

BRACKISH WATER: STORIES

by

Ivory Kelly

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Direct of Thesis: Dr. Liza Wieland

Major Department: English

Each of the five short stories in this collection depicts the struggle of a Belizean character and takes place in a locale that recalls the history or culture of a specific region of Belize. There are both male and female protagonists in these stories, and their circumstances represent both urban and rural life. These characters are also of various ages—from a ten year old boy to a woman in her seventies. There are, however, two important characteristics that are common to all of these protagonists. They all represent demographic groups that have historically been marginalized in Belize. There is, for example, a Q'eqchi Maya farmer whose infant son dies as a result of racial prejudice and neglect at a public hospital. There is also a ten-year-old village boy who longs to own a store-bought kite, but his father's meager earnings makes this nearly impossible. The second similarity among these characters is that in their quest to free themselves from their external circumstances—racial prejudice, poverty, rural life, broken family—they all discover that they must first overcome their own self-imposed constraints.

The title *Brackish Water* represents the threads that run through all five stories. First, it symbolizes the physical landscapes in the stories as each one is set chiefly in a community that is located on the banks of a river or creek in Belize: Moho River, Sittee River, Halouver Creek, and Belize River. These bodies of water are all brackish due to the mixture of fresh water with water that flows inland from the Caribbean Sea. Rivers and creeks have played a major role in Belize's

history: from pre-Colombian days when rivers formed a major part of Maya trading routes to the colonial era when timber and chicle—then the mainstays of the economy—were floated down-river and shipped to overseas markets, to the present day when many communities still rely on rivers and creeks for their livelihood. The title *Brackish Water* also points to the dichotomies that are explored in the five stories: male and female, rich and poor, privileged and marginalized, urban and rural, black and white, North Side and South Side, local and foreign, and so forth. Furthermore, the title *Brackish Water* symbolizes the complex mixture of ethnic groups in Belize and the challenges and triumphs that this plurality creates. Finally, brackish water is hard water and therefore represents the challenges that the characters in these stories must overcome in order to achieve personal fulfillment.

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A Thesis

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by

Ivory Kelly

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APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Liza Wieland PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER: Alex Albright MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER: Seodial Deena PhD

CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH: Jeffrey Johnson PhD

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL: Paul Gemperline PhD

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CHAPTER 1: A TINY, BABY-BLUE SUIT

The loud buzz of Valentino's power saw lingered in his ear for a long minute after he turned the motor off. He surveyed the lush rainforest surrounding the four acres of land that had been cleared so far. Two years ago, as he was traveling to Santa Ana, Valentino had decided that he would settle on ten acres of the virgin forest that he saw near the banks of the Moho River. He could see, from the dark soil along the river bank, that the land would be perfect for a *milpa*. The land belonged to the government, but as it was way back in the bush, and he was sure the government had no use for the land and would let him keep it. Now, as he surveyed the four acres of corn, beans, pumpkins and cacao that he and his brother, Benito, had planted so far, Valentino was very pleased. In the distance beyond a cluster of *maqoch* palms, he could see the smoke from Celenie's fire pit. He knew that Lilly was up too, even at this early hour, helping her *na* around the hut. Farther west, the great Maya mountains stood like guardians watching over the land.

Valentino turned to look at the river about fifty yards away. It had rained heavily the previous two days even though it was only the beginning of May. The rainy season was still a few weeks away. The river had risen a little, and its usual clear green had become a little cloudy with mud. Benito's boat came around the river bend to the east. Three mornings per week Benito took the bus from San Pedro Colombia to Punta Gorda Town then travelled by sea to help Valentino on his *milpa*. Then Valentino returned the weekly favor, travelling to his former village to help his older brother. Benito always arrived a little after daybreak, and now the sun had begun to rise in the distance, beyond the tall mangroves that grew a few miles away by the sea.

Moments later, Benito walked through the clearing that led from the waterside and greeted Valentino with a wave of his machete. “*Di’os,*” Good morning, he said in Q’eqchi.

“*Di’os. Cha’an cha cuil?*” Good morning. How are you?

“*Pues ’us.*” I am well.

Turning back toward the river, Benito said, “*Na cuil naq tyoquat rilbil li nima. Ut mucu sa’chol.*” I see you looking at the river. You look worried.

“A little,” Valentino said as he reached for his water bottle that lay on the ground next to the power saw and a container of gasoline. “I was just hoping that the rainy season doesn’t come too soon. If it does it will make things hard when the baby comes. If the river floods it will be trouble.”

“Don’t worry, brother. We still have a few more weeks of dry weather.”

“I am thinking about the big flood last year. Remember how it washed away the bridge at Kendall? You never know what can happen once the rainy season starts, Benito.”

“Everything will go well,” Benito assured him.

As Valentino took up his power saw again and began to walk back toward the cluster of cedar trees he was felling, Benito asked, “Did you see the Minister when you went to Punta Gorda last week? What did he say about your land papers?”

“The Minister was not in his office. His secretary said he was in Belmopan. But she said not to worry; the Minister was working on my application and he was going to take the form to Belmopan himself.”

“That’s what the secretary said the last time, Valentino. I think the Minister is giving you the run-around. He is a Q’eqchi just like us, but he is acting like all the other government people. Last year when he was campaigning, the Minister told you he would make sure you got a lease

for this land. He said you couldn't just take a piece of government land and squat on it, but not to worry; he would make sure you got your papers before three months. But as soon as his party got into power, the Minister became scarce; Now you can't find him when you go to his office. One year and three months has gone by, and he has not kept his promise."

"Don't worry, Benito. I will get the papers. The Minister told me that he wants more Maya farmers to plant cacao—many, many acres of cacao. And remember how last month he helped our uncle Alberto to get papers for his land in San Pedro Colombia?"

Squinting past Valentino into the sun that was quickly rising, Benito said, "Uncle Alberto is going against our people. Our leaders have said that the lands in all Maya villages belong to all the people. Nobody should own a piece for himself. That's the Maya tradition, and that's what the judge said in court last year."

"The judge only said that about Santa Cruz and Conejo. He didn't say that all the Maya villages in Belize are communal lands. I heard the news myself on the radio last year. And I don't agree with the *alcaldes*. They did not get permission from me. I did not tell them to go to court and ask the judge for Maya communal lands. A lot of us Mayas do not want communal lands, people like Uncle Alberto and me and some of the Cacao farmers back home in San Pedro Colombia. You see, Benito, when we have papers for our land we can get loans from the bank to make our farms better, to send our children to high school and university. Besides, some of our people are saying that the old way of farming is bad for the soil. When we cut down the forest and burn the land it's bad. Also, the old way of farming is wasteful because when the land in a *milpa* is used up we have to leave it to rest for five years before we can use it again. That's the old fashion way, Benito, and it is not good."

“The modern way is not always good, Alberto. The modern way destroys our culture. With the modern way, the government gives away or sells our ancestral lands, even our rivers, to big companies who drill for oil, or cut down the timber, or build dams. Those are the things that are bad for the land, plus they destroy our way of life. That is why our leaders are going back to the court in Belize City to ask the judge to make all the Maya villages in Toledo into communal lands. Already the leaders are writing down the names of the people who want to go back to Belize City. I and our other two brothers are taking our families. I think you should come with us, Valentino.”

“I will not go,” Valentino said with finality as he crooked two fingers around the ignition cord of his power saw. “It is not my fight. I do not want communal land. That is why I chose this piece of land all the way out here in the bush, where nobody else will want it.” Valentino tugged at the ignition chord, and the power saw came to life with a loud roar.

It was evening, and the sun was going down. Celenie knew Valentino would be back from clearing the land. As she prepared the evening meal in the kitchen, she thought of all the hard work Valentino had done on the land so far and the house he and Benito had built. The two brothers had spent an afternoon cutting down and hauling *moquoch* leaves for the roof and wild cane sticks for the walls. Then the following day they stitched these together with tying wire. And in one day the two-room house was built. Like all Q'eqchi fathers, Manuel Choc had taught his sons these and many other skills. Celenie rested a hand lightly on her protruding stomach and smiled as she felt a series of strong kicks from her second child. One day Valentino will teach those things to his own sons, Celenie thought.

Celenie picked up one of the hot corn tortilla off the *comal*. Then she put it in the hollowed pumpkin gourd with the others to keep them warm. The delicious aroma of toasted corn reminded Celenie of her mother's kitchen in San Pedro Colombia, and she inhaled deeply before replacing the cover on the pumpkin gourd. Celenie looked up at the smoked-stained calendar on the kitchen wall near the fire pit. In a week's time her mother would come to take care of Lilly and the new baby after Celenie came home from the hospital.

Celenie's thoughts were interrupted by her Lilly's excited, high pitched voice. "*Xc'ulunc se cabl in yucua!*" Papa is home! she yelled. Celenie put her head out the kitchen window and watched as Lilly tore past the chickens in the yard, scattering them as she ran toward Valentino. Valentino put down his power saw and gasoline container and scooped up Lilly unto his shoulders.

"*Cacuay, yucua!*" Horsie, Papa! Lilly urged.

"*Cau ta cha ha cuib!*" Hold on tightly! Valentino laughed. Lilly held onto Valentino's throat with her left arm and clasped his forehead with the other hand, pulling back Valentino's thick black hair and giving him a comical look. Valentino picked up the items off the ground and trotted toward the house, and Lilly squealed with delight. Celenie laughed at their antics then returned to the tortillas on the *comal*.

That night after the animals been secured and Lilly was asleep in her hammock, Celenie listened quietly as Valentino spoke once more about his plans for the future. They were enjoying a rare May breeze as they sat side by side on a wooden bench outside the hut. The night was pitch black and the sky full of stars. The only other light came from the hurricane lantern that burned dimly on the smooth dirt floor inside the hut.

“When my son is big enough,” Valentino was saying, “he will help me on the farm. Then I won’t need Benito’s help so much.”

“Don’t be so sure about ‘son,’ Valentino. Suppose the baby is a girl?”

“I know it is a boy. If feel sure.”

“You are worse than my mother,” Celenie giggled. “Every time she sees me these days, she says, ‘See how pointed your belly is, Celenie? I am sure this one is a boy.’”

“Your mother is a wise woman,” Valentino teased. He raised his head slowly and stared into the starry sky. After a long pause he said, “Benito says the Maya leaders are planning another trip to Belize City. Another court case is coming up next month. Are your mother and father going?”

“Yes. My two sisters and their husbands will go too.”

“Benito wants me to go, but I told him I do not want communal lands. You and I will own this land, Celenie, so that we can grow lots of cacao. We will save our money and send our children to high school in Punta Gorda, or who knows, maybe all the way in Belize City. Our children will go far in school; they will not stop at Standard Four or Six like we did. And also I want us to have the papers so that we can give this land to our children when we get old.”

This pleased Celenie, and she smiled at Valentino in the darkness. She studied the outline of his face, his broad forehead and strong nose. She thought of the night when Valentino came to her parents’ house in San Pedro Colombia to ask her father for permission to marry her. At that time Celenie was fifteen and Valentino nineteen. Valentino and her father had sat talking for a long while on a bench outside the house. Meanwhile, Celenie, her mother, and her two younger sisters remained inside the hut where they eavesdropped on the conversation.

Celenie smiled at the memory and rested her hand on Valentino's thigh. An owl hooted in the distance, and what sounded like thousand crickets pierced the night with their chorus. Celenie got up to go inside. "Wait, Valentino," she said, "I will come right back,"

A few minutes later, Celenie stood at the door with the brown kit bag she had packed weeks ago to take to the hospital.

"Is it time?" Valentino asked. He wasn't alarmed. He had prepared very carefully for this day. Still, he moved swiftly as he went inside to get Lilly.

Down at the river, Celenie settled herself in the dory behind Lilly who was already back to sleep. They sat on the pillows and blankets that Valentino had carefully arranged in the bottom of the dugout. Celenie watched as Valentino used his paddle to push the dory away from the wooden dock at the edge of the river. He then turned toward the outboard engine and tugged sharply at the ignition cord. The engine started up with a reassuring purr, and they headed down the Moho River. Celenie stared up at the stars and began to count them silently, the way she used to when she was a little girl. She knew it was a silly game, but it gave her something to think about instead of the birthing pains that were beginning to grow stronger.

The river became rough, and Celenie knew they were approaching the sea. Suddenly the outboard engine stopped. "What's happening, Valentino? Did the engine break down?" she asked anxiously.

"We forgot to pray," Valentino replied calmly.

Celenie laughed in spite of the birthing pains and reached for the rosary that hung around her neck.

An hour later, they arrived at the Punta Gorda Hospital. The building was well lit by fluorescent bulbs on the verandah and on the front of the building, but the place was very quiet and seemed deserted. In the maternity ward, Valentino led Celenie to a chair at the unattended nurses' station, and he went looking for a nurse. His rubber boots thumped noisily on the cement floor as he hurried down the empty corridor with Lilly still asleep on his shoulder.

Presently, Valentino came back. A Creole nurse followed in no great hurry a few paces behind. The nurse sat heavily on the chair across from Celenie. "When did the labor start?" she asked as she picked up a pen from the desk.

"About two hours ago. Around eight o'clock," Valentino replied.

"You have your clinic card?"

Valentino reached into the kit bag he had put on the floor. He handed the pre-natal record to the nurse who thus far had not made eye contact with either him or Celenie.

"Put it there," the nurse said dryly, pointing her chin toward the table.

Celenie saw Valentino's jaws tighten as he put the pale yellow card on the table. She knew Valentino didn't care for the nurse's attitude, and she didn't either. It was always like that for her people when they left their quiet villages and went to Town. In the stores, in restaurants, on the buses, the town people, most of whom were East Indians, Garifunas and Creoles, either ignored the Maya or talked to them as if they were children. Usually Valentino would say nothing about such treatment, but the muscles in his face would tighten as they were doing now.

When the nurse finished with the paperwork, she showed Celenie to one of two rows of metal beds refinished with glossy green paint. The white sheets had the letters PGH written in black permanent markers. The room reeked of Pine Sol and bleach. Valentino helped Celenie get settled.

He went back to the nurse's desk. "Nurse, I have to go home and take care of my little girl and tend to my animals. But first I must know, will my wife be all right?"

"She will be fine. That baby won't come until sometime tomorrow morning. Plus you can't stay in here anyway."

Valentino hesitated. The nurse looked at him for the first time. "We have two nurses in this ward tonight, plus the doctor is on call. Your wife will be all right, I told you."

Lilly stirred on Valentino's shoulder as he walked back to check on his wife one more time before he left.

Between her contractions, Celenie surveyed the empty beds in the maternity ward. She fixed her eyes on the unmade bed at the far side of the room near a window. Its occupant had been transferred to the delivery room sometime before Celenie got there. A small suitcase with wheels stood on the floor near the unmade bed. On the night stand was a large bouquet with a variety of beautiful flowers. These weren't hibiscus or periwinkle or any of the tropical flowers that grew in Belize. They were the kinds of flowers Celenie would only see in a bank or in one of the big hotels in Punta Gorda Town. Such flowers were imported from Mexico and bought by people who had a lot of money. At any other time Celenie would have admired the flowers, but the birthing pains, more urgent and intense now, demanded all her attention. She felt compelled to get up and walk around the ward. She wondered where the nurses could be. The nurse who had admitted her had come back once. She had taken Celenie's blood pressure and examined her to see how far along the baby was, saying that the baby was far from coming. But now, Celenie wasn't so sure the nurse was right.

Pressing hard against her back with both hands, Celenie tried to subdue the pain as she trudged toward the exit of the maternity ward. She hoped to find someone just outside, but the brightly lit corridor was deserted. Her lower back felt like it was about to split open, and she suddenly felt an urgent need to use the bathroom. Celenie knew she must get help quickly! She screamed and screamed for the nurse until her throat felt raw, but no one came.

Finally the nurse who had admitted her was at the door. She lunged clumsily toward Celenie who had gone back on her bed and was now struggling to drag herself up to a sitting position. The baby lay on the bed between Celenie's legs. One end of the umbilical cord was still attached to Celenie, the other end wrapped around the infant's neck. The maternity ward erupted into chaos. The nurse yelled for help, and a second, younger nurse came running at full speed. The two of them shouted frantic instructions at each other as they tried to untangle the baby's umbilical cord.

"Get the doctor, quick!" the first nurse wailed.

"Doctor is looking after—"

"Get the doctor!"

The young nurse bolted out the door.

The panic in the nurse's voice caused Celenie to spring forward, trying to get to her baby. "Let me see my baby!" she pleaded.

The nurse gave her a violent shove back onto the pillow. "Keep still. You will make things worse!"

Celenie obeyed and lay still on her back. The nurse, her eyes still wild with fear, continued to try to coax the child to respond. "Dear God, please let my baby breathe," Celenie prayed in Q'eqchi.

Valentino waited anxiously outside the small security booth at the entrance to the hospital compound. The security guard, a fellow Maya he knew from the old village, sat outside the booth on a low stool. A radio was playing loudly from somewhere in the neighborhood. Valentino could hear the familiar voice of the Love FM Morning Show host announcing that it was nine o'clock. Even though there was no need to do so, he glanced at the cheap plastic watch on his wrist. He needed to check the time for himself, to feel some level of control. Looking at his watch gave him something to do other than wait.

The security guard got up off his stool. "*Mas yo ha choc,*" You're a nervous man, he teased.

"*In'he,*" Yes, Valentino admitted sheepishly.

"What time did you leave home this morning?"

"Before the rooster crowed. I reached Town around six o'clock with my daughter. Then as I was securing my dory down by the sea a man told me he heard that my wife had the baby, but the baby was not doing so well. So I hurried here to the hospital, but they told me I have to wait until visiting hours at ten o'clock. So I went and left my daughter at one of my friends' house here in Town."

"Sometimes they let people in before visiting hours. You should ask again," the security guard encouraged.

"I already asked two times, my friend. The second time the nurse got very angry and just walked away. Then I heard her mumbling something about 'dirty Indians' as she walked away."

"That's how it is sometimes," the security guard said looking at Valentino's stained work clothes empathetically.

One hour later, Valentino stood at the nurses' station. Again, it was unattended. As he was about to go and look for someone, a young man dressed in khaki pants and white shirt came up to him. "Who are you looking for?" He was almost out of breath, his forehead shining with sweat.

"My wife. She had a baby last night."

The young man stiffened, and his face became the color of slate. "You better come with me, Sir."

Valentino followed the nurse's aide down the corridor at break-neck speed. They came to a door with a sign that read KNOCK BEFORE ENTERING in red letters. The nurse's aide knocked but did not wait for an answer. "Doctor Garcia, this is Miss Celenie's husband," he said to the Spanish-looking doctor sitting at a large mahogany desk.

The doctor sprang to his feet. "Mister Choc, have a seat, please." The doctor spoke with a heavy Spanish accent, and Valentino guessed he was one of the many Cuban doctors he had heard were working in hospitals all over the country.

"Thank you, Doctor, but I prefer to stand. Please, I want to see my wife and my baby."

"Yes, yes. I am glad you're here. Your wife, she is doing fine. But the baby...not so good. We have to send them to Belize City. The baby need a ventilator for breathe, yes?"

"There's none at this hospital?" Valentino asked in disbelief.

"Eh, you see, Senor....please, have one seat."

Valentino glared at him.

"Yes. You see, we have one ventilator, but one next patient, he is using it, yes? I think if the patient he don't make it—"

"You mean someone must die so my child can live? Is that what you are saying to me?"

“Eh, yes. That is why we have to send the baby to Carl Heusner Hospital in Belize City.”

“That’s four, five hours away! Why not Dangriga two hours away?”

“Dangriga does not have ventilator. If you hurry, Señor, you might catch the ambulance.”

The nurse’s aide, who had been standing by silently, sprang to action. “I’ll take him to the ambulance, Doc. Follow me Mr. Choc.”

The driver had just shut the double doors at the back of the ambulance. Valentino pleaded unsuccessfully to ride in the back, the driver insisting that only the nurse was allowed to be with the baby.

Valentino walked toward the front of the vehicle. Celenie was sitting in the passenger seat and staring straight ahead through the windshield. She turned slowly toward Valentino when he opened the door. Her pretty, girlish face was like a stone, and her dark, usually lively eyes had a haunted look that caused Valentino’s heart to stir with pity. As Valentino got into the seat beside her, Celenie dropped her head heavily on his knee, and a faint whimper escaped her. She made no other sound, nor shed a single tear. There was just the one tiny whimper, like that of a wounded puppy.

Valentino shoved the crumpled sheet of paper into his shirt pocket. *Dead on arrival*. That was what the doctor had written of the death certificate that now felt heavy against his chest. Valentino climbed into the back seat of the taxi beside Celenie. She was being interviewed by the reporter from the newspaper that Valentino had telephoned. Reporters from two television stations and one radio station had also come earlier that morning. It was noon on Wednesday, thirty-six hours after the baby was born.

“My baby died at eleven o’clock last night,” Celenie was explaining to the female reporter. “He only lived for one day, and all the time he fight, fight, for live, you know?”

“Have you guys named the baby yet?” The reporter spoke haltingly in a low, somber voice. A digital camera hung from a string around her wrist as she wrote down Celenie’s words on a small notepad.

“No,” Celenie replied. “We haven’t found a name yet.” She looked at Valentino as she said this.

Valentino shifted in the seat beside Celenie. He draped the clothing he had brought with him across one knee.

The reporter studied the clothing closely and asked, “Is that for the baby, Mr. Choc?”

“Yes. It is the burying clothes for the baby.” Valentino held up the tiny plastic hanger in the crook of his calloused, work-stained thumb. The reporter took several pictures of the matching long pants and shirt—a tiny, baby-blue suit. Blue for boy.

Valentino gazed past the reporter. In a few months he and Celenie might have taken a special trip to Punta Gorda to buy a suit just like that one for his son’s christening.

The reporter finished her interview and began to walk toward the hospital building. As the taxi driver, who had been waiting quietly behind the wheel, started to drive away, Valentino called out to the reporter. “Angel,” he said hoarsely.

The reporter stopped and turned around.

“Angel. That’s what we will name our son.”

The taxi drove onto Princess Margaret Drive. Valentino rearranged the baby-blue suit across his and Celenie’s laps. And they and headed toward the Municipal Air Strip where the tiny coffin had been loaded onto a Tropic Air airplane.

For a minute Valentino closed his eyes, trying shut out the sound of the airplane engine. He had never been on a plane before, but he never imagined one would be able to hear every detail of the engine's workings. He knew that Benito would be waiting for him at the Punta Gorda air strip. He knew Benito had borrowed a pickup truck from one of their relatives in San Pedro Colombia and would be accompanied by the Catholic lay person who was coming to conduct the burial.

Almost an hour had passed, and the plane began to descend. Valentino gazed out the window into the clear, sunny afternoon as the wrinkles on the Caribbean Sea grew larger into fat, bumpy waves. Thinking about the trip that he and Celenie would make in a few minutes, Valentino felt as though one of the swollen waves had occupied his chest, pressing hard against his lungs. He could hardly breathe. Celenie would sit up front in the pickup truck with the driver and the lay minister, he thought. Meanwhile, he and Benito would sit in the back with the tiny coffin. A stranger, a Creole woman whom they had never met, had brought the coffin to the hospital in Belize City along with the baby's burying clothes and a check for the airplane charter. The pickup truck would take them down to the seaside in Punta Gorda where Valentino's boat had been docked since the previous morning when he had first heard that something was wrong with the baby. They would travel by boat, he thought, down the coast and the up the Moho River. From the airplane window he could see the coastline and the thick mangrove canopy that bordered most of the Toledo District to the east. Valentino remembered how when he was a boy his father used to point to the trees along the edge of the Colombia River and say, "You see those trees? They keep the land from breaking away into the river, the same way the mangroves out there by the sea protect this country from hurricanes." Now, as Valentino looked at Celenie on the seat next to him, the way she ran her hand absently over the baby's burying suit on her lap,

the way she smoothed it over and over with her small hands as she stared vacantly ahead, Valentino wondered who was going to protect him from the wave that was threatening to burst in his heart.

The following Monday afternoon, five days after Angel was buried, Valentino and Celenie went to Punta Gorda to catch the bus to San Pedro Colombia. They were going to get Lilly who had been staying with Benito and his wife Carmita. Valentino and Celenie had almost reached the bus stop on King Street when a whitish SUV with dark tinted windows drove slowly past them and stopped. The driver got out of the vehicle. Valentino and Celenie saw that it was the Minister's driver, Pio. Like the Minister, and like Celenie and Valentino, Pio was a Q'eqchi originally of San Pedro Colombia.

"What's up, 'Tino," Pio said in English. He left the door of the SUV open and reached out to shake Valentino's hand. Valentino thought Pio's hand was too soft for a man, noting also how cool they felt from the air conditioning in the SUV. Pio wore a long sleeve shirt that was tucked tautly into his pants, but his stomach was so large and his lower half so small that he appeared as if someone had stuffed him into the pants by force. Patting Celenie on her shoulder, Pio said, "Very sorry to hear about your loss, guys. My condolences."

"Thank you, Pio," they both said.

"Actually, 'Tino, Minister sent me to look for you," Pio said. "I know you're about to catch the bus to Colombia," he added, switching to Q'eqchi in mid sentence, "but he says I can take you to his office and then give you a ride to Colombia afterwards. He wants to speak with you."

"Sure, no problem," Valentino said and lead Celenie to the SUV.

Valentino followed the Minister into his office while Celenie remained in the adjoining waiting area. As soon as Valentino saw the newspaper on the Minister's desk, he felt the crushing wave rise up in his chest once more. But now, as it had over the past few days, Valentino's grief swelled into a hot burning anger that caused his lungs to constrict painfully. Even before he read the headline that said, "This is not Nice!!!" he saw the picture of Celenie sitting in the back seat of the taxi as she held the baby's burying suit. Ready to accept the Minister's condolences, Valentino sat down across from the Minister and set his hat down on the vacant chair next to him. But instead of offering condolences, the Minister said in English, "I won't lie to you, 'Tino, this thing is causing the government quite a headache. I wish you had called me or the other Toledo representative before getting the media involved. All this media attention is embarrassing the government."

"Is that all you can say to me, Minister? The government is embarrassed?" Valentino also spoke in English.

"It's not only that. I hear you've gotten a lawyer. Is that true, 'Tino?"

"Yes."

"And I hear that the Maya Leaders Association is planning a demonstration in front of the Punta Gorda hospital. I thought you were on *our* side, Valentino. I thought you said you didn't want to have anything to do with those people and their communal land rights foolishness. Now you're conspiring with them against the government?"

"Minister, I think you forget that the Maya people are *my* people. The Q'eqchi and Mopan Mayas here in the South, the Yucatec Mayas up north, they are all my people. They are your people too."

“Come on, ’Tino. I know you’re vexed. You have every right to be vexed, but these things happen. Accidents like that happen all the time.”

“They killed my son at that hospital!” Valentino shouted, his dark eyes glowering like hot coals. “So, yes, I am taking this government to court. I will not change my mind.” He put on his hat to leave.

“Come on, Valentino,” the Minister said as he took the newspaper off his desk, folded it in half, and tossed it in a trash basket behind him, “You don’t have money to pay a lawyer.”

“I will sell my land if I have to,” Valentino said, heading for the door.

“That land doesn’t belong to you. It belongs to the government, you forget? As I have told you before, you’re squatting illegally on government land.”

“No, no. You told me that you will carry my lease application to Belmopan yourself—the form that you gave me to fill out—you said you will carry it personally. I came right here and saw your secretary last week, and she said everything was going good.”

“I am sorry, but you must have misunderstood. As a matter of fact I’ve been told in Belmopan that next week the Lands Department will serve you a notice to vacate.”

Valentino was about to say something, but he changed his mind and yanked open the office door and left. As he and Celenie walked out to Main Street, Valentino realized that their bus to Colombia had left. They would have to catch a later bus. He knew the Minister’s driver wouldn’t give him a ride after all.

Two hours later, Valentino and Celenie arrived at Benito’s yard in San Pedro Colombia, a village with gently rolling hills. With a population of about a thousand residents, the village was surrounded by thick rainforest and lay at the foot of the Maya Mountains. Benito’s house, like several others in the village, was a combination of the traditional and the modern. His two-

bedroom bungalow was made of concrete, but it had a thatched roof that the villagers knew was much cooler than the zinc roofs that the houses in most non-Maya communities had.

When Carmita saw Valentino and Celenie in her front yard, she ran outside and threw her arms around Celenie. Carmita didn't make a sound, but soon women were coming from every direction, the older women in black and white embroidered blouses and long, full skirts, and the younger women in modern clothing. They called out Celenie's name as they hurried toward her. All thirty or so women crowded around Celenie, hugging her, touching her face, caressing her hair. Some cried, one woman whispered, "Celenie, Celenie," over and over, and most of them said nothing all; but in their tears, their hugs, their caresses, they all said, "I am woman. I am woman. I feel your pain."

Meanwhile, Valentino had disappeared around the back of the house. He was afraid that if he remained with the women he would break down and cry. So, he followed the narrow path that lead to his parents' house a quarter mile away from Benito's house. On the way he passed a giant *ya'axtche* that towered more than 200 feet, its buttress roots more than six feet tall, and its straight, majestic trunk culminating in a large, shady canopy. Valentino thought of the stories his grandfather used to tell him, stories of the Mayan gods who sat on the branches of the *ya'axtche* and watched the people below as they walked past. He remembered the way his grandfather would raise his hands high above his head when he told how the *ya'axtche* formed the link between the underworld and heaven. Valentino walked past the *ya'axtche*, listening to the quiet sound of his rubber boots on the hard, sun-baked path. He wondered whether the gods were looking down on him as he walked below. Were the gods looking at him with disapproval? Were they displeased by his departure from the ways of his people? Or were the gods looking at him with kindness and compassion. Valentino wasn't sure.

CHAPTER 2: UNFOLDING FROM A CHRYSALIS

Clarence walked toward the dirt road that ran through most of Sittée River Village, the reddish dust powdering his bare brown feet. He knew his mother would be vexed with him for taking longer than he should have at the shop. His mother had sent him to buy flour after he got home from school that Friday evening, but now the sun was already sinking behind Victoria Peak many miles away. Clarence had far to walk as his family lived two miles away from the center of the village where most of the other houses were located. Clarence's grandmother had left his father the small piece of land on the west side of the village where there were mostly farmlands. The nearest residence to theirs was a half mile farther up the road and was separated from Clarence's house by virgin forest and two abandoned farms. The one-pound paper bag of flour that Clarence held in his hand was slightly soiled from where he had carelessly put it down near an overripe mango on the ground. Clarence knew his mother would rail at him for that too. Instead of going straight home with the flour, he had spent the past two hours hiding at the foot of a cluster of mango trees. From there, secluded by the high bushes behind the now deserted school building, he had watched four kites high up in the air above the village football field. Now, as he made his way home, the image of one kite in particular remained etched in his mind. It was the only box kite among the others, big and yellow and superior to the other three plain kites. The yellow kite belonged to Kirk, an older boy from Standard Five. Clarence had heard Kirk bragging at school that his kite was the only store-bought one in Sittée River. As Clarence approached the main road that ran alongside the river, he turned to take another wistful look at the majestic yellow boxie dancing high up in the sky. At the same moment, a British Harrier jet flew low overhead with a loud roar. Clarence wondered, as he always did when one of the fighter crafts flew over the village, whether the English soldier could see him from inside the Harrier. Clarence dreamed of becoming a pilot when he grew up. He loved to imagine what it must be

like keeping a huge aircraft floating on air. However, Clarence's current ambition, at the age of ten, involved a different type of flying. Clarence wished more than anything to own a fancy store-bought kite.

Clarence gazed at the river as he walked along the main road. The Sittee River, from which the village got its name, ran through the entire village, and most of the fifty or so houses were located along its two banks. The river changed color frequently, depending on the weather and the way the sunlight reflected off its surface. Usually, the color varied between forest green and jade throughout the day, but during the rainy season, between June and November, the river sometimes became yellowish-brown, like milk caramel, as the swift currents stirred the mud on the river bed. Now it was the first week of March, and as night was approaching, the river looked flat and dull, like a smoky mirror. The tide was low, and Clarence could see two *gaalins* walking lazily along the bank on the far side of the river. The slender white birds scattered as two boys ran out of their yard and down the embankment where they jumped into the water with a loud splash. The boys were from Clarence's Standard Four class, and they called to him as they swam out toward the middle of the river. Clarence waved at them listlessly as he continued on his way home. At another time Clarence would have been tempted to take off his shirt and swim the fifty yards across the river to join the boys, but he was too preoccupied now with thoughts about the yellow boxie.

The wooden houses scattered along the main road were all built on stilts to keep water from climbing in when the river flooded, as it did every couple years or so. The empty yards, many of them swept clean and adorned with flowers and hedges, reminded Clarence of how late it was, as most of the villagers were inside having their evening tea. Thin wisps of smoke rose

from fire hearths and from the heaps of grass or coconut husks some villagers burned in their yards to keep sand flies away.

By the time Clarence approached his yard he had thought up what he felt was a good excuse for why he was late. He would tell his mother he had dropped the ten cents change he had gotten from the shop, and it took a long time for him to find it. He wasn't worried about his father scolding him because he often didn't get home from work until it was quite dark. The yard was freshly cleaned, and Clarence could see the marks left behind from the coconut broom his mother used to sweep it. The tiny, one bedroom house was unpainted, and its weather-beaten, wooden siding blended in with the rusted corrugated iron roofing. The house was built far back in the yard that had a small flower garden in front. Clarence's mother had planted the garden with hibiscus, marigold, periwinkle, and a scattering of pink roses. Clarence made his way quickly past the unlit smoke heap his mother had made at the side of the house. His mother was taking in the clothes off the line on the other side of the yard, so he quickly left the flour in the lean-to kitchen at the back of the house and tried to make himself look busy by taking a long time lighting the smoke heap.

Later that evening, Clarence sat on the floor of the living room with his back against his cot. He stared blankly at the list of spelling words in the exercise book that rested on his drawn-up knees. A tattered copy of *Treasure Island* that he had borrowed from the school library lay on the floor beside him. He would read it later when his father was satisfied that he had learned his twenty spelling words for Monday. A hurricane lantern hung from an exposed joist in the center of the low ceiling, and it cast an orange light around the tiny room. Clarence's father sat at the small dining table in a corner of the living room. He held a one-week old newspaper at arm's

length, reading with intense concentration. Meanwhile, Clarence's mother, Consie, was busy preparing tea in the kitchen just outside the open door. From the glow of the fire hearth, Clarence could see her somber brown face against the dark night as she moved swiftly back and forth, her slippers dragging noisily across the dirt floor. Every now and then she mumbled something about "that good-for-nothing pickney." She was still upset with Clarence for his tardiness earlier that evening. But Clarence wasn't paying her too much mind. Right now he was focused on trying to get his father's attention, and finding the courage to ask him for a kite.

Oliver Andrews's face was almost completely hidden behind his newspaper. All Clarence could see was his prematurely graying hair and the top of his sun-bronzed forehead. Clarence scanned the newspaper headline, written in bold black letters: "Premier's Independence Sellout: Out of British Frying Pan, into Guatemalan Fire." He cleared his throat noisily. "Pa, you think George Price gwein sell us out to Guatemala fu true?"

"What are you talking 'bout, boy?" Oliver kept the newspaper to his face.

"The newspaper says it right there."

"That's just UDP propaganda because they don't want us to get independence next year."

"Propaganda, Pa?" Clarence laid his exercise book on the floor. He knew what propaganda was, from his Social Studies class, but he was angling to get his father's full attention.

Oliver said, "Maybe if you tend to your spelling words as you should be doing, you'll know what propaganda is."

Clarence was quiet for a few minutes. Then he said, as if talking to no one in particular, "Boy, I saw a harrier fly over today. Low, low in the sky. I bet those Guatemalans won't try to bother with us. I bet when they see those Britain harriers they 'fraid."

“Clarence, get back to studying your book,” Oliver said firmly.

“Yes, Pa.”

Just then, Consie came in with a plate containing five flour tortillas. “You two will have to make do with two tortillas each,” she said, setting the plate down on the table. “I have to make that pound of flour last ’til tomorrow evening.

“Do we at least have sugar for the coffee?” Oliver asked.

“Clarence, go bring in the sugar and cups of coffee from the table outside, Consie said as she pulled out the one available chair across from her husband. Oliver reached toward the back of the table and turned on the tiny portable radio. To save money on batteries, the family listened to Radio Belize only during the seven o’clock news at night. Sometimes they splurged and listened to the Top Ten music program on Saturday nights. The three of them listened to the news as they ate, Clarence still sitting on the floor with his back against his cot and his plate on his lap. Nothing much seemed to have happened around the country that day, as the news was mostly about the Premier’s latest trip abroad and other Government business that Clarence wasn’t interested in.

After tea was over, Clarence didn’t wait for his mother to order him to wash the dishes. This time he dutifully got up with his plate and cup and proceeded to clear away the table. He placed his mother’s empty plastic plate under his and put her enamel cup on top next to his own. Then he hesitated as he took his father’s plate off the table. “Pa, you think you could buy a kite for me,” Clarence asked, stacking his father’s plate with the rest.

“A kite?” Oliver studied him with weary eyes that looked much older than his thirty-one years.

“One of the ones they sell at the shops them in Dangriga,” Clarence said.

“Buy a kite out of what, Clarence? You see me trimming the leaves off a money tree lately?”

“Boy, you out of your head or what?” Consie interjected. “You don’t see me having to stretch the little money we have for food? And you asking for kite?”

“Why don’t you make your own kite?” his father suggested. “You can use the newspaper when I finish with it.”

“It’s not the same. I want a real kite. Like the one Kirk’s father bought for him.”

“Which Kirk?” his mother asked impatiently.

“Miss Cassie’s grandson. He said his father sent it to him from States. I saw him flying it just this evening.”

“Well you don’t have no States father, and you better not be redding your eye on other people’s things,” Consie said, shaking her index finger at Clarence.

“In any case, Clarence,” Oliver added as he reached for his newspaper, “you don’t need to be fooling ’round after school with no kite flying. You need to study your books.”

“Yes, Pa. But—”

“Can’t let that little McDougall girl take first place from you again.”

“No, Pa.”

“Well, your books is what you need to be worrying about, not some kite that you know I can’t afford.” He handed his cup to Clarence and resumed reading the newspaper.

One week later on Sunday, Clarence lay on his cot listening to the early morning sounds. The leaves of two coconut trees at the back of the house swished loudly with the brisk, early-morning breeze. Clarence heard his parents’ bed creak, then the sound of his mother’s slippers

dragging wearily across the wooden floor. His parents slept on the other side of the curtain that separated their bedroom from the living room. Clarence kept his eyes closed and pretended to be asleep, but he knew his mother had drawn the curtain aside and come outside. His mother unlatched the back door, letting the drafty daylight in. She walked down the three creaky steps to the kitchen and put the coffee pot on the fire hearth.

Clarence returned to his daydream about the yellow kite he had been eyeing all week. Clarence knew his father was right—he could make a kite if he wanted to. He could make the frame with straws from coconut leaves, and his mother wouldn't even miss the handful of flour he would take from her kitchen to make the glue. The tail also would be no problem, and Clarence felt sure his father could spare the fifty cents he would need to buy a reel of thread. The previous three years during the Easter holidays he and Elton and Jeremy, two brothers who lived a half mile up the road, had gotten together and made kites, then spent countless hours flying them. But now that Clarence had laid eyes on Kirk Westby's kite, flying a common homemade kite held no appeal whatsoever.

Over the past week, Clarence's mother had sent him to the shop on three other evenings since he first saw the yellow box kite, and each time instead of going straight back home, Clarence went farther down the road and snuck into his hiding place under the mango trees near school. Each time he gazed longingly at Kirk's yellow kite dancing and dipping high up in the air, outshining the other boys' homemade kites. He watched the way the kite strained against its string and mentally calculated where he thought the kite was likely to land if it went down. Already he had seen one of the other kites, the moonie belonging to David, break away. Clarence was sure that when David came to retrieve his kite a little while later, he had no clue that

Clarence was hiding beneath the cluster of mango trees only a few yards away from where the kite landed.

Now, as Clarence continued to listen to the wind rattling the loose zinc overhead, he hoped with all his might that the next kite to go down would be the bright yellow boxie. He would snatch it and run home as fast as he could. Clarence had thought about it long and hard. He knew there was a chance the other boys would see him, but he was sure he could dash from behind the school, disappear behind the grove of breadfruit trees nearby, and then quickly round the corner to the main road before they caught sight of him. He was a much faster runner than Kirk, David, Frank and Erick. He had proved that every September at the school's Sports Day. He was certain he could pull it off. Easy, easy. Clarence had already decided on a hiding place for the kite; he would keep it in his mother's old, abandoned chicken coop at the edge of their yard. Then, when he was sure no one was watching, he would sneak it down to the waterside, which was a good three hundred yards from the house and hidden by thick overgrowth. He would sneak down there from time to time and fly the kite to his heart's content.

Clarence heard his parents' bed creak once more from behind the curtain. Moments later his father came into the living room and paused near the back door. Even with his eyes closed, Clarence knew his father was slowly putting on his rubber boots with one hand while the other calloused, work-stained hand palmed the door post for support.

A few minutes after his father went outside, Clarence got out of bed and stood in the doorway. His father sat on a large tree stump sipping coffee from a blue enamel cup while his mother stood over the fire hearth baking flour tortillas. Clarence walked down the steps and unhooked a cup from one of the nails driven into the side of the house. Then he walked over to the fire hearth and filled his cup with the steaming corn coffee, inhaling the toasty, roasted corn

smell. He shoveled a spoon full of brown sugar into his cup and stirred it. Then he checked to see that his mother wasn't looking, and he added another heaping spoon full. He picked up two tortillas from the kitchen table and went to sit on the top step, his back leaning against the door post. Clarence put down his coffee cup beside him on the step and took a big bite out of the two tortillas he had folded together. He watched as his father got up and pulled his long machete out of the ground where he had stuck it, blade inward, against the tree stump.

“Where you going, Oliver?” Clarence's mother asked.

“Work,” Oliver said without turning around.

“Big old Sunday morning, man?”

“Consie, if I don't finish clearing that acre for Teacher Cuthkelvin, I won't get paid. Then how will we eat, ea?” To earn a living, Oliver usually picked oranges at one of the big farms in Kendall, a farming settlement ten miles farther up the Sittee River. But during the off season, he would cut grass, mend chicken coops, or do whatever odd job he could find in Sittee River or one of the four surrounding villages. He hardly ever had time to spend with his family or attend to repairs that needed to be done around the house.

Consie sucked her teeth loudly and watched her husband walk toward the clearing that led to the waterside. She turned to Clarence and put her hands on her hips. “Why you don't go and help your father, boy? You want him to kill out himself?”

Clarence swallowed his last mouthful of food and took a sip of coffee. “Ma, you know Pa don't like me chopping grass with he. He says all I do is bruise up the grass with my machete.”

“Well then go down to the waterside and see if there's anything in the fish trap.”

Clarence gulped down the rest of his coffee and reached behind him for a pair of rubber boots just inside the door. Then he changed his mind. It was better to go barefoot in case the box

kite went down that day. With rubber boots on, he wouldn't be able to run fast enough to get away with his prize.

Later that morning, Kirk, David, Frank and Erick met up on the overgrown football field a quarter mile to the west of the school. A little farther north, the Community Center, a two-storey concrete building, stood on a hill next door to the village chairman's wooden bungalow. Beside the chairman's house was a tiny building that housed the community telephone. The only other building in the area, besides the school building which doubled as the Methodist Church on Sundays, was the Baileys' house way across the river to the south of the football field. The four boys stood in the middle of the field. Their four kites lay among the knee-high grass a few feet behind them. There was a moonie, so called because of its roundish octagonal shape, two diamonds, and Kirk Westby's bright yellow boxie. In addition to these four kites there was another box kite—the same size and shape as Kirk's but of a slightly paler shade of yellow. It had frilly streamers hanging from either side. Frank and Eric, two brothers, had made this special kite using a yellow plastic bag that used to hold fertilizer. A few letters of the "Belize Agro-Chemicals" label peeped out from one corner of the kite, and from close up the kite looked just a little wrinkled and untidy. However, the boys were certain the kite would serve the purpose they intended to use it for. All four of them now gathered around it, their heads close together.

"Boy, David, you sure these wasps sleeping?" asked Frank, the oldest of the boys.

"Yes, man," Said David. He looked around with a broad grin that took in the entire group at once. David was the smallest of the boys, though he was not the youngest. He was proud to be the one who had started this operation. He had laughed as he told the others a few days back how he saw Clarence hiding underneath the mango trees behind the school, and how he pretended not

to see Clarence. Even though it was Kirk who had thought up the plan they were about to carry out, it was David who had brought the wasp nest from home, relishing the opportunity to get back at Clarence. During the previous school term, Clarence had caught him cheating on his Math test and had told on him. As a result, Teacher Larry had given David six hard lashes with his sash cord, three in each palm. Now, David smiled as he tugged at the loose-fitting waist of his khaki shorts. "I was watching this little nest all morning through the kitchen window," he explained. "Then after my mother went to church I took this here kiss-kiss from the fire hearth and pulled it down easy, easy." He squeezed the homemade wooden tongs he held in his hand, causing the two ends to snap loudly.

"You sure the wasps still inside here, though?" asked Kirk with the authority of one who was used to being in charge. Kirk felt certain it was his kite that Clarence was after, and he believed this gave him the right to take the leadership. Plus, the other boys usually allowed him to take charge anyway.

"Yes, man," David assured him. "They right in there. They only sleeping. The smoke from the fire hearth put them to sleep."

"Good," Kirk said as he finished tying the small, woody, brown nest onto the homemade box kite. Meanwhile, Erick and Frank each held one side of the kite, and the four boys stood back, admiring their handiwork. "They sleeping now," Kirk added grinning, "but I bet those little buggers won't be sleeping when this kite drop down by those mango trees today. Then that old thieving Clarence will get what he deserves." The other boys grinned back at Kirk, eager to go along with anything Kirk suggested as he was the one in the group who always had pocket money and got nice stuff from the States.

Having prepared their trap, the boys turned around and walked toward the other four kites on the ground. David picked up his moonie kite, the same one that had broken away the previous week, and he handed it to Kirk. Kirk reached into his pocket and took out the razor blade he had taken from his grandfather's shaving kit that morning. First he peeled back the red and black outer wrapper, then the thin white lining, exposing the razor blade. The others laughed appreciatively as the mid-morning sun glinted off the shiny new blade. They chatted excitedly as Kirk strung the tip of David's moonie kite's long tail through the hole at the center of the razor blade.

"Make sure you fasten it good, good," said Erick unnecessarily. "We don't want the blade falling off."

Kirk knotted the narrow strip of fabric twice and let go the kite's razor-tipped tail. Then he handed the moonie to David and picked up the yellow decoy kite to which the wasp nest was attached. David raised the moonie; then Frank and Eric raised their diamonds. Finally Kirk, ignoring his own impressive boxie for the time being, picked up the decoy and waited until the other kites reached as high as their threads would let them. Then he staked out a space near David who now stood apart from the other boys, and he raised the decoy. The four boys whooped and hollered as they watched the yellow kite soar high in the sky and take its place a little to the left of David's moonie with the razor-tipped tail.

Clarence threw the empty fish trap back into the river. The large chicken-wire pod sank rapidly, dimpling the forest green surface of the river. He knew the fish trap needed new bait, but he didn't feel like going all the way back to the house to roast two fresh coconuts. He had spent the last two hours sitting on the small, rickety wooden pier at the edge of the water, his feet

dangling above the river. Every few minutes he had looked up in the direction where he hoped the kites would appear. Now, as the last wrinkle faded from the river's surface, he looked up again. And there they were—all four kites high up in the sky! He squinted in the glare of the mid-morning sun and marveled once more at the yellow boxie dancing in the clear blue sky. He noticed that the boxie was now outfitted with streamers, and he smiled broadly as he watched the long white tassels rippling in the wind.

Clarence got up from the pier and bounded up the steep river bank. He ran most of the way until he reached his hiding place under the shady mango trees. Almost out of breath, he leaned against the thickest tree trunk and gazed up at the kites. He heard the church bell ringing and knew it was ten o'clock. He could see the last few church goers entering the building in their Sunday best. Having eaten several hours ago, Clarence's stomach was starting to rumble. He gathered four of the many ripe mangoes scattered on the ground and went back to lean against the tree, his eyes still trained on the kites. Clarence ate the mangoes distractedly, biting off each chin-shaped end and peeling back the bluish-purple skin before sinking his teeth into the succulent yellow flesh. A mosquito buzzed near his ear. They were plentiful under the mango trees, attracted by the sweet, pungent smell of ripe mangoes that permeated the air. Clarence could hear the faint sound of the Sunday lottery on the radio. The sound came from the chairman's house on the hill. He was glad it was Sunday when almost no one was about. From where he hid, he could barely see Kirk and the other boys beyond the tall grass at the edge of the football field some two hundred yards away. The mosquito continued to buzz at Clarence's ear, and he swatted it hard against his temple. He was about to inspect his hand when he saw the box kite make a sudden, violent jerk. Clarence stood straight and gaped as the kite veered away from the others. It spun a few times. Then it floated in Clarence's direction, and he knew it had broken

away from its string. He timed the kite's descent carefully, not wanting to venture out from his hiding place too soon. As soon as the kite landed in the grass a few yards away from him, Clarence ran after it and scooped it up with both hands. Then, propping the kite against his side with the crook of his right arm, he took off running at full speed.

Just as Clarence rounded the corner near the river, he felt a sharp, piercing sting on the right side of his neck. The kite fell to the ground, and he dashed back to get it, but as he was about to pick it up he realized that this kite wasn't the fancy yellow one he had had his eye on. It began to dawn on Clarence that he had been tricked, but before he could complete the thought, he saw a small pear-shaped nest dangling from the frame of the kite. Then he noticed that at least a dozen wasps were swarming around his head. He swatted at the wasps wildly with his hands and took off running again, but not before another wasp stung him below his left eye. Clarence kept running until he was almost at home, ignoring the curious stares and questions from people sitting on their verandahs. His face and neck felt like they were on fire. His left eye was already swollen half shut. The area near the eye throbbed with pain and felt heavy, stiff and itchy.

Reaching his yard, Clarence hurried past the side of the house, hoping to sneak down to the waterside unnoticed. He needed to collect his thoughts, to think about what had happened, before his mother began to pester him with questions. But just as he was about to slip past the back yard, Clarence came face to face with his father. He had his machete in one hand and a string of fish in the other—three good-sized river snappers and a few small bass.

“What happen to you, boy?” Oliver asked, frowning at Clarence's swollen face.

“Nothing, Pa.”

Oliver was about to say something else, but Clarence saw him hesitate, looking past him in the direction of the road. When Clarence turned around, his heart sank as Kirk, David, Eric

and Frank came running into the yard. They all spoke at once when they approached his father. “Your son tief, Mr. Oliver!” “Tried to tief Kirk’s kite!” “We saw him with our two eyes, Mr. Oliver!” “Yes, Mr. Oliver, he tried to tief the kite, but we caught him good, good!”

Clarence’s father turned back to him and asked, “Did these boys beat you up, Clarence?”

“No, Sah, Mr. Oliver,” David blurted. “We didn’t do him nothing. Go ’head, Clarence; tell your pa what happened. Tell him how the wasps sting you.”

“You boys go home. I will deal with Clarence,” Oliver said, glaring at the boys. The boys left the yard reluctantly, shouting taunts at Clarence as they retreated.

“Why did you try to steal those boys’ kite, Clarence?” Oliver asked, his stern face glistening with sweat. It was almost midday, and the sun was fierce.

Clarence remained silent, his swollen face bowed down.

“Boy, answer me! What the bloody hell made you try to steal somebody’s kite?”

Consie came trotting toward them. “What happen, Oliver?” She was looking at Clarence who was trying unsuccessfully to cover his swollen face with his hand. “Boy, what *happened* to your face?”

Neither Clarence nor Oliver answered. Oliver continued to press Clarence. “Clarence, what is wrong with you, boy? It’s jail you want to end up? Ea? It’s jail you want to go? If you want a kite so bad why the hell don’t make a kite? It’s thief you turning into now? It’s jail you want to go?”

Consie came and stood close to Clarence, her light brown eyes narrowing as she studied him closely. “Clarence, do for heaven’s sake, answer your father.”

Oliver began to walk away. Then he turned back and said, “I have a good mind to warm your backside, boy, swell face or no swell face. You better not start with no thieving round here.

I'll beat the habit out of you if I have to, you hear?" He handed the string of fish to Consie and stalked off.

Clarence picked at the rice and fish his mother made for dinner. His mother had fried the fish in fresh coconut oil, the way he liked it. But even though his mouth watered for the food, he ate with little satisfaction. Afterwards he tried to take a nap on his cot, but the afternoon was too hot, and his face smarted terribly. Clarence's mother cut open a cochineal leaf and instructed him to hold it against his swollen face. Then she spent the rest of the afternoon fussing over Clarence and scolding him alternately. For much of the afternoon Clarence lay on his back going over what had happened. He knew the boys had set him up. But how did they know he was after the kite? Had they been watching him all the while? Clarence wondered how long the swelling would last. He almost wished it wouldn't go down for weeks. He didn't want to go to school. He knew the boys would tell everyone. Tomorrow they would taunt him mercilessly. They would probably tease him for weeks, months even.

Later, just as night was beginning to fall, Clarence was returning from the river with a bucket of water when he heard a strange male voice coming from the kitchen. He put down the bucket and peeped from behind a coconut tree. His heart stopped when he saw the Police Constable talking to his father in the kitchen. At first, Clarence thought the policeman had come to see about the kite he had attempted to steal that morning. But as he listened, he heard his father say, "I will pay Wally for his fish, I swear, PC. I was only trying to feed my family." Mr. Wally was a neighbor who lived a half mile up the river.

Clarence suddenly remembered the question that had flashed through his mind when he saw his father with the string of fish earlier that day. The question hadn't registered fully, only flickered across his consciousness for a fraction of a second. But now it came into full focus, and

he knew the answer. He knew his father didn't have money to buy fish, and he knew his father hadn't gone fishing. He thought about the empty fish trap he had taken from the river and put back with stale coconut bait. He knew his father had stolen the fish.

Clarence turned and headed back to the river where he remained until the policeman was gone.

Clarence was relieved when school closed for the Easter holidays. The swelling had lasted for four days, and his father had allowed him to stay at home until it subsided completely. But once he went back to school Kirk and the other three boys and a handful of other kids taunted him until school closed a week and a half later. They called him "kite thief," and "blowfish face" and tried to pick fights with him during recess. Clarence hoped things would be better after the break.

During the Easter week, Clarence helped his father on two jobs, digging a well and cutting a half acre of grass in Kendall. For once, his father took time to show him how to handle tools properly and didn't fuss at him when he didn't cut the grass low to the ground or when he dawdled too long with a task. Often, as they worked or while they took a break, Clarence wanted to ask his father about the confrontation with the police. Once or twice the question was on the tip of his tongue. However, he could never muster the courage or the words with which to broach the uncomfortable subject. He wanted to know why his father stole the fish. How his father *could* steal after he chastised Clarence for doing the same thing. And yet, Clarence didn't want to know. What he wanted was to hear that the policeman and the man from up the river had been mistaken. That it was just a mix-up and his father hadn't stolen the fish after all.

On Good Friday, Clarence went to church with his mother. Meanwhile, his father went to work. Then on Holy Saturday his father went to Dangriga Town on the Z-line bus. He returned at around five o'clock that evening and called Clarence into the house. When Clarence entered the living room, he saw four sheets of kite paper laid out on his cot—two red and two blue, plus a ball of nylon string, a small bottle of wooden glue, and several thin strips of wood about four feet each. "I think we should make a kite, Clarence, you and me," his father said, chuckling at Clarence' surprised expression. "What do you say?"

Clarence didn't know what to say. He turned around and looked at his mother who was pouring flour into the wooden bowl in the kitchen. She put one hand on her hip and said, "You see how your pa killing out himself? Spend the whole of Good Friday holiday working extra instead of resting, just so he could buy kite things. I hope you know money don't grow on tree." She sounded like she was scolding, but Clarence could tell she was pleased.

"Thanks, Pa," Clarence said finally. Then he added tentatively, "Can we make a box kite?"

"I don't see why not. Look in my tool box in the room and you will find a little saw. We'll need it to cut the sticks for the frame. Bring the measuring tape from in there too."

Clarence returned with the items, and he and his father laid out the materials on the floor as they set to work on the kite frame. Father and son worked in tandem, Clarence holding down the wooden strips while his father sawed them; his father holding up the strips while Clarence applied glue; Clarence wiping off the excess glue with a rag while his father held parts of the frame together. As they worked, Oliver told Clarence stories about when he was a boy. He told Clarence about the days when there were no roads linking villages and towns, and people travelled mostly by passenger boats. As Oliver spoke, Clarence could see the sail boats gliding

across the Caribbean on a calm day, or rolling and pitching upon the rough sea, huge waves crashing against the sides. Clarence loved the boat names. There was the *Heron H* that transported passengers and cargo up and down the Belize and Honduras coast and the *Endeavor* that was locally owned and travelled from Sittee River to Dangriga and Belize City. Oliver told how for a short time in the late fifties when he was nine he worked as a boat boy on the *Endeavor*, cleaning out the cabin after the boat returned from a trip. And he told Clarence about how he learned to ride on the first bicycle that came to the village—a Hercules that was owned by his godfather.

Clarence was surprised to find that his father was such a good storyteller. He saw a youthful look creep into his father's face as he told these stories. His father's eyes lit up, and for the first time Clarence thought his father looked close to his thirty-one year age.

“And who taught you how to build kites like this, Pa?” Clarence asked as the frame was nearing completion.

“I learned from my technical drawing teacher in First Form.”

“First Form? I didn't know you went to high school, Pa.”

“I started Belize Technical High School in the early sixties. That was before it became Belize Technical College.”

“Wow. Technical? All the way in Belize City?”

“Yep. I won a Government scholarship. But I didn't finish.”

At that moment Consie came and stood in the doorway. “Clarence,” she said, “Didn't you know your father started high school when he was only ten?”

“Ten?” Clarence was now beyond surprise. He stood up from his crouching position in the middle of the living room and gaped at his father for a long time. “How comes?”

“Your father started school when he was four, and then they skipped him two times.”

“Rikitti! You must have been pretty smart, then, Pa.” He turned back to his father.

“Sharp as a tack,” his mother said and went back down to the kitchen.

“How come you didn’t finish high school, then?” Clarence asked.

“Hurricane, boy.”

“Which one?”

“Hattie. 1961. Plenty people died in that hurricane, all over the country. Including my father and your uncle Stephen. Plenty people lost their houses too. Schools closed down for months. I never did gone back.”

“Did you want to go back?”

“Sure,” Oliver said, as they finished the kite frame. “But I had to go to work, help out my mother. Sometimes things don’t work out. That’s just life.” Then, switching gears abruptly, he said, “All right now. Let’s clean up this mess off your mother’s floor. Tomorrow we’ll finish the job.” Oliver picked up the saw and measuring tape and ducked behind the curtain to go put the tools away. Clarence stood for a minute and admired the kite frame—a fragile rectangular prism in the middle of the living room floor.

It was almost teatime now, and night was beginning set in. The aroma of freshly baked Creole bread wafted in from the kitchen as Clarence tidied up the living room. Clarence wanted to know more about when his father was a boy. He had heard a lot about Hurricane Hattie, the worst storm to ever hit Belize. He knew that in Sittee River the only building that remained standing was the police station and that after the hurricane, hundreds of people moved away from the village. But he never knew that the hurricane changed his father’s life forever. Clarence wondered what else he didn’t know about his father. He wanted to know about these things,

about his having to leave school even though he was as sharp as a tack. About losing his father when he was only ten, the same age as Clarence was now. Did his father cry then? How did he feel about having to grow up so suddenly? Did this have something to do with why his father always insisted that Clarence do well at school?

Clarence reached overhead for the hurricane lantern. He suddenly felt guilty for neglecting to clean the soot from the shade that morning. As he removed the lampshade he thought once more about that Sunday two weeks ago when his father stole the fish for their dinner. He remembered how he had run away when he heard the policeman accusing his father. He remembered the shame he had heard in his father's voice, the way it cracked as he confessed the theft to the policeman. Now Clarence was beginning to understand why he had gone down to the river to hide. The words were starting to find their way to the surface of his consciousness, like a butterfly unfolding its wings. He had hidden because he didn't want his father to see him watching, to know that his son had witnessed his shame. Clarence didn't think this as much as he felt it, deep down, where words don't always reach, only feelings—about what a person should or shouldn't do.

CHAPTER 3: CRY PRETTY

I was ten years old when I began to take notice of man-and-woman-business—the term used by my mother and other adults to refer to romantic relationships between men and women. I suppose it was because of Miss Irene and Raymond that I first began to notice these things. My mother and I lived on Elizabeth Street a few houses down from them. Ms. Irene was my mother’s best friend, and Raymond, who was a *sweetman*, was Miss Irene’s husband. Even though I was just a little girl, I could see why women loved Raymond so much. He was tall and muscular and had very smooth black skin. He wore his hair in charcoal-colored dreadlocks that reached down to his waist. One day when my Aunt Debbie was visiting my mother, I heard her say that Raymond was a real Mandingo. Then later that evening Raymond was passing by our house as my mother was plaiting my hair on the verandah. Talking partly to myself and partly to my mother I said, “Hum, that Raymond is a real Mandingo!” not knowing what Aunt Debbie had meant by it. I heard the sound even before I felt it—a dull *klop* as my mother cuffed me in the head with the back of the plastic comb. So I put two and two together and guessed the word “Mandingo” probably had something to do with sex or some other big-people’s business.

My mother and Miss Irene often talked about how much Raymond loved to run around with women. One evening, I was studying my spelling words on our verandah when Miss Irene came bustling toward our house. Her eyes looked wild, and her long, bushy hair swung violently from side to side.

“Vangie, where is Florence?” she asked even before she reached our yard.

“Maaa! Miss Irene come look fu you!” I yelled over my shoulder.

Many times I heard my mother say to Miss Irene, “Why don’t you leave that no-good man and go about your business? You still have your pretty young-gial looks, and Belize got

plenty man you can choose from. All your children grown and gone, Irene; you don't have to put up with that kind of foolishness." But Miss Irene never listened. My mother was the kind of person who didn't tolerate foolishness, but for some reason she never seemed to get tired of listening to Miss Irene's woes.

My mother came out on the verandah to meet Miss Irene, and I moved down to the bottom step with my spelling book even though I knew I wasn't going to get much studying done until Miss Irene left. "What happen, gial?" my mother asked as the two of them settled onto the bench on our verandah.

"Raymond gone too far this time!" Miss Irene declared.

"So what happen this time?" my mother asked, half bored, half interested.

"I hear him talking to the woman on the phone."

"Which one?"

"One from States. Yes, the man have American woman now!"

"Stop your lie! You mean a white woman?"

"I don't know, Florence. White, black or blue, what difference does it make? Woman is woman, and that low-down one got my husband. Yes ma'am! Ah hear him with my own two ears, talking to the woman on the phone."

"So, the woman was calling from overseas, or is she here in Belize?" my mother asked.

Miss Irene sucked her teeth loudly. "Overseas. And from the way he was talking on the phone it sounded like he met her when he was tour-guiding at Lamanai."

"Talk 'bout mixing business with pleasure," my mother said with a dry laugh.

"But that's not the half of it, Florence. I hear them making plans."

"What kind of plans, ma?"

“The man planning to go to States with this woman.”

“Cho? But how man so facey, ea!” My mother now placed both hands on her hips.

“Yes. I heard the woman telling Raymond that she will send money for him to get his visa and plane ticket and things.”

“But *how* man so facey!” my mother repeated indignantly. “And how come you hear all this, Irene? You mean Raymond talking to the woman all the while on *your* house phone?”

“Yes mam. That’s how facey Raymond facey. He was on the phone upstairs and didn’t know I was listening on the other line in the shop downstairs. I knew he was up to something, so I said, ‘Raymond, I gwein lock up shop early tonight so I can go see Mama.’ (Mama wasn’t feeling too good that week). So I make plenty racket downstairs, banging the windows and doors shut so Raymond could think I was locking up the shop. Then I holler to him upstairs, ‘Raymond, I gone!’ And I slam the gate hard and walk up the street. But then I swing right back and gone into the shop quiet, quiet one. Then when I hear him talking on the phone upstairs, I pick up the line in the shop, and that’s when I hear the whole thing.”

Everybody in our neighborhood, from Elizabeth Street up to Basra and all the way over to West Street, knew Miss Irene was famous for interfering in other people’s phone conversations. Since she was one of the few people in our neighborhood who owned a phone, people often borrowed her phone for a small fee, and there were rumors that Miss Irene often listened to the neighbors’ conversations on the phone extension in her room. I once heard her oldest daughter Eva telling Aunt Debbie that when she was still living at home one of her boyfriends called on a Sunday afternoon. Eva and Miss Irene were the only ones at home the time, and Eva and her boyfriend were having a long conversation on the phone, talking a whole lot of sweet things to one another. Then all of a sudden Eva heard a loud snoring on the phone,

and, thinking it was her boyfriend, she began to scold him for not having any manners. But her boyfriend said it wasn't him snoring. So Eva set down the phone on the living room sofa where she was sitting, and she tip-toed into her mother's bedroom. And there Miss Irene was, snoring away with her mouth wide open and the telephone handset lying on the pillow beside her.

“No, sah,” Miss Irene continued now, “you can't trust dem tourist these days at all. And the women dem? Plenty a dem come to Belize fu enjoy more than just the Maya temples and the Caribbean Sea.”

“But what you talking 'bout 'tourist,' Irene? You know that when it comes to your husband no woman safe—tourist or no tourist.”

“Yu got that right, Florence, gial. But you just wait and see. I will fix his business this time.”

My mother said, “Cho, Irene. How much time I hear you say that? I tell you the truth, I don't know how you love suffering so. Woman like you is what my grandmother used to call 'cry pretty.'”

“What that mean, now?”

“Meaning that on the outside you act tough and well composed, but inside you sad and crying.”

Eventually my mother and Miss Irene went on to talk many other things such politics and the price of food going up again at the shops, my mother, being a loyal PUP, putting the blame squarely on Prime Minister Esquivel and the UDP. Every now and then Miss Irene would steer the conversation back to Raymond or to men in general, and my mother would say, “That's how man stay.” My mother and her friends' conversations were like boil-up, with a variety of foods

thrown into a big pot of salted water, in no particular order, and boiled until the pot is a steaming, bubbling, savory cuisine.

By the time Miss Irene left our verandah that evening, the conversation had long ceased to interest me, and I had turned my attention to the steady stream of passers-by in vehicles, on bicycles, and most on foot. Up the street Mr. Errol played Lucky Dube's "Prisoner" over and over on his stereo.

The next day was Saturday, and my mother sent me to buy panades from Miss Irene's shop. As usual, a large crowd spilled across the small yard in front of Ms. Irene's shop and reached all the way to the street. I navigated my way expertly through the noisy crowd and headed toward the counter, the smell of fried corn making me hungry. Someone was shouting, "Hurry up with my panades, man, Irene. I hungry bad!" David Ramsey, who was in my class and lived across the street from Miss Irene, was yelling in his high-pitched voice, "Miss Irene, mi ma say please send two dollars garnaches. She will pay you later." When I reached the front of the crowd, I wedged my way in front of Mr. Brian who was shouting, "Three dollars salbutes, Irene. And I want plenty peppa!" I noticed the flask of white rum jammed into his back pocket, and I wondered how strong rum mixed with hot pepper tasted.

I ignored all the noise and tried to make eye contact with Miss Irene. It was a trick I had taught myself at the Chinese fried chicken shop on Euphrates Avenue. The shop was always crowded and noisy at night, and I noticed that the people who made the most noise were always ignored. Now, when I got Miss Irene's attention, I said, "My ma wants three dollars panades, Miss Irene."

"Right now, Vangie girl. I will get to you in a minute." Miss Irene spoke in an extra sweet voice as she wrapped a pile of panades in a piece of white shop paper. The paper quickly

became soaked with oil from the hot panades. Miss Irene pushed the greasy package across the linoleum-covered countertop toward Mr. Brian and collected three dollar coins from him. Then she paused and cocked her head a little to the side. That was when I noticed the noise coming from upstairs. Something fell heavily on the wooden floor above the shop. Then came the sound of furniture being dragged across the floor. Then there was a loud thud and the sound of angry footsteps walking briskly up and down. All the while I noticed that Miss Irene had a satisfied look on her face.

When I got back home, I handed my mother the panades that she had sent me to buy, and I said, “Ma, I hear big ruction upstairs at Miss Irene house, like somebody turning the place upside down.” My mother threw her head back and let out a loud, girlish laugh that I hadn’t heard in a long time.

The following evening Miss Irene came back to our house and told my mother about how Raymond nearly went mad when he couldn’t find his passport. “You should see how the man had the whole house looking like hurricane just past through,” Miss Irene said, settling herself on our top step. Between bursts of laughter from her and my mother, Miss Irene went on to explain that Raymond had hidden the passport underneath a chest of drawers, but Miss Irene discovered the passport and hid it in the kitchen oven.

When Miss Irene left our house an hour later, my mother left the verandah and walked past me into the kitchen. As she began to make Johnny cakes for our evening tea, mixing flour, baking powder, salt and coconut milk in a bowl, I heard her say to herself, “But how some people could be such a glutton for punishment? Poor Irene.”

I followed my mother into the kitchen, hoping she would keep mumbling to herself in her usual way. I wanted to know what she meant by “glutton for punishment.” But the only thing

my mother added, after a long pause during which her mind seemed far away, was, “Cho” in a slightly annoyed way.

The following Saturday, Aunt Debbie came to visit my mother. Aunt Debbie, who lived in the Buttonwood Bay area on the North Side of the city, often came to visit us on Saturdays. Aunt Debbie would tell my mother that the only reason why she bothered to cross Hulover Creek anymore was because her oldest sister lived on the Elizabeth Street. She said the South Side was becoming too tang infested, and she didn't understand why my mother insisted on staying there. And my mother would say she wasn't moving anywhere, and besides her navel string was buried on Elizabeth Street.

It was mid-morning when Aunt Debbie came. I was peeling two green plantains and a few sweet potatoes and cocoas. My mother was going to make boil-up, cooking these with a bit of pig's tail and boiled cake for our dinner at mid-day. When Aunt Debbie came through the door I ran to hug her, leaving the half-peeled plantains and ground food in the pot on the kitchen dresser. “Aunt Debbie!” I cried, enjoying the sweet scent of her perfume as she squeezed me tightly against her.

“Look at my little Vangie. You're getting so big,” Aunt Debbie said fondly. As she stepped back to get a good look at me, the cluster of silver bangles on her left hand jingled like tiny bells, making a pretty sound.

My mother came out of the bedroom with her two arms full of dirty laundry. She dropped the clothes into the nearest sofa when she saw her sister. “Well, look here! What a nice surprise,” my mother said as she squeezed Aunt Debbie's slender frame close.

“I was just telling Vangie that I can’t believe she’s gotten so tall, Flo,” Aunt Debbie said. She and my mother sat at our dining table. The table was pushed against the wall that partially separated our kitchen from the living area. “Miriam going into First Form next year.” My aunt turned toward me to include me in the conversation, “and Amira is in Second now.” Miriam and Amira were Aunt Debbie’s two daughters.

“Pickney grow too fast nowadays, gial, Debbie,” my mother said. “But praise God you and Frank can afford to send your girls to high school.”

“And lucky thing Vangie here smart as anything,” Aunt Debbie said, tugging playfully at the fraying end of my one of my corn-rowed plaits. I bet she will win a government scholarship.”

“I well believe so,” my mother agreed, “and with the way things getting more and more dear every day in Belize, by the time Vangie graduate from Standard Six, who knows how much high school will cost?”

“When last you hear from that one?” Aunt Debbie asked. By *that one* Aunt Debbie meant my father, Ben. My mother and father had split up when I was three. I didn’t know much about my father except that he was a very tall man with a big, broad smile and that my mother didn’t want to have anything to do with him.

My mother rolled her eyes at Aunt Debbie and said, “Oh, do, fu God’s sake” which was her way of dismissing a bothersome subject.

My mother and Aunt Debbie went into the kitchen so Aunt Debbie could make black tea. I continued to listen to their conversation from the living room. My mother lit the kerosene stove and put the kettle on while Aunt Debbie took a tea bag and one of our good teacups out of the kitchen safe. Setting the cup down on the kitchen counter, Aunt Debbie leaned close to my

mother and said, “You know, Florence, like I always tell you, if you need help with anything—school books for Vangie or anything, just let me know.”

“Thanks, Deb,” my mother said, “I know you mean that, but I can manage. Miss Vasques says she will soon need me to cook in addition to the cleaning I already do. So I’ll get more pay then. But thanks all the same.”

The kettle came to a boil with a loud, screeching whistle, and my mother poured some hot water into the cup for Aunt Debbie. A couple minutes later, Aunt Debbie removed the teabag from the cup and scooped in a spoonful of sugar. Then as she stirred her tea with her right hand, she reached with the other hand past my mother who was standing near the pot I had left on the dresser. “Florence, is this the trash?” my aunt asked absentmindedly as she dropped the used teabag into what was to be dinner for me and my mother.

My mother glanced into the pot and said nothing.

I didn’t say anything either. And even though my mother didn’t look at me, I knew we had just shared a secret—the kind of secret you don’t allow yourself to form into words, not even mentally. But you know it is there, and you feel ashamed.

I snuck outside and went to sit on the top step even though the mid-morning sun had taken over the entire verandah. As I sat there looking up and down Elizabeth Street, I began to notice, for the first time, the squalor of my neighborhood. I looked down at the clogged drains with black, stagnant water on either side of the street and at the large pile of garbage that various households had dumped on the side of the street in front of Miss Lena’s house two doors down from us. I thought of my mother’s graying, weather-beaten wooden house that had lost its paint decades before my mother inherited from my great-grandparents. I thought of the way it leaned slightly to the side as if it were whispering something private to Miss Rita’s equally drab one-

bedroom house across the fence. Then I thought of Aunt Debbie's big, two-storey concrete house on University Boulevard near the sea, with its stone-finished facade and two pretty light fixtures on either side of the front door just for style. And suddenly I wished Aunt Debbie would leave our house and never come back.

My mother and Aunt Debbie eventually came back into the living room, and from the verandah I could hear them talking. My mother was telling Aunt Debbie about the latest episode between Miss Irene and Raymond. After my mother was finished narrating the story, there was a long silence. Then, lowering her voice, my mother said, "You know, Deb, that kind of thing could go on for years and years. Look at Irene—nearly sixty and still putting up with foolishness. Man like that don't change, you know."

Aunt Debbie didn't answer, and after another long silence, mother said, "I can't tell you what to do, but there's no shame in leaving a no-good husband. I know Frank still seeing that girl from Cayo."

"I have my two girls to think about. If it wasn't for them, maybe—"

"You've been saying that for years. You can't slave your soul for your children. Woman should never slave their soul for man or children."

"Aye, man Florence. You know I don't like to talk about this. I know what you're going to say: how you left Ben the first time he beat you; how taking a man back after he treat you bad is giving him free license to do it again. I know. I know. But I am not you, Florence. You have to get off of my case, man."

"Alright, I won't pry. But I can't promise you that I won't bring it up again the next time I have a mind to."

"Then maybe I just won't come hail you next time."

“Yes you will.”

Aunt Debbie continued to visit on Saturdays, but my mother didn't broach the subject again even though Aunt Debbie never left her husband. And Miss Irene continued to drop by almost daily to tell my mother about Raymond's goings on. But as the weeks passed, I noticed that my mother became less and less tolerant of Miss Irene's stories. Now, as she listened to Miss Irene, all she would say was, “Aye, gyal. That's how man stay.”

CHAPTER 4: MATILDA'S FINEST MOMENT

You might say Matilda was a busybody. But that's because you wouldn't have heard about the way Flowers Bank was in Matilda's time. Back then, in the 40's when Matilda was young, people would show up at your house without any warning. You would-a wake up in the morning and go outside to let out the fowls or take out your chamber pot, and bam! somebody walking into your yard. They come early, early to visit you, but you're used to it. So you offer them some cool rain water from your drum, and the two of you sit on your verandah and talk until you run out of things to say.

Back then too people didn't mind helping one another out. Say you're starting out in life and decide to build a house ('Course, you'd have to be a man; wasn't no foolishness 'bout woman building house back then), all the village man them would get together and help you build your house. 'Course, when somebody else turn come, you would go by him and help to build his house too. Meanwhile the woman them would cook up food and things and then come feed the man. Everybody pitch in. Flowers Bank people used to help out each other plenty. 'Course, things does be so hard, you did have to pull together. And of all the things that people used to come together for, nothing beat a funeral. And, of all the villagers, nobody loved a good burying more than Matilda Forman.

So, the other day when Old James Bailey passed, Matilda was in her glee. Mind you, before Old James got sick, he used to be the most important man in Flowers Bank. He was the Anglican lay preacher. So everyone knew Matilda would make sure Old James got nothing but the best burying.

The morning after Old James passed, Matilda walked down by the riverside where she waited to catch the Belize City bus. You would-a think Matilda was Old James's widow the way

she parked off by the roadside with Old James's burying clothes over her arm (though, the way Matilda spent so much time down by church, and with Old James's wife passed off so long before, people does say those two might as well get married). While Matilda was waiting at the roadside, Miss Doris came out to the road with her grey hair all loosed out and puffy. Miss Doris had a big, blue plastic comb in her hand. She said she came to keep Matilda's company until the bus came, but mostly she came to interfere.

Doris raked the comb vigorously through her hair as she came to stand beside Matilda.

"Look how Old James peg out, ea, Matilda?" she said.

"The last of his breed, Doris, girl. A more upstanding man you couldn't find."

"To God," Doris said, making two more swipes with the comb.

"I tell you, when James Bailey walked through this village he was always well dressed and put together. You never see pants crease so sharp."

"And always with his Bible clutched under his arm."

"Staunch Anglican," Matilda said, raising her forehead heavenward for emphasis. "They don't come like that no more."

"So how the arrangements coming?" Doris asked, finally getting around to her reason for coming out of her yard to wait by the waterside with Matilda. "You going down to Town to take care of things, I suppose?"

"Yes. Mavis and Consie gone head. The three of we will dress the body this morning, and then some of the man them from the village will bring back the body tomorrow for the funeral."

"That's the burying clothes you have there, then?" Doris parted her hair in two, stuck the comb in one side, and began to plat the other half.

Matilda held out her arm with the clothing draped over it. “Uh-hm. I have his newest black suit right here with a white shirt and a black bowtie. And see? I haul one of my old church frock over everything so people on the bus won’t try to interfere.”

Doris gave an approving nod, her head tilted in the direction of the plat she was working on. “You hear if anybody coming in for the funeral? From States I mean.”

“I doubt it. Consie and Mavis were saying last night how they don’t think their one brother will make it. His green card and thing still not straightened out yet.” Just then, Matilda saw the bus coming, and she inched closer to the road. “I will see you at the wake tonight, girl, Doris. What you bringing?”

“The usual johnnycake, like most people.” She started on the second plait as she walked back to her yard.

“Make sure you come early so we can start making the wreaths,” Matilda shouted as the Belize City bus slowed to a stop. “And don’t forget your hymnbook, Doris!”

The wake was crowded that night as nearly all of Flowers Bank was out. Plus, a handful of people from Burrell Boom, Isabella Bank, and Bermudian Landing came out, some to pay their respects and others just for the little outing. The sett’n-up was taking place at Miss Consie’s house since she was the oldest of Old James’s three children. Plenty of the mourners sat down under a blue tarpaulin that stretched from one side of Miss Consie’s low house to halfway across the yard. An electric bulb hung down from the center of the tarpaulin, throwing a pale orange light over the crowd. Doris and some of the other women them were singing hymns and sankies while another group made wreaths from black, white and purple crepe paper. Close by, the man them played feechee and drink up white rum. They were making a whole pile of noise, slapping

down the dominoes and talking loud, sometimes drowning out the hymns and sankies. The older children played happily 'mongst the big people them, while the smaller ones drooped across their parents' shoulders and laps since it was way past their bed time. And, as usual, the young man and woman them hung around at the edge of the crowd, some of them waiting for a chance to slip away together into the night.

Meanwhile, Matilda and Consie and a couple other women hustled back and forth between the house and the makeshift tent as they served black coffee and johnny cakes to the crowd. 'Course, while the other servers joined the crowd under the tent from time to time, Matilda scarcely took a minute to rest.

Around one o'clock the singing and feech playing fell into a little lull and the story-telling started. Pretty soon, a big argument broke out between Chauncey Rhaburn, the village drunk, and Gerry Gentle, the village chairman. The fuss was over a stone monument that Gerry was planning to place near the river across from the school. Chauncey was saying, "Who the hell tell you we want a slave monument in Flowers Bank, Gentle? You see any slave round here?" By this time Chauncey's speech was already slow and heavy from drinking all night.

"No man," Gerry said, "It is not a slave monument. It's a heroes monument. The men whose names will be on the monument were the first true-true heroes of this country. Twelve of them were Africans, and they used to live right here so in Flowers Bank. They used to be slaves before time, yes, but then they got freedom some way or the other. So now they could vote, you see. And it was because of *their* votes that the British decided to stay and fight 'gainst the Spanish them in the Battle of St. George's Caye."

"So what?" Chauncey said drunkenly, "That don't give you the right to go round telling everybody that we Flowers Bank people is African."

By this time, Matilda had come outside to see what the ruction was about. She said, “Chauncey, why you don’t take your drinking noise home? It’s you cousin wake you come to, you know, not barroom. And besides, you *is* African, yes. Why you think you so black?”

Chauncey started to say something, but the laughter from the crowd drowned him out. Gentle continued to try to reason with Chauncey, explaining to the crowd in general that if it wasn’t for those fourteen men from Flowers Bank who paddled their doreys all the way to Belize Town to throw in their votes at the Public Meeting, the British would have left the settlement to the Spanish them in 1798, and then there would be no Belize. But Chauncey insisted that he was no African. He was Creole, and that was that. Eventually, the men went back to their feech and the women started up a fresh round of singing.

The following afternoon, about two hundred people were crowded inside the Anglican Church for Old James’s funeral. This was far more than the usual crowd that attended church on Sundays. The Anglican Church building doubled as the schoolhouse during the week, and many of the mourners now sat on the desks that were usually stored at the back of the building. Most of the mourners, all dressed in black, white and purple, were already seated quietly and waiting for the body to arrive from Belize City. Matilda, however, was busy walking up and down in the church. More than once, she fussed with the wreaths that were lined up against the communion rail, consulted with the organist, checked to make sure her fellow choir members were prepared, checked to see if the Reverend needed anything, and went over to comfort the family members in the front pews.

At two o’clock when the six pallbearers walked in with the coffin and set it down on two chairs at the stand at the front of the church, Matilda finally sat down with the rest of the choir.

The pallbearers remained stone-faced as two of them slowly loosened the screws on the coffin. Then Mavis, Consie, and the other close family members got up and walked toward the coffin to begin the final viewing. The organist stopped playing, and the whole church watched in respectful silence as the grieving family gathered around the coffin. Then the pallbearers raised the lid of the coffin, and a loud gasp went up from the family members. The congregation sat up straight in their pews and leaned forward, their necks strained. Then the family turned their heads to stare at Matilda in the front choir pew. The congregation also turned their gaze on her, and the Reverend dashed down from his pulpit made it to the coffin in four springy steps. At the same time Matilda jumped up from her seat and headed for the coffin. And there Old James was, laid out in Matilda's long, flower-patterned frock with frills around the neck and sleeves. All of a sudden Matilda's knees gave out, and she sat heavily on the church floor. By then the congregation was already on their feet and making their way toward the coffin. But the Reverend took control of the situation and banged the coffin lid shut.

Never before had Flowers Bank seen such a commotion at a funeral, and it took a good twenty minutes before everybody settled down. Mopping up his face with a white handkerchief, the Reverend explained as soberly as he could, that there had apparently been a mix-up with the burying clothes at the Belize City morgue.

Again, everyone stare at Matilda who had gone back to sit with the choir. She still looked as if she was going to faint. At long last, she got up and faced the congregation. "Brothers and sisters, friends, family of the beloved deceased," she said in a shaky voice, "I don't know what happened today. I couldn't begin to explain. All I know is that I get up early yestiday morning, take my time and press Mister James burying clothes for him, and take it to Belize on the bus.

And to stop any interfering eyes from getting into my business, I haul one of my old church frock over the burying clothes to cover it up. When I reached the dead house in Belize—”

“*I* take the clothes from her!” someone shouted. All eyes turned to the back of the church where Chauncey Rhaburn stood grinning. He continued, “*I* went to the morgue after Matilda left and *I* put the dress on him. Think you can call me ‘African’ and get away with it? Ea, Matilda? You think you could cuss me ‘black’ in front of everybody and get away? Now look at your dearly departed, lying there looking like an old flowers garden.” Chauncey laughed drunkenly and staggered out the back door. The whole congregation sucked in their breaths and sat there with their mouths open. One of Old James’s nephews got up from the front pew and bolted down the aisle after Chauncey. But two other men caught him by the shoulders and held him back, telling him it wasn’t the right time, his uncle wouldn’t approve.

The Reverend postponed the funeral service—another first for Flowers Bank. He told everyone to return two hours later. The pallbearers carried the coffin back to Old James’s house to get him properly outfitted. Matilda spent the next half hour comforting Old James’s family who were still in shock. Then she was her old self once more, bustling about the church, tidying up and rearranging things for the funeral service later.

CHAPTER 5: BRACKISH WATER

Allison surveyed the spacious living room and adjoining kitchen in the Los Angeles apartment that she had shared with Darrell for the past thirteen months. A bouquet of yellow carnations adorned the breakfast bar that partially separated the kitchen from the living and dining areas. The mid October sunlight filtered through the double sliding doors and kitchen window, lighting up the kitchen and living room. Near the open door of the apartment sat Allison's two red suitcases that contained everything she owned or cared to take away from her failed marriage: a framed photo of her parents, her mother's Creole bread recipe, her Belize passport and U.S Immigration papers, and her scant wardrobe. The rest of her clothes and jewelry remained in the guest bedroom closet. Most of them had been gifts from Darrell, or more to the point, a year's worth of pretty bribes and glittering apologies.

Yesterday's mail, mostly bills and junk mail, remained unopened on the glass-topped dining table. Only three of the four aluminum-framed chairs remained, the other having lost a leg some two months ago during a moment of spontaneous love-making. Allison promptly let go of the memory and walked over to the large kitchen window. She watched two small boys play basketball in the alley below and wondered why they were not in school. The boys looked like twins, except that one was of a lighter shade of brown than the other. Their delightful laughter, muffled by the closed window, caused Allison to think of her second grade students for the first time since morning. She sighed deeply and felt a sudden pang of guilt for lying to her principal about why she was taking the day off. It was one of the many lies that she had told at work lately, not wanting to admit to anyone that the bruises she had on her arms weren't caused by a hereditary condition or that she didn't really get that that black-eye last Christmas at Mammoth Mountain when she accidentally poked herself with a ski pole. And she didn't tell anyone at

work that she was taking the day off in order to leave her husband while he was safely at work and wouldn't try to stop her.

Allison studied her white Toyota Camry that was parked in the alley in front of the opened garage door. Darrell had bought it for her from a used car auction—the first car she had owned. Allison recalled three months ago when she had driven the car to the Inglewood Police Station. It was early in the night, and the traffic was heavy. Allison had leaned way forward in her seat as she drove, her forehead almost touching the windshield. Her left eye was swollen shut, and she could hardly see. She now remembered the business-like manner of the two police officers at the front desk. They had both seemed sincere but not overly concerned about her swollen face and bowed head. They'd seen the likes of her many times before.

The following afternoon Allison had driven back to the police station to pick up Darrell who had spent the night in jail. She had remained stoic as she waited for him at the front desk. However, when Darrell approached through a corridor that led from the back of the station, her indignation instantly waned. Darrell no longer seemed like the handsome, self-possessed technical writer she had married. He was disheveled and appeared morose and dejected as he walked through the corridor. He still wore his work shirt, now severely wrinkled and partially unbuttoned. The un-tucked ends of his shirt hung sloppily out of his khaki pants. His shoelaces were in his hand, and as he walked, he dragged his loosened Doc Martens noisily across the tiled floor.

Allison had first met Darrell at her best friend's house in Belize City when she was in Second Form in high school. Darrell had been living in the States for several years, and at the age of twenty-four had just ended his first marriage. But Allison didn't know that at the time. All she knew, when she first saw him bounding up the front steps of Hazel's house, skipping over every

other step, was that he was as handsome and masculine as she had imagined him to be. Allison had become infatuated with Hazel's big brother a year before she met him, just from listening to Hazel talk incessantly about her wonderful brother who was a writer and lived in Los Angeles. Hazel once showed her a magazine with Darrel's picture in it, and for weeks she walked around with the image of him stuck in her head. In her mind, she invented engaging conversations with Darrel who always smiled at her wit and sophistication. Then, when he finally came on a surprise visit for his mother's birthday and said "Hey! You must be Allison," Allison was so shy, she took her schoolbag and slipped away from Hazel's verandah as soon as she could.

Years later when Allison was twenty and Darrel was on another trip to Belize, their whirlwind romance resulted in marriage six months after. In addition to her longstanding infatuation, Allison was charmed by his intelligence. And upon moving to LA, she enjoyed going to events with him and his bookish writer friends who told her she had such a sharp tongue she ought to be a lawyer. But it wasn't long before she came to regard their constant jabber about thematic juxtapositions and contrastive analyses, etc. as cardboard conversations with no soul. And she couldn't stand the condescension that she soon learned to recognize in their polite comments. Upon learning that Allison was a grade school teacher with just an associate's degree, for example, one of them would exclaim, "Oh, how great! That's *awesome!*" About a month into their marriage Allison discovered that Darrell had used up all his tolerance for feisty, strong-willed women in dealing with his mother and ex-wife and had none left for her youthful arrogance. That was when she began to feel like a colorful parrot in a tiny cage.

The first sign of trouble came two months into their marriage when Allison found a document case in the garage. It was full of copies of personal documents belonging to Darrel's ex-wife. There were medical records, receipts, identification cards and a few letters and cards she

had sent Darrell during their separation. When she asked Darrell why he kept them, he said they showed that he was right and that his ex-wife and her lawyer had screwed him over. But Allison saw the documents as proof that Darrell was still holding on to his former wife, and she insisted that Darrell throw them out. But Darrell put his foot down hard and declared that he wasn't going to let another woman tell him what to do. The violence started not long after that.

Now, Allison turned away from the kitchen window and studied the crisp bouquet of yellow carnations on the countertop. She pulled out one of the long stalks and held the flower to her nose, anticipating its sweet fragrance. The bouquet had been yesterday's birthday present from Darrell along with dinner at the L.A. Prime restaurant. Allison smiled faintly as she remembered the look of surprise on Darrell's face when she told him she was leaving. She had waited until the waitress brought their dessert.

"It's my birthday present to myself," Allison told Darrell, enjoying the surge of power that she felt.

Darrell pushed his chocolate soufflé a few inches away and laid his spoon on the beige tablecloth. He studied Allison closely, his brown eyes narrowing. He didn't say anything.

Allison looked past him, taking in the night-time view of Downtown L.A. Her eyes were drawn to the Union Bank building nearby. All the windows in the building were lighted, each row resembling a strip of camera film.

"It's my twenty-third birthday present to myself," she repeated, turning back to Darrell who had still not spoken.

"Are you making fun of me, Allison? Taking me for poppy-show?"

"No. I'm perfectly serious."

“Where’s this coming from all of a sudden? I thought we were okay. I thought things have been good between us lately.”

“Do you realize when or why we stopped quarrelling, Darrell?”

“Does it matter?”

“It was after you threatened me with the steak knife—less than a week after I picked you up from jail, the bloody fool that I was. And do you remember what you told me as you held the knife to my face? You said you’d already been to jail; you knew that if you hurt me again they’d keep you for good; so you’d make sure it was worth your while the next time. That’s what you said. And now you act like you don’t know why I’m leaving you.”

The waitress came with a pitcher of water and refilled their glasses. Darrell picked up his spoon and began to draw swirls in his soufflé. Allison looked out her window.

When the waitress left, Darrell said, “And you’ve been holding on to that all this time? Plotting and planning like a psychotic nut?”

“What I’m saying is, married people *ought* to be able to have a decent, civilized quarrel every now and then without—”

“Genius. Did you come up with that oxymoron all by yourself? Hum? Well, it makes no fucking sense.”

“Keep your voice down, Darrell. I swear to God, living with you has been like trying to navigate a minefield. I can’t live like that. I won’t.”

“And you’re such a goddamned saint, right? You who are always up in my face, running off your mouth. You don’t know how to back down. You never learn.”

“Do you know that I don’t feel safe in my own house, Darrell? A woman should never feel afraid of her own husband.”

“Well, you’re no picnic either. You—you’re arrogant, you’re fucking competitive; Jesus, you have all the faults of a man.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

“You don’t even cry when I slap your rass around.”

“See what I mean, Darrell?” The two of them glared at each other in silent impasse.

The waitress brought the beverage menu and handed it to Darrell. “Would you like an after-dinner drink this evening, Sir? Maybe one of our dry ports to go with your dessert?” she asked.

“Maybe later. Thank you.” The waitress retreated. Darrell passed his hand over his low-cropped head and sighed deeply. “I think we should get counseling or something. Try to work it out, you know?”

“I’ve given this a lot of thought. I’m leaving when the school term ends,” Allison lied, and she thought of new apartment key that she had hidden in a jar of face cream in her bathroom.

“Where are you going to live?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” she lied again.

“You won’t last six months. Not even two. In fact, the minute you leave I’m filing for divorce. And you know what that means. You’ll lose your immigration status, and you’ll have to haul your rass back to Belize.”

Allison thought of the first time she had moved away from Sittee River Village and went to live in Belize City. She was eleven, and her parents had sent her to live with her aunt in Belize City so she could attend a good high school. For Allison, it was a dream come true, leaving her small village that had no electricity or running water for the big city where children wore good shoes even in their yards and went to Matinee on Sundays and where every household had a

television set. She adjusted to city life easily and returned to home only during the long summer holidays. In high school Allison became part of the in-crowd. She played on the volleyball team, ran track, and formed a rap crew with two other girls. It was a life far removed from the village life she had known, and it wasn't long before Allison began to shed her "bushy" identity, as the city students used to refer to those who came from Out District. After high school, Allison went on to teachers college and never returned to Sittee River for more than a brief visit during the Easter holidays.

Now in the restaurant, she noted the derisive smile in Darrell's eyes. She didn't say anything.

"So you'd go back to that dawg-siddown shack your family calls a house? Back to the bush where you come from?"

Allison still didn't respond.

"Only a fool would throw away a green card like that," Darrell pressed on.

"I didn't marry you for a green card," Allison said, denying once more what they both knew was true. Without a green card she would not have been able to work legally in the United States. She would have had to find a menial job such as cleaning house for some rich American who would turn a blind eye to her illegal status in exchange for her tacit permission to have them work her like a slave. Or, she would try to pass for an American citizen by assuming an American accent or by claiming to be from the U.S. Virgin Islands. Then she would have to buy fake documents and live the rest of her life in America looking over her shoulders and praying that the INS didn't catch up with her.

"You can't say anything now, can you?" Darrell asked with a look of triumph. "What happen to all your back chats now, huh?"

Allison moved the flower away from her nose and carelessly stuck it back into the bouquet, disappointed that it had no fragrance. Then she heard the door of the apartment click shut. Her stomach lurched. She turned and saw Darrell standing next to her suitcases near the door. His face bore a grim scowl. He walked over to the dining table and set down his bunch of keys. The strident clatter on the glass surface set Allison's nerves even more on edge. She took a deep, slow breath. "You're taking the afternoon off, Darrell?" she asked.

Darrell put his workbag on the dining chair nearest him. Then he turned to look at the crowded bookshelves that lined the living room walls, as if taking a quick inventory. "You've been talking to your parents, haven't you, Allison? They've turned you against me. That's it, isn't it?"

"No." Allison thought of the last phone call she had received from Belize. It was the day after she had picked up Darrell from the police station. She didn't know how her mother had heard, but as soon as Allison picked up the phone, her mother insisted that she leave Darrell and return to Belize. Her parents passed the phone back and forth to each other, her mother pleading with her to come back home and her father swearing that the next time he heard Darrell was in Belize, he would hunt him down and bust his ass up. In the following weeks Allison avoided calling Belize or answering the phone. She knew that if she walked out of her marriage because her family persuaded her to, she would be tempted to use that as an excuse to go back. Now she realized that she had been gone a long time ago, although not physically. And she found that she was no longer afraid.

She picked up her handbag and was about to leave the kitchen when Darrell suddenly stood in front of her, blocking her path. “Do you know what I could do to you right now?” he asked in a low voice.

“I do,” Allison said. “And I know there’s nothing I can do to stop you. So you either do whatever you came here to do, or let me past.” Allison fixed her eyes on the vertical lined pattern on Darrell’s shirt, no more than an inch away from her face. The smell of Darrell’s cologne filled her nostrils—a mild, familiar fragrance, almost pleasurable. The refrigerator hummed behind her like the sound of a motorcycle way off in the distance. Finally, Darrell moved past her and walked into the kitchen.

Allison walked slowly toward the door where her two suitcases stood waiting. She wanted to turn around, to see what Darrell was doing. Would he try to harm her, prevent her from leaving? Or was he sitting on the countertop, head bowed and shoulders slumped dejectedly. She had seen him that way before, had given in to the impulse to soothe, to fix, to atone. Atone for what? She didn’t know. The refrigerator continued to hum loudly, willing her out the door. Finally, she picked up her two suitcases and left.

It was Mama and Pa who had urged her to leave Los Angeles and return home to Belize, yet Allison was relieved to find that they were genuinely glad to see her when they met her at the Belize International Airport. She wasn’t too concerned about Mama’s reception because Mama was always mild and easy-going. Pa, on the other hand, was a very stoic man who brooked no nonsense. Even when Allison and her four sisters were teenagers, all Pa had to do to keep them in line was be present. As a result, Allison grew up both craving Pa’s validation and fearing his wrath or disapproval.

From the airport Pa drove east and passed through Belize City. Then he drove west for a half hour and then southeast onto the Coastal Highway. The drive would take two hours. The unpaved Coastal Highway traversed sparse pine forests and mango and citrus orchards. The leaves on the trees were coated with a thin layer of red dust from the road. Sitting between Mama and Pa in the front of the Chevy pickup, Allison breathed in the familiar smell of the sun-baked dust outside, mixed with the sweet scent of ripe oranges. It was the smell of Southern Belize, the soothing fragrance of her childhood. Throughout the drive Pa played country music on the ancient eight-track stereo. The songs reminded Allison of a trip she and Pa had taken to town when she was eighteen. “Pa?” Allison asked over the loud music, “do you remember that time when you drove me to Dangriga to take my exam?”

“Huum. I’m not sure, Al. You’ll have to remind me.” Pa reached out to turn down the volume on the stereo. He had a farmer’s hands—big and strong and a golden brown from the fierce Belizean sun.

“I was eighteen,” Allison continued, “and you were taking me to town for my Teacher’s College exam. You still had the old yellow Chevy that you named Yellow Bird.”

“I think I remember.”

“It was the time when I told you about this boy who I liked.”

“Yes, I definitely remember now.”

“Which boy?” Mama asked, her coffee colored brow wrinkling with a mixture of surprise and amusement.

“Some light-weight boy from Pomona Valley,” Pa said. “Used to work in the office at the citrus factory.”

“You’re right. He *was* kind of flaky,” Allison said chuckling. “But you remember what I told you that day? I said, ‘Pa, now that I am eighteen, I think I’m old enough to have a boyfriend.’ I think it was the bravest thing I ever did, telling you something like that. But you know why I decided to have that talk with you, and why I waited until I was eighteen to have a boyfriend?”

Pa waited for Allison to continue. Meanwhile, Johnny Cash sang “I Walk the Line” in a plaintive bass-baritone in the background.

“Because,” Allison continued, “I didn’t want to disappoint you or make Mama ashamed of me.” Allison didn’t look at either of her parents but stared straight ahead through the windshield where to the west the deep orange sun was inching its way behind the trees.

“Don’t you worry ’bout none of that,” Pa said. “You could never disappoint me.”

Then Mama added, “Everybody makes mistakes. And I am not ashamed of any of my pickney them.” Mama and Pa never displayed affection openly, or lingered in a emotional moment. Instead they would remain silent until a moment passed or say something that would abruptly change the mood, as Mama now did. For the same reason, neither Mama nor Pa broached the subject of why Allison was back in Belize. There were no sympathies spoken, no comforting hug. Yet, for Allison it was enough that Mama had begged her to come home and that Pa had offered to beat Darrel up. For the rest of the drive, Mama caught Allison up with the latest happenings in the village.

Dusk was about to settle when they turned off the Southern Highway and onto the main road that ran through Sittee River Village. To Allison, the road, now paved with a thin layer of asphalt, seemed much narrower, the wooden houses much smaller and farther away from the road. A quiet calm hung in the air as they drove down the scant road. Occasionally they passed

someone either walking or on bicycle. Since Sittee River had no more than a few hundred villagers, Allison knew everyone and waved as she recognized a cousin or an aunt or a childhood friend on the road. Smoke rose thinly from a few yards where grass or coconut shells were being burned to keep sand flies and *batlass* away. Most of the yards and verandas were empty as the villagers were inside having their evening tea. As they neared home, Allison could see the river which ran parallel to the main road. As night was about to fall, its dark green had deepened to the color of a grayish-black river stone. The river invoked in Allison a calm and peaceful mood, and for the first time since she left Darrel two months ago, she felt almost at ease.

The following morning Allison woke up in her old bed and gazed around the tiny bedroom that seemed so much larger when she was younger. She used to share the sparsely furnished room with Delia, Shelmadine and Mary before everyone grew up and moved away. The narrow bunk bed that Patricia and Mary used to share was still pushed against the wall below the window. As she lay on the top bunk of her and Delia's old bed, Allison looked up at the exposed wooden joists and corrugated iron roofing. The roof gave off a soft cracking sound as the warm December sun caused the metal to expand. The slivers of daylight seeping through the tiny gaps between the wall slats told her it was past breakfast time. She could hear Mama downstairs in the kitchen and the radio playing outside in the living room. She knew Pa had already gone to the farm. As Allison lay in bed, she could almost hear the constant foot traffic, the sibling rivalries, the night-time Bible readings, and the girlish giggles that once filled the house with life. She longed for those days when things were simple, when the word *divorce* was as foreign to her as *freeway* or *turnpike* or *immigration*—days long ago when she was content to be an unsophisticated village girl.

Later in the morning, Allison accompanied Mama to the grocery shop a half mile down the road. Cally had just finished serving the one other customer in the shop, a woman named Miss Norma. Miss Norma, who was in her fifties, belonged to the only Mestizo family in Sittee River. All the other villagers were Creoles.

Miss Norma turned away from the counter as Allison and Mama entered the store and said cheerfully, "What, Allison, I never know you come." Allison knew Miss Norma was lying. In a small village like Sittee River, people knew each other's business well enough, sometimes long before the business even occurred.

Allison walked up to the counter and accepted a handshake from Cally. He was weighing a paper bag of rice on the scale that dangled above the counter. Feeling a little heady from the strong smells of the onions, cheese, pig's tail, kerosene oil, and other goods, Allison said, "I came yesterday, Miss Norma. Didn't Mama tell you I was coming?" Allison knew very well that Mama hadn't told Miss Norma about her coming home. Mama was friendly with all the women in the village, but Miss Norma was famous for gossiping and wasn't the kind of person Mama would tell her business to.

"So, you came for the Christmas holiday, then, Allison?" Miss Norma asked.

Mama deliberately interrupted by ordering the items she had come to buy, speaking loudly as if Cally were deaf.

Allison gave Miss Norma a weak smile. "Nah-ah. I'm back for good. And how are your two boys? They must be big. What class they in now?"

"They okay. The lee one is in Standard Four and the big boy is in Six. And how is the husband, girl? He come with you?"

“No,” Allison said flatly, not looking at Miss Norma, but aware that Miss Norma was studying her closely.

“But Allison, girl, how you get so slim?” Miss Norma pressed on, the gold strips around her front teeth glinting. “Most people go to States and come back fat, but you slim right down.”

Mama gave Allison a quick look that said, watch out; *Old Interfering is trying to get into your business.*

Allison mumbled something dismissive. Then she opened one of the large glass jars on Cally’s countertop and took out a handful of coconut sweets wrapped in wax paper.

Back home, Allison and Mama sat on the verandah facing the river. Neither of them had said much during the walk back. Now, Allison could tell that Mama was vexed from the way her lips were tightened into an almost straight line as she picked small stones from the bowl of the red kidney beans in her lap. When Mama finally spoke, she said, “You know, Allison, when I was a young girl my mother used to have this thing that she liked to say. She would say, ‘Sometimes Julia, girl, life is like rain water—silky and light and sweet. Other times it’s like river water—heavy and difficult to swallow. Whichever one you get in your tumbler, you don’t usually have a choice; all you can do is throw your head back and swallow.’” Mama got up with the bowl of beans and walked across the landing that led to the kitchen.

Allison remained on the verandah, her eyes fixed on a cluster of tall grass along the river’s edge. Behind her, the house was still. The clock ticked loudly in the living room, echoing off its plastic frame. The sound made the air seem tense, as if the whole world was holding its breath, waiting.

