nothing end up happen again other than a couple fuss and mumbling. Not until Ms. Ledonia get up and pour drink from the table that I realize all of them was drinking from plastic cups which probably give fuel to the whole situation. As soon as they cup get some of that drink, which I know now was rum – get-togethers like that always carry rum – they down it with one gulp.

I had seen my father drink before, and he always get drunk but never socially like that. I have to admit, it make me a little nervous, especially with them man eyes still on him. Even though Ms. Ledonia keep pour drink and they keep down it, it only seem to make them more rowdy. My father face look sleepy, but he was calm, looking at his dominoes line up in the palm of his big hand. The thing is, he never looked worried, not like I feel that night. He was sweating yes, but everybody sweat with hard liquor and a hot night with no breeze. I remember that I admired his reaction to the man them, but wonder why he couldn't be the one angry at them instead. I never liked my father being the accused because some part of me start to believe it.

Just when I decide that I no want to find out the truth, one man mumbling turn into a loud curse and he fling his empty cup at my father and rush at him, knock him off the plastic chair and just start swing his arms at the curl up ball my father had become. I can't tell you how much time I gone over it and think, why I never gone help him? I think I freeze up, that's why. On top of that, I wanted to pretend I never see it. It no sound like me now, true? Could you imagine how he would try to make up for me seeing him like that? I no think that was the type of man he want me to see, and I never about to let him know that I did see it.

No sooner was I overthinking when I hear Ms. Ledonia squeal, Leave him alone! Leave the man alone! The man was still swinging, ignoring her like a stubborn dog. Instead of help, the other man them just get up from their chairs and stand back.

Why you no help Fredo? Ms. Ledonia say. She never even wait for their answer when she run inside and come back out with a broom. So quick was it that I never even

think about run back into the room I supposed to be sleeping in. She beat the man with the stick until she finally get his head and he turn around like he about to hit her until he realize who it was that was doing it.

Haul yo' rass from my yard, say Ms. Ledonia. She say it through her teeth and look the man right in the eye. The man was so angry, I don't think he was drunk anymore, but something about the woman make him listen. No without trying to grab his money back from the table first but she smack the table hard with her broomstick that the coins and dominoes tile them bounce and jingle.

She stare the man down in a way I never see a woman do before, and the dog actually try backchat the woman.

He cheat, though, he say.

It's true, say another man, and the others start mumble something I couldn't hear good.

Listen, Ms. Ledonia say, that money stay right there. All of you better go right now before I no make you come back in this yard to do any kind of socializing again.

The dogs they listen without another word, some gone up the street and others gone down. Meanwhile my father start to uncurl from the ground and get up and dust himself off like he just come out from underneath a car.

That da barely a good beating, he say, I not even di bleed.

Ms. Ledonia take him to the front door, and only then I realize that I had to rush back to the room, which I did and make sure I close the door good. I could hear him stumble inside and I cover myself with the sheet and turn on my side to face the wall. I

see light pour into the concrete for some seconds before it get dark again. But I gone and peep again. I open the door just enough, and it even creak a little bit but they never pay attention. Ms. Ledonia had a mug in her hand and she was mixing it with a spoon and my father was rubbing his shoulder and stretching his arm and arc his back and I could tell it pain him bad.

Ledonia, my father say, I can't bring Ray here again. Night like this di get unpredictable.

When she a come back from Orange Walk? She ask.

Probably til Monday or so, my father answer.

You a come back tomorrow to play some more, though, right?

I can't left Ray home by heself, he say. No idea what kind a trouble that boy wa get into.

I call it rass now. He never care if I stay home by myself, but when he say that, I believe him and I figure I was too much trouble.

You see he wake up? Ms. Ledonia continue say.

He could, though.

Make sure you come back tomorrow, she say.

She sip her drink from the coffee mug and my father never say anything more than a short grumble. I gone back to the bed and drop asleep worrying about the next night. When I wake up in the morning, I was back in my bed at home and my father watching news in the living room.

We never said much that day, I remember, and nothing eventful happen except that he gone and never came back until the evening when he pick me up and we went to Ms. Ledonia house again. Maybe he think I can't get in trouble during the day, only at night. It was that song, *oh cherry oh cherry oh baby...* that boom out from her radio when we pull up to her house. Eric Donaldson, yes, him!

The music cut off and I tell Ms. Ledonia in her living room that I happy to see her again. She laugh and pour me a cup of Kool-Aid and tell me to watch TV. They never gone in the room, though. They just sit down at the kitchen table and talk for a while until the sun gone down. I never pay attention to what they say. Cartoons was on and that was better. But as soon as the sun gone down, they gone to her room. I watch them go and my father never even look in my direction. Like I never exist to them, and it only make me frustrated. Unlike the previous night, I really just wanted to be at home, even if my father was there. In my mind I already had a repeat of that night going on, and I never wanted to see anymore.

But there it was, I start to fall asleep when I hear the bedroom door open and my father look at me and notice that my eyes red.

Come here, he say. And I gone. He show me the bed, the same one that I sleep in the previous night, and say to go sleep. Half asleep already, I gone without say anything and he just pull the door close behind him. It never take long for me to dose off again, and I woulda probably stay like that all night if I never start hear a *thump-bang-thump-bang-thump-bang*. I wake up and open the door a really soft inch when the sound come clear: Ms. Ledonia was blasting out paranda music.

I have to admit, though, Thomas, I a little nosy, especially in them days. I fight it, though, I really try, but I could not sleep and I figure the night had to be different if music start play. So when I notice nobody inside the house, and Ms. Ledonia room door open again, I gone right in and peep through the window.

My father and about three other man were already sitting down in the middle of a game, and it look just like the previous night. The dominoes and money on the table, plastic cups and Ms. Ledonia on the steps. But the man them, they were different. Bigger than the last ones. And they sit there looking calm. Calmer than my father was, like they had no worry about losing. And they drink too, worse than my father did. In fact, they take the bottle from Ms. Ledonia and start pour it themselves, then pour some for my father and wait for him to down it and then pour again.

This, by itself, was intense.

That game soon finish and then one of the man reach out and sweep the money close to him with his long arm. Ms. Ledonia come back to the table with a full bottle of rum, and again, one of the man take it and pour it, then down it, pour it then down it again, and continue play, all the while staying quiet quiet and calm.

After that game, the man them seem to get a bit frustrated when my father pulled the money in close to him, but he never smile nor look at the man them. He just shuffle the tile and continue play like nothing happen. No until I hear they say something that I realize how loud the music get.

Turn that shit down, Ms. Ledonia, say one of the man. I can't concentrate.

When she gone inside to turn it down, I never had time to get to the other room, so I hide in a dark corner and wait until I hear the volume go down and the screen door slam shut.

This game soon finish too, and the bottle of rum soon gone with it, and more frustration, but up until that point, it never reach like what happen the previous night. One of the man curse, but it never seem like a big deal because nobody pay mind to him. But I remember being happy, you know? Relieve, you would call it, that nothing happen. And I figure it the best time to just rest my head a little bit, because it was already late, and at that time, I was dropping asleep right there.

You think I no know what you doing? Say one of the man them.

Of course, that wake me up.

You want get fuck up nuh?

I realize the man them talking to my father, and I remember the feeling clear, the way my heart beat against my bones, my skin. It feel like it was coming up my throat and I was going to vomit it out. My father, though, he never look fraid. He look the man straight in the eyes, and I smile. You think you could remember a smile after all these years? I remember. I remember because I never have a smile turn to hate quicker than what happen.

One of the man swing a hand directly at my father's face, throwing him out of his chair with money splattering on the grass. It was not like the previous night when he curl up and they only get his body. I think this man already calculate just how hard, how fast,

and exactly what spot on his face he want to get. Two man jump on top of him quick.

They kick him and punch him and drag him out into the street.

I couldn't help myself. I vomit right there by the window and I start cry.

Ms. Ledonia run out to the street with a stick she get from Lord knows where, but as soon as she raise to club one of the man them, he grab it from out of her hand and shove she to the ground. She start bawl, loud and crazy. If the situation never serious, I woulda burst out a laugh. The man them continue to swing hand and foot at my father on the ground, and Ms. Ledonia only get louder and louder until lights start turn on from the neighbors around. The man them notice it, and they finally stop. Ms. Ledonia continue bawl and crawl to my my father.

I no like cheaters, one man say.

He and the other man come back to the table and start pick up the money from the ground and they pocket it while Ms. Ledonia manage to get my father on his feet and take him to the door. I rush back and lie down and wait for them to check on me, but they never did, so I put my ears to the door and listen.

Then try win it back tomorrow night, say Ms. Ledonia.

I done, my father say.

No start that, Ms. Ledonia say. By tomorrow you ah ready fu play again.

I di bleed and hurt bad. Tomorrow I wa feel worse. My son wa see this.

Tell he you drop down a hole or something, she say.

I done, I say. I finish with all ah this.

You know how much money you get last night? You could still get more. I want to make sure we no have anymore police out of uniform here again.

I say I done, woman!

I hear his footsteps come toward the door and I run back to the bed and pretend that I was sleeping. He never even try be silent. The door open wide and I jump up and look at him. He look at me in the bed watching him, the light on my face probably showing me wide and awake.

Come, he say. That was all.

We get in his truck and we drive home. I never even pretend to fall asleep or act sleepy, and I never look at him the whole time. I no know if we were thinking the same thing, but I no say anything to him, and he no say anything to me. He start get old to me from that night on, and I start think that someday I woulda no be afraid of him.

My father never take me to Ms. Ledonia again, and I never want see she either. I never want to explain to she how vomit get on her window and droop to the bed.

CHAPTER IV
NIGHTS AT THE BAR

I haven't been back for more than two days when my cousin asks me for some money for drinks, then, drunk, he asks for more. The lights in the bar don't dim as much on a Tuesday night, so I hide my disgust and flatten my last American five-dollar bill on the counter. Marti puts his hand over it and slides it across the table toward the bartender, who pours him another glass of rum with fresh ice cubes.

I'm on my fifth beer and have given up on trying to feel a buzz.

"No worry, primo," he slurs after the first sip. "You ah make the big bucks with that degree ah yours. Enjoy yourself. I done tell you."

Marti focuses on his drink and doesn't say much after that, or even before. I wonder if he's sociable like this, or if I'm just not good company. He picked me up from the airport and drove me back home. It was an hour both ways. He had said something about gas being expensive, but I didn't make any offer so he got quiet the rest of the way. The sight on the highway was great but only because it was great to see it again. The villages, the trees, the swamps, the houses, and the snaking two lane highway. Just two lanes.

Maybe that's why I'm here at the bar with him. To pay him back with drinks. I regret not making that offer to pay for gas because at ten dollars a glass of rum he's

already set me back a week and I'll have to go back and re-budget for the next month and a half. I start my new gig with the University as a lecturer in the English department in a couple weeks when summer classes open. I'm staying at my parent's home in the meantime

"Primo," I say to Marti. "We need to get out ah here when you done with that drink. I broke now."

He knows I'm not broke. The problem is, he thinks I'm loaded. He's been talking about all the things we need to be doing this upcoming weekend. At first I think he's got class: travel down south to the coast in time for Lobster Fest. Head to the islands and chill on the beach (again) and dance with the tourists. Then he mentions clubs in the city, all night booze, casinos, and "Bouncy Titties". I'm still not sure if the last one was his own spin, the name popular among its customers, or the real name of the strip club. It's hard to tell in Belize.

"Ay man," he says. "Acabas de venir de Los Estados. You at home now. Celebrate. Belize like a good woman who wait for you in bed. Two years, primo. Two years Belize wait for you with she pussy wide open. Celebrate and fuck she good."

I don't know what to do with the imagery. *Celebrate and fuck she good*. He doesn't seem to know that he has told me this more than fifty times since heading out tonight. There is no way to tell him I don't have money in a way that he will believe. So I just leave it alone and let him go on.

"Drink up and enjoy, primo. That's all you need to do. Enjoy."

Instead of paying attention to him I can't help but think about the last time I was here in this bar. With Ray. That was a week before I left to go study. Now he's been dead for a couple months and it still disturbs me a little. It disturbs me that I couldn't even make it back for the funeral because I couldn't afford a flight. That's how broke I was. Picking up every penny, literally, taking it to coin machines and saving everywhere else so that I could get back home after I finished school. I didn't even consider how illogical it would be to come back for the funeral and head back up again, only to come back down two months later. I was too concerned with my revisions of *Derek Walcott Versus V.S. Naipaul and The Outlook of Caribbean Literature* than to attend an already broken friendship.

Sitting here now, though, it's like I half expect Ray to pop up at the entrance of the bar and walk straight up to me and punch me in the face or hug me tightly. Because he was like that. Terribly complicated and unpredictable. The kind of friend you follow all your life because they seem to have things under control despite the world around them crumbling and despite the trouble they get into because they're just so good at it until you've had enough and you get left in the dark and cold and dust watching a car speed away.

I think of something else instead. Like the bar and what little change two years could do to Belize. The neon light on the wall behind the bartender now says "Lighthouse" instead of "Red Stripe". The musty heat the same. The potholes the same. The politics the same. As if the moment the plane took off with me on it to the US, someone pressed pause.

I start thinking about the street the bar is on. A tourist street, one that confuses even Belizeans. When the shops are open during the day, the arts and crafts depict more of a Jamaican culture than a Belizean one: the word B-E-L-I-Z-E painted in red, yellow, and green. The cobblestone street is so well-kept, even the smell is like sun-tan lotion. Some of the restaurants still sell rice and beans up to five dollars more than the restaurant on the pot-hole-riddled street a block away. And the floor of the bar is covered in beach sand, even though the islands are a two-hour drive and a half-hour boat ride away. And why does the menu have only pizza, wings, and burgers? Does it cater to Belizeans who want to eat like Americans or for Americans who hate Belizean food? And the music, “Sweet Child o’ Mine” on repeat it seems.

But Ray, the motherfucker. How do you live as the person voted most likely to die by retaliation, only to get hit by a bus? Even his mother refused to believe it was him when they asked her to identify the body? Did you examine the body for bullet wounds? she asked. But they told her No. No, mam.

*

“You ah be gone for two years,” Ray said as he threw his empty beer bottle across the river. He aimed at the large rock sitting on the bank looking like it would roll in the water at any minute. The bottle breathed out a hollow breath when it landed in the mud.

“You nervous?”

“A bit,” I said. We sat on what was left of a fallen tree with our feet dangling in the shallow water. With the sunset behind us, the coolness of the water gave off a chill that made me look more nervous.

“Time ah go fast.” He grabbed another beer from the cooler.

I had a week left before I’d be waving goodbye from the plane, and I already felt like I had a foot in the US with all the lectures and advice from everyone who knew I was going. Mom was the worst: “Now, things could get really cold ova there. They have all kinds of used clothes shops where you could get you some nice jacket and coat to keep warm. Them American people very kind and they like help people. For Christmas and Thanksgiving, you no even have to worry about food, I bet they give you food to last weeks. Things very nice ova there, so make sure you go out and get a nice run every so often. They food will make you fat real real quick. No go get too fat. Please, son.”

Ray took a few big gulps of his beer and burped.

“Belize no going anywhere,” he said. “Things no ah go change at all at all. And two years da nothing.”

“I know, I know,” I said. We both drank and watched the water rush down river.

“But you think you know.” He looked at me and nodded slowly. The only thing I knew was that he had spent some time in the States before and he came back an experienced man. I don’t know why I thought of him that way. But he didn’t act like the States was all that great. Not the way I thought it was. I still hadn’t dipped my feet in the knowledge of the world. Still, I gave myself to that image. I figured he had to say something about that.

“I think I ah go learn a lot from being in the States,” I said, pretending to understand, “and not just from school.”

Ray nodded again as he swallowed a mouthful of beer. “You got that right. But I think you ah learn a lot more when you get back home.”

He finished his beer and threw the bottle across the river. It plinked when it landed on the pebbles a few feet from the rock he was aiming for.

“What you mean, Ray?”

“Belize no ah change. The system no ah change. But people, bredda, people change.”

“How so?”

“People change because they think you change.”

I nodded and I think he knew that I didn’t understand him.

“Make we go to the Town tonight,” he said.

“I got nothing else to do.”

We sat drinking a bit longer until Ray finished another beer and threw the bottle. It didn’t go to far and it landed in the water, floating away with the current. I was ready to leave by then, but he grabbed another beer from the cooler. He didn’t open it, but shook it and aimed for the rock across the river. The bottle burst open on the rock with a fizz that ended as soon as it started.

“Why you waste good beer like that?” I said a little annoyed.

“It is a good thing I buy it then,” Ray answered.

Ray and I were headed west in the middle of the night. A thirty-minute drive to a bar whose menu seemed more American than the McDonald's commercials we kept seeing on TV. The fog was already thick and only got thicker as we drove up the hills, so much so that Ray kept the wipers on and I had to keep wiping my face to get the water drops out of my eyelashes and eyebrows. The only lights we came across on the two lane highway were lampposts every few miles in the villages.

“Stop it,” Ray said over the noise of the Mazda's accelerating on a slope.

“What?” I said.

“Stop.” His voice mimicked the sound of the engine, *stooooopppppp*.

“The fuck you talk bout?”

“You high. Keep you fucking head inside and roll up you window. You di get the ganja wet.”

I passed him the roach and searched around the door for the handle. The sound of the wind closed up beside me and I could hear the low murmur of 60's soul music going on from the speaker below. I turned up the volume and Ray and I started to hum along to words we didn't know.

My ambivalence to the weed kept me silent for some time. I felt sleepy and did everything I could not to lean the seat back and dose off. But time felt to me like a luxury too easy to waste. The longer I was conscious during my last week at home, the less guilty I'd feel in the weeks to come. Even if there were things to regret during my time awake. *Experience some life*, wasn't that what Mom said? *Get out of the bubble*.

Soon we crested a hill and saw the lights of the Town scattered below like fireflies in a jar, except that jar was a valley. For a very brief moment I felt like I was already in America. This was because on TV the camera always hovered over New York at night and that was what I thought America would be like.

“The bar,” Ray said. “We going to the bar.” He jammed it down the hill and hit a speed bump at the bottom that jerked the car into a loud continuous squeak until it stopped bouncing. He laughed and I was suddenly wide awake.

“If we get there alive,” I said and rolled the window back down.

The bar was loud when we walked in and we felt the sand sprinkle in our shoes. It was a Saturday night and most of the Americans seemed to have taken over in conversation and were competing with the music, and they all seemed to know one another, shouting from one table to the next. Ray led us to a table at the back, passing, along the way, some of the white folks as they nodded and Ray said, “How’s it going, bud?” They kept on nodding and we kept moving.

A waitress came with two menus and Ray waved it away as he ordered wings and a couple beers. I turned the chair and leaned back up against the wall underneath the framed poster of some NASCAR driver. I looked around at all the other tables and no one seemed to take notice of us. I soon realized that there were Belizeans at almost every table sitting with the foreigners. They laughed and took sips of beer and they consciously tried to keep their eyes on their guests, but took obvious glances at the football game on the TV above the bar.

“Why we come here, Ray?” I said as the waitress brought our beers and placed them on coasters.

“The wings,” Ray said. “I like wings. You no like it?”

“I like the food,” I replied. “But it so pack today.”

“And?” he said. He leaned back in his chair and rested his arms out in front of him on the table, one hand on his beer. He kept his eyes on the TV and winced when one of the teams missed the goal.

“Nothing,” I said. I sat up straight again and played with the label on my beer bottle as I glanced a few times up at the TV.

“You prefer another bar?” Ray asked. “No let the white people make you feel uncomfortable.”

“You crazy. They no make me feel uncomfortable. Just a lot of people. That all.”

“We gone in a lot of bar with a lot of people in them. You nervous now. It remind you that you ah go leave Belize soon?”

“No man.” I laughed and took a sip of my beer and leaned against the wall again. “I ready for the States.”

“Mmhmm.” Ray looked away from the TV to me. “You see them Belizeans with them Americans?”

“Aha.” I looked around again.

“They tour white people around the country and hope that them generous enough to give them tip. Heck, they drink they beer slow cause they can’t be sure that the American ah pay for them beer. I bet they sleepy and just want go home in ah them bed.

Look how quiet they quiet. All they could do da smile and laugh. They no know shit them white people talk about.”

“Why all of a sudden you want talk like that, Ray?”

“Because I no want you go kiss no white ass and come back and think you betta than anybody else.”

“Fuck, Ray. You know me betta than that.” I didn’t understand why he was taking it so seriously, and honestly, it hurt a little. He talked like this before, but never did it sound like he didn’t trust me for something. It felt like an unnecessary warning. A warning. Since when did Ray give me warnings? As a matter of fact, I still waited for him to congratulate me and to wish me well on this new course my life was taking. Or maybe he did already when I wasn’t paying attention. A gesture or a subtlety in something he had said or done. But no. He wasn’t that type. He’d either say or not.

“I just di say, bredda,” he said.

We remained quiet for a while, or at least I did. Ray went back to watching the game, teams I didn’t bother recognizing, and he laughed and clapped when one of the teams made a goal or almost would.

After the wings came and Ray and I started eating, the bar got louder. Someone burst out laughing and clapped their hand on a table. Another person kept raising his voice more than he needed to, no doubt his drunkenness clouded his awareness of his tone. A bearded fellow yelled out to the waitress, “Hey, chica!” and kept calling out to her as she held served beer to other customers.

“I can’t concentrate,” Ray said. He had stopped eating and was staring at the rest of the bar angrily.

“Just a game,” I said. “You could watch a replay or something.”

“This a replay, though, and I already miss it the first time.”

“Look it up later.”

“Them people di get too loud,” Ray said as he wiped his hands in a napkin and let me finish the plate.

The bearded man still yelled to the waitress who smiled at him and finally went over to his table.

“What took you so long?” His arms flailed about, exaggerating his gesture. She didn’t answer and waited for him to continue. “I want more rum,” he said, slowing down his pronunciation. The girl went to get the drink and a man beside him patted him on the back and said something I couldn’t hear. He banged a fist on the table and said loudly, “You’d think they know what fucking rum is!”

I lost my appetite and put the last wing back down before I took a bite. Ray opened his mouth and I thought he was going to say something about leaving. Instead, his voice reached out to the crowd.

“Hey, buddy!” A few people looked over at us, trying to see who might have said something. Ray was louder the second time and the bar got quieter except for the music. The bearded man turned his head and looked at Ray, sweat and crunched eyebrows clearly showing drunkenness.

“How about you keep quiet so I can watch the game,” Ray said.

A few people chuckled and the bar went back to being loud. The bearded man looked away and began to chat with the others at the table as if continuing a previous conversation. Ray took out his wallet and slapped a fifty-dollar bill on the table.

“Let’s go,” he said as he got up. “Walk in front. Go.” He kept his hand on my shoulder as he gently pushed me out toward the entrance. When he let go, I didn’t think to look back, I was too focused on trying to avoid the stares of everyone. I jumped when I heard glass crash behind me and I turned around to see Ray run past the other foreigners who sat stupefied. He had a piece of a broken bottle in his hand which he quickly threw to the ground. Everyone had gotten quiet again and the bearded man slumped in his chair until he fell off, those around him wiping their forearms and faces. I didn’t realize I was standing still until Ray got to me in a few seconds and shoved me out into the street.

“Run!” he yelled and I followed behind him toward the car. He pulled the keys out of his pocket and threw it at me. “Drive,” he said, “My hand di bleed a lee bit.”

I fumbled to get the car unlocked, constantly looking behind me to see if anyone was coming. No one was. I got the engine started and I took off down some street I didn’t know. Anywhere. Just to get away. Ray began to laugh as he wrapped his hand with a t-shirt he grabbed from the back seat.

“What the fuck, Ray!” I said. I kept my hands on the steering wheel to stop the shaking. “What if they catch we? You want me go to jail?”

Ray just laughed and said, “Keep driving, pania.” I wanted to punch him in the face but the way he sat there in the car, relaxed as if he was about to take a nap, made me feel like I’d be hitting a pillow that refused to fluff.

“If I go to jail they wouldn’t even make me get on the plane. You can’t mess with American like that.”

“Chill, bredda,” said Ray. He had his hand stuck out the window and grabbed at the air. “One quick hit and we left. No camera. No evidence that Belizean police could work with. Plus, everybody agree that the man deserve it, maybe even he himself. It easier for him to take his lick and move on.”

“Stupid,” I said, but I agreed with him and it was somehow comforting to hear the reassurance.

Ray kept his hand out of the window, and when we got outside the town the bleeding in his palmed stopped. He made fists to make sure and said, “How bout I drive now?”

Ray gunned it through some narrow-ass streets that I was sure were one ways. Tall cement fences on either side with broken glass glued to the top. When we finally made it to highway, the fog was meaner than earlier and I couldn’t see anything ahead of me. Ray jammed it even harder and I hoped that he was doing more than guessing. The curves were no joke and they got especially sharp going around the hills. I got real nervous when he lit up zooming down one of them and it seemed like he’d forget another speed bump was there at the bottom. He mashed the brakes and the car screeched before it bounced and we took off again.

“What your rush, man?” I said pushing against the dashboard. I had tried putting on the seatbelt but it wouldn’t click so I held on to whatever I could.

“Fun, bredda, fun.” He passed the herb. “Relax, just relax.”

“Slow the fuck down, Ray,” I said. A chilly wind found its way inside the car and made me shake, partly with anger. I thought he’d seen it too because he slowed down. Instead he turned off the highway onto the rocky shoulder then made a right turn down a road beside a bus stop. It was the first village just outside the town on the way back home.

I sighed. “I no in the mood for more tonight.”

“No worry,” he said. “Just have to see a woman about something.” He drove slowly over the rocks and in the middle of the night when everything is still and the crickets and frogs have become white noise, wheels over rocks sound like crumbling cement houses. A dog began barking somewhere and when Ray lowered his window the sounds became sharp, almost too much for me. He squinted at the road in front of him and switched the headlights off.

“Please no start this foolishness again” I said.

“Why you no shut up?” He answered.

“Fucking asshole. I want go home.”

“Then go.”

I almost did. Wasn’t gonna go without punching him in the face first, though. Then I thought about where I was. Miles away from home, in the middle of the night, no buses running until the morning, the only person I’d call would be Ray. I made a fist and hit my knee instead. Then I thought about sleeping at the bus stop on the bench. But it was cold and I didn’t want to be out there. I hit my knee again.

Just then I heard an extra crunching of rocks coming from behind us, the low sound of our engine overwhelmed by the sound of a diesel one. It was a pickup truck, its headlights also turned off. A blue light came on that flashed like daylight but only for a second then turned off. It did it again and Ray stopped the car.

“Fuck, Ray, Fuck,” I said as I hit my knee again. “They find we. They fucking find we. All cause you mess with that American, you fucking ass—”

The hit didn’t register but the pain in my jaw swelled from zero to sixty in a few seconds. All other senses were dulled until Ray’s voice slowly built up into a loud whisper: “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

The policeman got out of the truck with a flashlight bouncing around in the dark all the way up to Ray’s window. He was big. Not fat, but he was tall and had all the pounds to match it so that he reminded me of a wrestler. Or maybe it was just the way I viewed all Belizean policemen, they’re reputation for unchecked ruthless power preceding them in our psyche as that image. He flashed the light in Ray’s face then mine then back to Ray. I hadn’t checked, but from his gloss over me, I gathered that Ray’s hit didn’t draw blood or bruise, though the pain made me imagine so even later into the night.

“Sketchy boys,” he said, almost laughing.

Ray didn’t say anything but there was a smirk on his face. I began grinding my teeth and my jaw suddenly hurt a hundred times more. I was surprised that no one saw me wince at the pain.

“Why so sketchy boys?” said the policeman. He said it slow too, like he wasn’t in any rush to hear the answer.

“For obvious reason, mista officer,” Ray said, “To let the village sleep. Bright lights and the *vroom* ah engine could wake people up from some really nice dream.”

“Oh so we have smart man, nuh?” said the policeman. He leaned on the door with one hand and with the other he pointed the flashlight directly into the side of Ray’s face. I wanted to whisper back to Ray to stay quiet, or to give him a look, one to let him know that this wasn’t about him going to jail. It was about me. I had a lot more to lose. I hoped my silence was telling him this. He wasn’t listening, though.

“Have to be smart in a world so dumb,” Ray said.

“No officer,” I said, trying to calm things down. It hurt to talk, but I kept going, “He no mean what he say. He just di act silly tonight.”

“Silly could get you killed,” he replied.

“So you ah tell we why you stop we other than have we headlights off?” Ray said. He sounded like he didn’t want to play around anymore and I was glad for it, but I was also sure I knew why he had stopped us. It had never occurred to me that it could be for something else, not even driving around with our headlights off. He was playing around with us. The question was a suggestion that Ray was ready to lie about hitting the American. About even being near the bar that night. It was cold all over again and I did everything to hide the trembling in my body.

“No take me for stupid,” he started, and I was ready to hear him repeat our night back to us. “Your headlights off mean you up to something.”

“No officer,” Ray said. “We just no want wake anybody up. We almost reach home.”

The policeman looked at Ray suspiciously. He turned to me and I nodded. He didn't know about the bar. He just randomly stopped us. I almost laughed but kept it inside, feeling the bubbling effect of relief.

He flashed the light again at Ray and examined him from his chest to the top of his head. He stepped back from the car and flashed his light over the body and the wheels.

“No take me for fool, I tell you.” Now he looked at Ray like he was already guilty and then I felt guilty again too. “You nor this car familiar. You no live here.”

“How you know that?” Ray said sounding like he was offended.

“You give me that fool again, I go shoot you right in the head.”

“Officer—,” Ray said.

“Which one ah you is the man?” said the policeman, suddenly confusing me.

“Officer, what you talk about?” Ray said. He looked honestly confused too.

“Just tell me. I just want to know.”

“Officer, seriously—”

“The village talk. People tell me.” He was panting. He took his gun out of his holster and moved around uneasily, almost dancing in the dark. I was shaking my head and saying, “No we, no we, no we. We just want go home. That da all!”

“You fucka, you fucka!” yelled the policeman.

The sound of a sputtering pickup truck echoed from the direction we had come from lighting us all yellow as its headlights came closer. The policeman dug his gun back in the holster and his face lit up with the reflection of the lights. Tears. His face was wet from tears. He stopped moving about and tried to retain a posture that suggested he was talking to us. Ray quickly shifted the car in first gear and took off up the road, cutting off what I saw was a vegetable truck. Ray turned the headlights on and kept going into the fog, leaving behind the policeman and wondering if he had even tried to come after us.

We turned left and right through a series of narrow streets until we eventually got back on the highway and sped over potholes and speed bumps on our way back home.

“You see that?” Ray seemed more thrilled than scared and he laughed and tapped on the steering wheel. I didn’t say anything. I was too shaken.

“Perfect timing. The vegetable truck. Of course they go work early!”

Until then I hadn’t thought about how late or early it was. The clock on the radio said a quarter past three. I settled into the seat trying to breathe and think about what just happened.

“Fuck you,” I said, softly at first. “Fuck you, asshole!” I yelled.

I was ready to block a blow this time, but Ray didn’t do anything. He had calmed down and stared out at the road which had cleared up from the fog.

“Stop right here,” I said.

“Why?” he said.

“Because you da the man.”

“What man?”

“You and that policeman woman. You di mess with that policeman woman.”

“Thomas,” Ray said.

“No Thomas me. We could a get kill tonight all because a your stupidity.”

“Thomas, shut up now. I di take you home. Just be happy.”

“Stop di car.”

“I di take you home.”

“Stop di car.”

He braked abruptly, the tires screeched and I caught myself with both hands on the dashboard. He started again and drove to the side, off the road. I stepped out of the car and Ray did too. He didn't say anything, just walked around to my side angrily and grabbed me by the collar and flung me to the ground.

“Fight you want fight?” I said as I tried to get up. But he jumped on top of me and shoved me back down and placed his weight on my chest, my arms caught underneath him.

“Fuck you!” I screamed at him from the ground. I expected him to land blows at my face and for a few moments I thought about how it would look if I walked through immigration looking like that. What happened to your face? I imagined US immigration asking. I got into it with a tree (because isn't that what they all think anyway?).

Ray placed his palm on my face and turned it to the side, pressing half my face into the rocky ground. Sharp rocks jutted into my right cheekbone and temple and I moaned loudly. I tried wiggling but the rocks cut deeper and I was sure that blood was being drawn. For all the pain, I could tell he wasn't putting his entire weight on me. He

was angry, but careful. He was hesitating. I couldn't tell how long he was going to be at it, though.

I groaned and then groaned louder.

Ray finally got off me and stood up. As quickly as he came at me, he went back into the car and drove away, continuing on the highway toward home.

I lay on the ground breathing heavily, letting a few small rocks drip off my face. I heard the sound of a car somewhere up the highway and got up, dusting off my shirt and carefully cleaning my face with my shirt sleeve. There wasn't much blood, just a few dabs like after a shave or popping a pimple.

Around me was the beginning of the fourth village on the highway back home: a few houses with big yards, a football field, and the thick forest all around. As I kept walking, there were more houses closer to each other beside the highway, some closed shops, speed bumps, and finally a bus stop.

I sat on the bench and lay on my side, feeling the coolness of the concrete on my right cheek. I waited for a few hours, dosing off here and there. I waited for the first bus from the town to take me back home. Each time I woke up I noticed how it got brighter and brighter. And I didn't feel cold with nervousness anymore. In fact, I was sweating by the time the bus finally came roaring on the highway and I flagged it down.

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“So how you like the white pum pum, primo?” Marti says. He laughs and then the bartender laughs and gives me another beer. I realize how much I'm thinking and I'm

starting to get a headache. Marti giggles for a while and the bartender takes the opportunity to speak.

“¿Y cuanto tiempo estabas en Los Estados?” I am aware that I’m not offended by his assumption that I speak Spanish. I’m proud. At least he knows I’m Belizean. The US was filled with dumb asses who thought I was some dirty Mexican, saying things like, “You speak English so well!” or “Do you write in Spanish then translate it to English?” But this guy knows what I am. He doesn’t pause to wonder why I don’t answer his question in Spanish. Communication has no restriction. We roam through all of its borders like birds.

“Two years,” I say. He nods his head.

“¿Estudiando?”

“Si.” He nods again. I finish my beer and leave him a tip, something else I learned. Marti is about to fall off his chair until I shake him by the shoulder and tell him we need to leave.

“Celebrate, Thomas, Celebrate,” he says.

“The bar empty,” I tell him, “It don’t feel like celebration. Weekend we could celebrate. Come, give me your keys.”

“Good one, primo.” He puts his arm around my shoulder and lets me carry him to the old Toyota pickup. It doesn’t take long for me to realize that the potholes have gotten bigger and the pickup rattles like zinc roofs during a hurricane all the way home.

CHAPTER V
CONSOLATION

My cousin Marti and I were at the market for breakfast where I met Ray's mother. Correction: where I ran into Ray's mother. No, still: where I thought that by bending down to examine cassava spread out on the ground over flattened sacks behind the table with tomatoes would hide me from her, but instead gave her a chance to catch up. She stood behind me and Marti didn't stop talking shit either.

"The fuck you want with cassava? You can't even fry wa egg." He giggled like he was already high, with a stupid-looking hunch and a lazy hand over his mouth.

"My ma ask me to buy some." I looked at him expressionless, because even so, it didn't mean nothing. I turned to Ms. Garcia and smiled embarrassingly.

The truth was, after I couldn't make it to Ray's funeral, I felt no obligation to make it up to him. The last I'd seen of him was two years ago when he left me in the dirt watching his taillight disappear over a hill. All I remember was the feeling of cold and dust in my lungs, waiting hours for an early morning bus. A week after that night, I left to go study in the US and had no reason to contact him anymore. So I didn't, until I heard he died a couple months before my graduation. But my only contact with him then would have had to be through a Ouija board. Even so, what would I say? We weren't the lean-on-me type of friends. You pour out your heart, you get left behind. We'd have nothing to say to each other. I knew it.

But with Ms. Garcia in front of me, less than a few weeks after being back, I felt a can of worms trying to open itself up, first with feigned sadness, then wordy apologies, and finally with an explanation of our friendship. She wasn't having that, though. I could tell just by the expression on her face: impatience.

"I have something for you from Ray," she said. "Come by my house later this afternoon. You still know where I live?"

"Yeah, but—"

"You could spare a quick visit," she said and turned and walked away, her chancletas smacking her heels like a warning. She was old now, and I could see it in her walk, as if the weight of her body—she wasn't even that big—was too much to hold for long without sitting down. When she was gone I let it go and thought about breakfast again.

Marti was busy chatting up some girl by the crate of green peppers; she trying to sell to him and him trying to sweet talk her. Both lost in the art of persuasion, she losing terribly if only because she was a bit too young.

"Hattieville for you," I said as I walked past him and kept walking towards the food stall.

"She just had she quinceañera, Thomas," he said. He caught up and patted me on the shoulder, tossing an apple in the air and catching it with his other. "Her two chu chu nice and big, you no see?"

"You know that da States you can't juck girls till they eighteen?"

"¡Que putaso!" he replied.

There was a table in front of the food stall. Marti and I took a spot not occupied by the three other people. The smell of bleach coming from the plastic tablecloth and flies buzzing on the salt and pepper and hot sauce unsettled me for bit until an older Mestizo woman came up, grease stains on her apron.

“¿Que quieren?”

“Un burrito y una Coca,” said Marti.

“Mismo,” I said.

She made a mental note and went back into the kitchen in the stall.

“The girl da wa ripe good age,” he said.

“Fi go to Hattievile.” He smirked and looked away to the bus terminal where most of the noises of engines and horns came from like the morning call that it is.

“What age keep you outta jail, then?” He asked finally. He avoided eye contact and I realized that his question was less to humor me than genuinely interested. I felt old at that moment because I saw his stupidity. Big mouth and no sense of direction, not even street smart. Just fresh meat for the world. But I wouldn’t be a guide. Heck no. I just got to know him after coming back because he was staying at my parents’ house for school at the University. Plus, stupidity had been my friend all my life and no amount of coaxing would help. Marti would have to learn the hard way.

“Just get somebody your age,” was all I gave him.

“So what the lady want?” Changing the subject brought back the mischievous smile I hated. I should have just kept issuing warnings, but I didn’t care enough.

“Seh she have something for me.”

“Punani?” I didn’t laugh.

“I hope not,” I said. The lady placed two plates in front of us, the burritos draining with gravy. I ate it quickly and ordered another and sipped at my Coke and ate more burrito until what was left was a too-full-to-walk stomach with no regret.

I didn’t take Marti with me to Ms. Garcia’s house later that afternoon. In fact, I almost didn’t go myself. A Sunday afternoon was best left to napping. I never liked Ms. Garcia. She was too forward and unrestrained from what I remembered, and if earlier was any indication, she still was. And if I had nothing to say to Ray, then I had nothing to say to her, which would inevitably be a part of the conversation. And when it came up, I’d tell her: just because Ray and I had known each other since our primary school days when we spun marbles and *bang* hooky, didn’t mean that it had been all Bonnie and Clyde. As much as there were times he’d look out for me by stepping into a fight, or hooking me up with girls, or getting into trouble, there were times when we’d curse each other out and drift apart. Then, just as unintentionally, we’d drift into each other’s lives again waiting for it to fall through. But that last time, we didn’t just drift apart, we drifted away.

So with a small tinge of curiosity, an even smaller amount of “out of respect”, and mostly for a peace of mind (in case I randomly ran into her again) I went.

She still lived in that corner of Belmopan, directly across town from where I lived. When I turned onto the street, a strong sense of nostalgia lit up my insides like little glow worms. So much so that it made me nauseous. I used to live in the second house on the right. This wasn’t like coming back to Belize from the US. This was coming back to

my childhood. Not that it was all bad memories, they were no different than anyone else's. But when you leave something behind for so long it disappoints those memories. Passing my old home, I saw that it was fenced up and painted a different color and had an old Mercedes Benz parked in the yard. It looked smaller than I remember too. It was a wonder how my five member family lived in it so long. When we moved, about a year before I started high school, I was sure that that would be the end of me and Ray's friendship. But he had a bicycle and riding across town didn't seem so far away for him.

I stopped in front of Ms. Garcia's house, but I couldn't stop looking around. Some houses were still the same colors, others had expanded, but they were all different. There were no kids running around on the street like I remembered, nor adults lounging in the shade. A ghost town, even though the sun was out and bright. Maybe the afternoon heat chased everyone inside to shelter with open windows. Apart from the soft whirring of fans on all-out and the random clanking of pots, the quietness was overwhelming. Even the soft murmur of soca music from some street further away didn't do enough to drown it out.

Ms. Garcia's house fit right in with its layer of green paint peeling away to show the years of different paint colors it had gone through. The yard was still a forest. The custard apple tree Ray and I used to climb stood bare at the edge, and the papaya tree beside the house next to the gas tank had a few green papayas hanging down from the top, drops of milky liquid deceptively leaking from them, but going nowhere. At the back of the house still stood the tangerine trees green and bushy as they had always been, just like the grass growing tall and hiding the trunks.

I went up to Ms. Garcia's screen door and knocked; it shook like it woke up after being left for dead, just to say its last words. Suddenly a sharp barking came from inside that would ring your fucking ears off. It came up to the screen still shrieking the way small dogs do, but the fucker was angry. Didn't even look like it was barking to let the owner know a stranger was at the door. It hopped at the screen like it was about to rip it apart, which wouldn't take much. If it wasn't for its size, the door would have been flying.

"Who that?" I heard Ms. Garcia shout, then the sound of her getting up from the sofa.

"Thomas," I shouted over the barking.

"Shut up, Princess!" came Ms. Garcia. The dog hushed and moved from the behind the screen door to make room. I smiled when I saw her appear and she waved me in.

If the outside appeared small, the inside felt claustrophobic. Even without the wall to wall shelves and coffee table and two sofas, the living room was smaller than my own bedroom. I wondered what other unnecessary items had taken space in the house which didn't seem to have enough room for more than her. Maybe she'd kept Ray's things. Piled them in a box, or filled his room. Or old room, because I knew he had lived on his own for a while.

"That dog da such a good dog," she said. She sat down on the sofa and motioned for me to sit on the other one, which I did hesitantly, maybe a little obviously. "She always di look out for me."

“I notice that,” I said, sitting at the edge of seat with my elbows on my knees.

“She almost tear the door down di try get to me. Such a small dog.”

“A very small dog,” she said. “But she really no trouble, and she listen good.”

By now the dog, its brown fur waving with the slight wind that came in through the screen, lay down panting and staring absently through the door. It was small, but already struck me as mad.

“So how things, Ms. Garcia?” I didn’t want to be rude by asking what she had for me, but I did want to speed things along.

“Things good, and only wa lee bit lonely, but I can’t complain.” She made herself more comfortable in the chair, and I started tapping my fingers on my knee.

“A long time since you no come back over this side, Thomas,” she said.

“Well, you know, ever since we move—”

“I no care if you never come visit me or not. I just member when Ray used to ride his lee bicycle cross town just fi go see you.” Her tone was aggressive and it took me by surprise because I had been waiting for the moment when I needed to be forward with my purpose there.

“We da mi good friends, mami,” I said more shyly than I’d like to have done.

“You only had he fool,” she said as she turned her head towards the dog. The dog noticed this gesture and must have interpreted it as its opportunity for attention because it went to Ms. Garcia’s feet and waited with ears perked. Ms. Garcia merely shoved it away with the sweep of a foot and looked away. Meanwhile I sat open-mouthed.

“The only place I see you all them years since you move da mi around Belmopan, but never this area. Never to come see Ray. Ray always go see you.” She leaned forward in her chair and pointed at my face. I couldn’t help but be distracted by her old fingers, the spots and wrinkles and the way they couldn’t keep straight. “As a matter of fact, if Ray never talk about you as much as he always mi do, I woulda forget you even exist.”

What she said was right, and as I thought about it I couldn’t help think that it was an effort on his part to come see because he had more free time and was less likely to be missed if he was gone for hours on end. My mother would hunt my ass down and drag me back with chains if I stayed away too long. But who was I to speak to this mother’s lack of security for her child? I never asked him to come to my house to play when growing up. He just always did.

But instead of saying anything, I hung my head decided to wave my white flag just for the sake of ending the visit.

“I no know what you want me fu say,” I said. “I sorry.”

“No use fu be sorry now,” she said. “Ray dead already and it no matter anymore.”

“Then why you bring it up then?” I felt a swell of frustration carry the words past my lips. “What it matter at all? He da mi just a friend.”

“Just a friend?” Her raised voice made the dog stand up from where it went back to lay down, and it stared at her. “That sad. That just really sad.”

“What you di talk about?”

“Ray da my son, and I loved him just like any mother. But that boy da just a fool. He always believe things that no real.”

Her vagueness was obviously intentional and was just to frustrate me. I knew she wanted me to keep probing, but I was beyond ready to leave. In fact, I stood and aimed for the door. The dog growled.

“Wait!” The dog echoed a bark. I stopped and waited for her to say something. “Arite, arite...I wa stop. The whole thing, with Ray dead, that mess di try arrange the funeral, the cost; all that just have me irritated. Even Jackie, my daughter, I hurl bad words her way til she left too.”

“Ms. Garcia, what you have for me?” I said. Ignoring her remark didn’t make her feel any better. She scrunched up her eyebrows but answered the question anyway.

“First I want know something,” she said, and motioned for me to sit down. I shook my head wanting her to get the idea. If she did, it didn’t matter to her. She still spoke in slow syllables. “Ray come home really angry late late one night. It feel like it happen so recent, but da already about two years now, I think.”

Two years and *Ray* were keywords that brought up that last time I was with him. The memory played back the physical pain and the sensual touch of the cold cement and cool but long night in uncomfortable sleep I had while waiting at the bus stop. I saw the wave of anger coming. It had long been coming but since Ray’s death, it receded and now it was coming back. I let Ms. Garcia continue.

“I see the boy mad before, but not like this, and not ever since. At first I mi think he drunk, but his eyes. Just like with his father, I could tell the difference between drunk and angry, and just plain angry.”

“I still no understand,” I said, but sat down anyway.

“I always lock my door, especially since I start live by myself. But that night, he broke open the door. I hear when he first start try and knock it open and I already had my hand pan the phone ready fu call the police. When the door finally fling open, he walk right in and look pan me. Never say anything. I mi so scared. But he gone right in the bathroom and lock himself in the rest of the night.”

“Why the bathroom?” I asked, my curiosity unconsciously surpassing the anger I began to feel earlier.

“The question is, why my house?” That was, in fact, the question. Ray had been living on his own for years. His own door to break open. I had been there myself a few times: a tiny studio apartment with cement walls and tiled floors with only a few furniture and a TV, it made for the perfect echo chamber, and I had made fun of him for it which always annoyed him. He tried to fill it up with unpacked boxes and books and picture frames and even carpets, but it just made the room smaller. In truth, I envied his ability to have his own place and since then I had dreamed of having my own to fill. I still had the dream even after returning, but I was getting too comfortable at my parents’ house.”

“The whole rest of the night he stay quiet quiet in the bathroom. It scare me so bad, I never sleep at all. In the morning, though, he mi so embarrassed.” She chuckled like a mother telling embarrassing stories about her children. And it was, but given that the story was about a grown man, it was odd. “He try sneak out, but I mi di sit down right here. I mi want ask him what happened, but he look like he mi so ashamed, I left him alone.”

“So what that have to do with me?”

“Ray tell me the day before that that he was with you.”

“Oh.”

“Mhmm.”

“So you want know what happen?”

“Mhmm.”

“We had a fight. The night mi long, he frustrate me, I start tell him about himself, and he get mad and we fight. I get left pan the roadside and had to wait for the bus fu take me back home.”

“Then why he come home here so upset?” she asked.

“I no know. What ever happen after he left me, I no know. I never talk to him since that night because a week after that I gone do my studies da States.”

“That no very satisfying,” she said as she folded her arms.

For two years she wondered what had happened to Ray that night and I tried to be sensitive to that. But there was nothing else to the story. It was a bad night. I was leaving. We lost contact. Her guess was as good as mine. Something else must have happened. Surely, he couldn't have taken what happened between us that bad? I was the one left in the dirt and had to find my own way home. Leaving for the States right after that should have been a blessing for him, so he wouldn't have had to worry about running into me again. I know it was for me.

I looked awkwardly around the room with nothing else to say. The dog was now lying in the kitchen with its head down between its paws and its eyes closed.

“That dog da fu Ray,” she said catching my stare. “About a week after that night, he get it. He say wa friend ask him to take care of it while they gone out of town, but it look like the friend never come back. When I see the dog never going anywhere, I ask him about it. He say the dog grow pan him.”

I laughed at that. I never had a pet of my own, but I knew it meant a certain sense of responsibility and commitment which it never occurred to me that Ray had. If he got up one morning and decided to leave for a few days, he would. He was just that type of person. I had to admit, though, that it had been so long, he could have become anything, and done anything. Until now I had never thought about him being anything different than a wild card. He’d get into fights, dodge police, and make risky moves at the domino table, or with someone’s wife. Sometimes he’d tell me stories of crazy nights with crazy people, or sometimes I was there, drawn into the mesmerizing confidence he was apt at portraying, feeling invincible with him around. So it was odd to imagine him with a dog.

Ms. Garcia was looking at me now, and I had to stifle the laugh. She ignored it.

“A couple days before he dead, Ray bring the dog here and say he was going to come back for it. He left fifty dollars too.” The dog, meanwhile, got up from its place and went to the back door where it began whining.

“Hold on,” said Ms. Garcia as she got up. “I have to go let the dog out.”

I stood when she did, then said, “I have to go too. Now, what you mi want give me?”

“Thomas, I really sorry you come all this way.”

“What you mean?” I felt the waves coming at me now, out of nowhere. It wasn’t a very satisfying visit, and her tone shift at this moment suggested that there was never any such thing. I showed a mild irritation because, well, she had lost her son, I was in her house, and she was older than me. Being overly angry would be unfair, even though I wanted to disrespectfully walk away without a word. But I figured I’d use the opportunity to end it all.

“Ms. Garcia,” I began gently. “Me and Ray used to be good friends. We grow up together, and we get into trouble together. If it is about the funeral, then I am sorry, I was in the States studying and couldn’t afford to make it.”

Ms. Garcia looked at me puzzled.

“You think this da bout you?” She said. “I mi think I had something for you, but it turn out that it couldn’t be you. So I sorry you come all the way here.”

I felt the heat on my face from the anger, a feeling that was just as confusing as her comments. But I was too focused on wanting to leave than staying to satisfy my curiosity. Like what had she meant? And who did she mean for it to be?

“Bye, Ms. Garcia,” I said and walked out the front door.

I sat in the car mumbling to myself, and was about to turn the engine on when I heard a loud and sharp yelp coming from all the way at the back of Ms. Garcia’s house. It sounded like a fight between vicious animals and Ms. Garcia’s dog was the one getting its ass torn. It squealed mercilessly and it didn’t sound like it was about to calm down. Some of the neighbors poked their heads out of their front doors looking for the source, and without thinking, I went back inside.

“I think snake bite she,” said Ms. Garcia between the yelps. She sat on the sofa with the dog in her lap. She stroked the fur and that seemed to keep the dog from writhing in pain, but it still whined uncontrollably. “I gone to the back to check pan she and all of a sudden she jump in the air by the banana patch and she bawl di come run straight to me.”

“What if we take she to the vet?” I asked.

“No use,” she said. She was oddly calm, as if resigned. Relief, even.

“Why not?” I asked. She was making me calm too.

“I bet da yellow-jaw. She so small. No chance for she.”

I was uncomfortably calm.

“I mi think da you who left the dog to Ray. I mi going to give you back.”

Something began eating away at my calm and I grew jittery. The dog was whimpering softly in Ms. Garcia’s hands, but its quickened breathing made me think it still had some time. I didn’t feel calm anymore.

“I think I could take it to the vet,” I said, thinking about the veterinary clinic near my own house that boasted an emergency 24/7 service.

“No bother, she wa dead anyway.”

I noticed then that her calm was an old resignation. It had been the end for a while, and she didn’t want the dog one way or another. But while she nursed what I figured was relief, the dog was losing its chance with every second.

“Let me take it,” I said, motioning for her to pass it into my hands. It is a strange thing to watch a dog die. There is a well of pity that is uncovered you never knew existed,

and suddenly you entertain the idea that maybe it can live. And if the owner wasn't going to do anything about it, then maybe I should. "Make we see what happen."

"Whatever happen—,"

"I know."

I took the dog into the passenger seat of my car and lay her down comfortably on her side. It wasn't whining, but her breathing was steady. I took off leaving Ms. Garcia in the doorway watching me speed down the road.

On the way, I petted the dog and said, "It will be all right, you ah get a good doctor fu fix you up". It felt unnatural, but right. There was a soft wind coming in from the half-open window, blowing the brown curls in her fur like the wings of a hummingbird.

The sign in front of a light green cemented house with a porch in front said "Singh's Veterinary". I parked next to the chain-linked fence behind a red Chevy pickup with the vet's company sticker on the tailgate. I turned the engine off, and picked up the dog from the passenger side and brought it into my lap. It was still breathing, but its limbs felt limp. I got out and walked quickly over the cement walkway toward the front porch, the dog dangling in my arms.

The room I stepped into was no bigger than the living room and kitchen room space in Ms. Garcia's house. It didn't look like an actual clinic. It had a wooden counter chest high about six feet from the door and the space in between had four plastic chairs lined against the wall; a single open window with glass louvers at the side next to the

counter. Behind the counter, though, was a regular living room and kitchen: couch and TV, stove and shelves and refrigerator. A girl was lazing on the couch watching a show.

A door on the right just behind the counter opened and Mr. Singh, the vet, came out. He was a short man with chubby fingers, his dark greasy hair slicked back in a neat comb, his shirt littered with dog hair and he smelled like a horse. He saw the dog and in my arms and moved closer to pull it into his own.

“What happen?” he asked, examining the dog’s tiny body.

“Snake bite,” I said. “I think da yellow-jaw.”

“Oh my,” he said as he shook his head. “You could have a seat right there in one of them chairs and I will see what I could do. Oh my, oh my...” He went back into the room he just came out of, his pessimism fading with the door closing behind him.

I sat down. The vet’s expression was the only diagnosis I needed, and I began to think of going back to Ms. Garcia’s house to return the limp corpse of the dog. She was ready for it to die, but I still took it. She had no reason to take it back now. I’d have to take it and bury it somewhere. I couldn’t do it back home, my mother would throw me in the hole too for messing up her yard. I probably wouldn’t even make it past the front gate with the dead dog dangling in my hands. She was too superstitious, and bringing in a random dead dog must mean something bad.

The girl who was watching TV earlier was at the counter now. She leaned on it with her elbows and stared at me.

“So what happen?” she said.

“Snake bite,” I replied. She raised her eyebrows and nodded.

“We get a lot of that. But people usually bring horse that get bite.”

“They survive?” I said.

“Mostly. It take longer fu the poison to a kill horse. But dogs, especially this small one? Me no know.” It was strange that she struck up a conversation with me rather than watch TV. Maybe it was a part of the service: preparation for the worst. But she spoke matter-of-factly, like it happened everyday.

“Dogs usually eat frogs, though,” she said.

“Frog?”

“Yes, frog. They see it bounce about the ground, they jump at it. Bite it. But the frog they have poisonous white milk that come out from they back.”

“Oh.”

“So how long you had the dog?” she asked.

“Da no mine,” I said. She looked disappointed.

“Who then?”

“A friend.”

“Why they no bring they own dog?” she asked. At this point I was annoyed and wanted to be left alone.

“Because he dead.” I said it as bluntly as I could, hoping she would get the idea.

“Oh,” she said, but she kept looking at me. I looked away, trying to act distracted by the posters from the Health Department on the front of the counter. I could still feel her stare, waiting for me to say something else. Or get mad. Cry. React. Even if it was

that kind of friendship, I would have cried a long time ago. “So if your friend dead, the dog can’t still be for he. Da yours now, nuh?”

“No. Worse so if it dead from snake bite,” I said.

“And if it survive?” I knew her kind. Interfering. Forward. Stupid. Instead of leaving people alone, they prefer to probe until they get a reaction.

“What if you left me ‘lone?” I said a little bit louder than I wanted to. I hoped my eye contact would drive the point in.

“You no sound like a good friend,” she said as she turned around and went back to the couch.

Bad friend, good friend. It all didn’t matter in the end. It was easy to forgive Ray when he was dead. Even though he pressed my face into the dirt at that bus stop in the middle of the night. Even though he got me into more trouble than I could count. I wasn’t the one that left him in a dust cloud wondering how he would get home. I was better than that. A better friend. A good friend. And here I was in the vet’s clinic with his dog. A part of me wanted to leave the dog here; the vet would find a way to get rid of it. Another part of me wanted to take it and leave it at the front door of Ms. Garcia’s house. Still there was another part that wouldn’t leave me alone if I did any of those things. Maybe it was the part that made me bring the dog to the vet: pity. Pity is a terrible motivation.

When I finally settled on burying the dog in the forest close to where I live, Mr. Singh came out. It had been thirty minutes. I looked up at him from where I was sitting and waited for his announcement.

“Yellow jaw bite,” he said still shaking his head. “Small dogs like your spaniel couldn’t survive it. But look like the snake only partially envenomate she. If not, she dead already. Good timing help, too.”

I must have looked some kind of surprised because Mr. Singh tapped me on the cheek with his palm motioning me to go in the room with him. Afterwards, I figured, he was slapping me gently.

“I no think he want the dog, Paul,” said the girl watching TV. He closed the door behind him and showed me the dog laying on the bed, its breathing steady.

“No worry about she,” he said, meaning the girl. “She like talk too much. Get the customers uncomfortable. I give it the antivenin”—now talking about the dog. “I treat the wound too. You could take the dog home, and I will lend you a dog kennel so you could carry it.”

He helped me put the dog carefully in the kennel and then I took it up the counter where I paid. It was cheaper than I thought which didn’t surprise me given the informality of the clinic. Not thinking about the cost made me think, as I headed for the car, what to do with it. Ms. Garcia’s resignation was clear, but mine wasn’t. The humane society would take it. They’d nurse it back to health, find a home, and that’d be a good deed for all of us. I looked through the metallic cage at her face. She rested, and her stomach rose and fell in calm, uninterrupted breaths, the bandage on her thigh moving accordingly.

Was her name really *Princess*? She didn’t look like much. Ray must have had no choice in it, I thought. If he did, he’d have chosen a pit-bull by the name of Rocky. I’d

have chosen the same thing. Instead, on the way to my parents' house, I began planning how I would tell my parents that I was going to find my own place.

CHAPTER VI
RAY AT THE DEAF INSTITUTE

I was deaf. I still am, of course. You never leave it. Or the deafness never leaves you.

But like I said, I was deaf, and still am.

I first met Ray when he came to pick me up from home in the village to take me to the Deaf Children's Institute. I was tapping the wooden walls as I always do. My mother sat in the kitchen with a neighbor, and my dad slept outside in his hammock, the breeze blowing under the shade of the porch. I imagined this was his way of making fun of the sun because it couldn't catch him under there. His revenge for having it beat down on him all during the week as he worked in the cane fields. Our house is close to the entrance of the village, so as I stared out the window, up the road I saw a white pickup coming with a cloud of dust rising up behind it. I tapped on the wall with my knuckles as I turned to look past the living room and into the kitchen at my mother, who was facing the neighbor, her lips moving, and her arms gesturing in the air. I tapped on the walls harder. Continuing along the walls, I tapped all the way to the kitchen, feeling the steady vibration and slight pain in my fingers. My mother and the neighbor looked at me but I didn't stop tapping, so she got up and came over and placed her palm over my fist and tightened it. When I opened my mouth, she let go. I went back to the living room and through the front door, and I began to tap again on the wall outside. I was looking out at

the pickup now and it was coming closer. And then Dad threw his slipper at me and it hit my face. I looked at him angrily, but he already had his eyes closed again. Just then the pickup pulled up in front of the house leaving the cloud of dust to settle behind it.

Ray stepped out of the driver's side and closed the door behind him. He wasn't tall and he wore a green t-shirt that seemed a little too big for him. My dad sat up in his hammock and turned to face Ray as he approached the porch. My mother came outside and the neighbor left after waving everyone goodbye. I like to imagine the conversation between Ray and my parents went something like this:

I heard your son is deaf, Ray would say.

That's right. And Edgar is not much use to us here, my dad would reply.

He will, if you let us teach him.

And how will you do that?

If we take him to a place where there are other kids like that and teach him to use his hands to talk. And we can teach him how to read.

Will it cost me anything?

Nothing.

Where will you take him?

Far down south. It's an institute.

How long will you have him?

The entire year. But he'll be back for the Christmas break.

My dad looked at my mother, and they talked for a little bit. But I couldn't imagine what they had said because it wasn't for long, and I knew it would have taken longer to convince her to let Ray take me.

You can take him, but you can keep him during Christmas.

It might have been different, especially after some time when I found out that Ray had already been to the house before to talk to my parents.

At the time I only largely understood motioning, which my mother had learned to navigate. She'd have me help her in the kitchen, showing me the pot spoon and pointing to the pot on the wood stove, or showing me the knife and pointing to the vegetables.

But when she tapped on my hand and I looked at her, and she pointed at me then at Ray and swung her fingers out as if saying, "Go", I didn't understand her. Only when we went inside and Mom started putting my clothes in a bag, I understood her.

Outside she kissed me on the forehead and tapped gently on my cheek and smiled. Dad waved from his hammock as the Toyota left dust on the road behind us, and then I couldn't see the house anymore.

The trip was a long one, and I sat in the passenger seat feeling the bumps and looking out the window. I also felt a thumping vibration on the door and I figured Ray was listening to music since he nodded his head in a rhythm, his lips moving and a vein popping out on his neck. I neared crying several times, but Ray kept passing me chocolate and I ate them. He was quiet, and by that I mean that we didn't interact much, except for when he pointed out cows or horses or whatever he thought was interesting in

a village or town we passed. When we finally got close to the Institute, he reached to the radio and turned the knob and vibration stopped.

The Institute was on a large piece of land just off the highway going west, next to a small airstrip where I saw some small planes. We didn't have to drive far in past that airstrip on the dusty road to get to the Institute. As soon as we passed it, on the right and the left were green pastures bordered into about four or five squares of land bordered with barbed wire fences. On a field just across from the compound, were rows of tall corn stalks and I could see the green corn husks protruding all over them. The field ran way far back up past a hill. We got up to the compound where there were different buildings of all sizes, some wooden and on elevated posts, and others were cement. Some were painted and some weren't and some had paint peeling off of them. I learned that these buildings were the dorms (dorms for the teachers, the students, the older students, the boys, the girls), and the kitchen, and the chapel, the classrooms, the director's quarters, and the barn.

Now, you have to understand that the Deaf Children's Institute was less of a facility and more of a church camp for deaf kids. Of course, they had teachers that taught us sign language and we stayed in dorms throughout the school year, but the environment, and the work and activities we had to do was like a camp, a farm, and a church.

Obviously because they were most of them Mennonites (except for Ray, whose brown skin was always shiny with sweat): the teachers, the director, the coordinators. Not

the really traditional ones, thank God. But the ones who owned Chevy trucks and wore jeans and buttoned-up shirts.

We did a lot of farm work in the mornings and evenings before and after classes. We had responsibilities. I fed the pigs. Or sometimes I'd work in the fields picking or planting corn, or picking Oranges. Or even in the garden where we planted okra, cabbages, peppers, tomatoes and so on. Under the heat of the sun, it was tough to work.

I didn't want to get out of the Toyota truck. I cried into my bag that had my clothes in it. I had no idea where I was, and when I looked around outside the windows and into the compound, I didn't recognize anything or anyone. Everyone seemed to stop what they were doing to look at me in the Toyota. One of the boys wearing a sweat-soaked shirt and rubber boots leaned on a shovel, another had a hoe on his shoulder beside him. And a few faces appeared at windows. Two female teachers wearing matching pink dresses and head coverings came to the door of the Toyota and motioned for me to get out. I shook my head and sunk further into the seat, letting them know that I didn't want to get out. They both smiled, which still haunts me to this day, even though there was nothing menacing about it. They were just friendly. No one had been friendly to me before that. But they smiled at me and walked away, leaving the door to the Toyota wide open.

Ray got out on his side and walked around to where I was. He paused a little bit by the door and then bent down to pick something up from the ground. He didn't look at me, though. It was as if I wasn't there. When he stood up straight, he had a small stone in

his hand. Very small, like a pebble. He stared at it in his hand. For a moment I thought he was studying his palm, so intently he looked at it. And he didn't even acknowledge me sitting there. But he stood so still, watching the stone in his palm, not even blinking. His hand had a slight shiver, and if it wasn't for that, I would have thought the world froze around me, even with the boys being back at work somewhere in the background with the shovel and hoe.

He stood like that for an awkwardly long time, and I started to feel how tightly I was holding my bag with my clothes in it. I loosened up a little. He kept staring. From where I sat the stone didn't seem very fascinating. It was just a random small stone, brown and ragged just like all the other stones on the ground. I thought that maybe there was a bug on it. A very small one. Or that it was on the other side of the stone, the side I couldn't see. Getting out of the corner that I had sunk myself into, I slid closer in the seat toward the door. Ray kept staring at the stone, still not looking up to see me sliding closer to him. To the stone. When I got close and looked into his palm, he closed it. I looked up at him, and his eyes were closed. After a moment he opened them and looked at me, then he threw the stone at my forehead. It felt like a raindrop. Then it fell on my lap. He was already walking away when I looked up from picking up the stone, so I got out of the Toyota clutching my bag of clothes in my left hand and aiming for his back with my right. I threw the stone and it bounced off his shoulder. He didn't stop; he kept walking straight up the steps to one of the wooden buildings and I followed him, intent on getting him back.

When I walked in he was standing next to one of many beds lined against the walls of the building on either side. He pointed to it and motioned for me to come over, and I knew that was my bed.

After I put my bag on the bed, he took me to meet everyone. At first I thought I was going to be the subject of everyone's fascination, like back home when my mother would take me outside and all the kids would come up to me and yell, determined that if they yell loud enough there would be a pop in my ears that would make me hear. But it wasn't like that here. I wasn't the only one who was deaf. I had never met others like me before, so it wasn't until I saw that Ray and the teachers motioned to the other boys (the boys who had been holding the shovel and the hoe) the way they motioned to me. I wondered if everyone if everyone at the Institute was like that, but then I saw that the female teachers and Ray communicated with the movement of their lips like I saw other people do.

There wasn't much to our introductions. There were no names for me to hear, and I couldn't offer anything other than a weak handshake. It wasn't until I learned to read that I started using names. Ms. Gabriela and Ms. Elizabeth didn't shake my hand, but they nodded in acknowledgement. Mr. Theissen, the director, was in his office in a little building, and he gave me a piece of candy that I quickly ate. The boys – who I later came to know as Kaylon and James – smiled and shook my hand. One offered me his shovel, but Ray shook his head and turned me away.

On my first morning there, after the fog over the compound was mostly gone and there was only a slight chill in the air, we had breakfast in the kitchen. I got a giant plate of scrambled eggs that I couldn't finish and a cup of hot chocolate. Ray sat at one end of the table with a pencil and paper. He was drawing and he seemed intent on it. I wanted to go over and see what it was, but I wondered if he was going to throw the pencil at me. It was somehow in this small moment of his drawing when I saw a troubled line creased across his forehead. It wasn't a scar. It was just a line, like a wrinkle. I say troubled because it was painful to watch, much more, I imagine, to have. It went away when Ms. Gabriela came with a plate just as big as mine of scrambled eggs. It wasn't the eggs that made the line go away, of course. It would be funny to see eggs being the solution to a troubled mind. But when she set the plate down on the table, her fingers gently and discreetly brushed against his arm. She pulled her hand back as if she did it by accident, and then he looked back at her and they both smiled. It was quick; the other two boys were too busy with eating their mountain of eggs, and Ms. Elizabeth was mixing some more chocolate in a cup at the counter.

After breakfast, I had a one-on-one sign language session with Ms. Gabriela until lunch. I often looked outside the classroom and saw Ray do odd jobs around the compound. He painted one side of the wall of the dorm building, fed the pigs, and loaded some sacks of fertilizer onto the trailer and slowly hauled it with the tractor up the road.

I joined him later after lunch along with the other two boys. Ray motioned for us to get on the top of the trailer and I hopped on, feeling unbalanced on the flat surface as it shook. He motioned for me to sit and then he took my hand and made me grasp the rail

on the side by the wheels. The vibration on the trailer was comforting, and it was a welcomed distraction from the heat on my arms coming from the sun. When the tractor took off, it was exciting to feel the trailer jumping up and down over rocks and holes on the dirt road sending me, at times, flying a couple inches or so above the wooden bed. I laughed at Kaylon and James who were also laughing and struggling to keep themselves placed by having their two hands on the rails. Ray looked back every so often and laughed at us too.

We eventually came to a stop at a second barn that was past the hill next to the end of the corn field on the other side of the pastures where the cows were grazing. In front of the barn was another large acreage of land where two horses were also grazing among the shrubs and grass. They were both fully brown but one was larger than the next, which I took to mean they were male and female. Lovers, as they stood beside each other.

The vibration on the trailer stopped and Ray waved his hand at us so that we'd follow him as he got off the tractor and walked towards the barn. We followed him towards the entrance of the pasture where he swung out a makeshift gate made of barbed wire wrapped around a couple posts. When we walked through, the horses looked up and came slowly toward us.

Ray reached down and pulled a tuft of grass from the ground and as they came up to Ray, he held out his hand out as one of the horses at it from his palm. We stood behind him, but Kaylon and James were having a small struggle for a thin piece of stick they found on the ground. Ray motioned for me to come closer and then pointed to the grass

on the ground. I pulled up a tuft of it, and Ray put his palm out and I did the same as I came closer to the horses. The smaller horse came up to me and ate it from my palm and I laughed at the tickle from its hairy mouth.

They weren't saddled, but they were bridled. Ray tapped my shoulder and then tapped the horse's back, the same horse I was feeding. I shook my head, and he smiled with that smile I've come to know as gentle, but he urged me by tapping the horse's back again and motioning his head toward it. The boys walked past me and up to the bigger horse. Kaylon bent over and hooked his hands together while James used it as a lift as he swung up on the curve of the horse's back. Then James gave Kaylon his hand and pulled him up behind him. Ray was still urging me so I went up close and he lifted me onto the small horse's back. He put my hands on the mane and I held the long rough hairs tightly. The horse shifted a little and I felt like I was about to fall, jolting me to lean forward and hug its neck. Ray laughed, his face up and his mouth wide open and deep dimples on each cheek. I loosened my hug and sat up straight again, still holding tight to the mane.

Ray held the horse by the reins and began walking. I felt like I was about to fall off and my legs tightened on the horse's belly. As it continued to walk, I loosened my grip some more and moved along with the trot. James and Kaylon stopped and waited for us to pass them. Kaylon had the short thin stick in his hands, the ones they were fighting over, and as they picked up their speed overtaking us, Kaylon reached out and whipped my horse on the rear, sending it shooting forward so fast Ray couldn't get a hold of the reins tight enough. In the speed that it went, I was forced backwards, leaning away from the mane where I had been holding on to. To make it worse, as the horse ran, I was

bouncing all over its back with my leg gripping tightly to its sides. I was about to bounce right off the horse when one of the bounces sent my upper body forward where I quickly grabbed the mane and held on so tightly I pulled back and the horse stopped immediately. I plunged forward doing a flip or two past the side of its neck and onto the grass on the ground. I landed on my back pretty hard and it knocked the wind out of me for a few seconds before I looked up and the horse was standing there, just watching me. Ray came running behind and when he got to me, knees down in the grass, he looked all over my body for cuts or bruises. I smiled and he stopped looking and looked back at me seriously until he smiled then laughed.

Kaylon and James came trotting up to us, both laughing until Ray shot them a glance. He then got up and ran towards them flailing his arms in the air, frightening the horse onto its hind legs, sending Kaylon and James tumbling down the horse's back and onto the ground, the horse taking off in a gallop, the smaller one following behind. They were fine and got up laughing, patting the dirt and grass off each other's back.

Ray showed me around during the rest of the evening. He took me to the corn field to show me how to pick the corn off the stalks and putting them in a bucket to take back to the kitchen. Then he showed me the pigs. The mud smelled like shit, but not so unbearable and I laughed to see the pigs played around in it. Ray poured some feed into their trough and we left them to eat.

By the time we had dinner I was already tired and hungry and I jumped greedily into the large piece of chicken breast and leg along with peas and mashed potatoes and corn. But it was still too much and I couldn't eat it all.

That night I couldn't sleep because an ache in my back from the fall was just catching up with me. Night was long settled in and the boys were already asleep, which I could tell because they weren't laughing or messing with each other. Light from the moon and the lamppost outside had made the room more visible through the sides of the wooden louvers of the window. I got up and went over to Kaylon and smiled at how stupid he looked with his eyes closed and his mouth half open revealing a chipped front tooth. With my forefinger I flicked his nose and watched his face scrunch up then he turned on his side.

I went over to the window and opened the louvers to look out at the compound and the corn stalks and how the moon lighted all of it. I couldn't see the cows in the pasture grazing, figuring they were asleep like everyone else. The only signal of life was the soft movement of the breeze over the corn stalks. It was peaceful.

Then Ray stepped out of his dorm building, closing the door behind him and a flashlight in his hand. Going down the steps he went straight toward the corn stalks. As soon as he was out of sight I put my slippers on and opened the door, stepping out and making sure I didn't make any sudden vibrations when pulling it shut and rushing down the steps. I felt my slippers hit against my heels and I took them off, tossing them toward the front of the dorm and running into the night, toward the corn stalks. I could still see the dim light of the flashlight getting dimmer as it went deeper into the corn field. I slipped through one of the rows and felt the leaves rub against my arm, prickling me, but I still went further in, following the dim light which was getting brighter and closer. Then I stopped when it stopped moving.

From where I was, the stalks were too thick and it was too dark to see anything. I got on my belly and crawled forward, hoping I wasn't making any noise that Ray could hear. I had put the flashlight on his shoulder, and he was picking corn from off the stalks and tossing them into a sack. It didn't make sense to me. He had us to help him during the day. I couldn't imagine that he was stealing them. I was sure that if he'd asked, they would have given him. But he was carefully breaking them off, examining them, and placing them into the sack slowly, as if placing them in would make such a noise as to call attention to himself. I was getting bored and was about to crawl back out when he stopped, sat on the ground, and started sobbing. At first I thought he was laughing, having seen him do that before, but he put his face in his hands and his shoulders shook. It was a very touching image, him holding a picked corn in his left hand and his face in the right, the flashlight falling to the ground. I almost cried with him. He soon stopped and wiped his eyes and placed the corn ear into the sack.

I was scratching my nose when he glanced in my direction and picked up his flashlight and stood up. I thought he had found me. That moment when I moved my hand to my nose, my arm must have brushed against dirt, or the scratching was what caught his attention. All this time I had seen people scratched parts of their bodies and never seen it bother anyone. But it wasn't me he was looking at. He was looking far above me, at the top of the stalks. He turned the flashlight off and remained standing in the dark for what seemed like a long time.

When he turned the light on again, he looked around him, then turned his attention to the ground by his feet. He was searching for something. He stooped down

and used the fingers of his free hand to dig up the dirt around him. He wasn't frantic, but he seemed determined. He stopped when he picked up a tiny stone and held it in his palm under the scrutiny of the light. And he stared at it.

I jumped to my feet, feeling a few ears of corn hit me in the head and shoulders then I ran back through the corn stalks, the leaves of scratching against my arms. When I was finally out of the field, I ran up to the dorm and quickly opened and shut the door and stood behind it to catch my breath. I knew my slippers were outside but I didn't bother to go get it. I went to the window and looked out and there was a tiny light still in the middle of the corn field. And it stayed there for what seemed like a long time.