

DePauw University

Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University

Honor Scholar Theses

Student Work

5-2022

In Our Shoes

Mahogany Brim
DePauw University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.depauw.edu/studentresearch>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brim, Mahogany, "In Our Shoes" (2022). *Honor Scholar Theses*. 193.
<https://scholarship.depauw.edu/studentresearch/193>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honor Scholar Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University.

In Our Shoes

Mahogany Brim

Committee:

Professor Joe Heithaus (Advisor)

Professor Leslie James (Reader)

DePauw University
Honor Scholar Program
Class of 2022

Table of contents

I. Immigrant Tax

- Afro-Caribbean
- Barrel Babies 1
- Disclaimer 1
- In Between-ness
- Distance
- Calling Cards
- Alleys
- Privilege
- 12 Bosvigo Gap
- Peanut Butter
- Welcome Home

II. Growing Pains

- Disclaimer 2
- Wood Dove
- Rice Grains
- #6
- Fast
- Peanut Butter
- Chattel House

In Our Shoes has lived inside of me for a long time. As someone who has always been fully immersed in my own culture, I was born into this duality of identity. I realized early on that I existed in two different worlds: the one shaped by my Bajan identity and the one shaped by my American one. I wasn't fully a Black American. I had deep ties to this tiny island in the Atlantic, famous for flying fish and Rihanna. And I wasn't one of those immigrant children that had never set foot on the island that they were calling home; I went every summer for months. But there, I was just American, nothing else which created this really awkward place for me where I felt as though I was stuck in this "in between-ness." It was a confusing and isolating experience for me for a long time.

But as I got older, I realized that I wasn't alone in the in between. I started meeting people who were the same as me; children of immigrants from all over the diaspora. We would go out to dinner, play card games, do homework together, and in the midst of these activities, we'd tell each other stories of our crazy immigrant family experiences. Through these experiences, we were knitted together across cultures by this seemingly invisible connective tissue. We had all packed barrels to send home or felt the pain of beatings with a belt.

This collection of stories, memories, and memoir is shaped by my friends and family.

I. Immigrant Tax

Afro-Caribbean

My identities are wires

They tangle

Twist

Knot

& never end

One always attempting to

Dominate

The other

Barrel Babies 1

I open the last pack of sardines gently, and the juice leaks out the sides. I place three sardines on each plate, coupled with five crackers and pickled cucumber on the side. Reaching into the fridge, I pull out a pitcher of Pinehill black currant juice. It is half way gone and will not be enough for the three of us, so I pour it into a pitcher and add cups of tap water to it. There is no foil so I cover one of the plates with a spare plate and place it in the fridge for my brother to eat after work. I take my plate and my mother's out to the living room where she is reclining back in the chair, fiddling with the four jumbo plaits in her hair, and place it in front of her.

“Dinner mommy.”

She sits up and moves the scaly fish around her plate. I sit across from her and watch her play with her food.

“Mommy, dis is the last of de crackers and fish. There's nothin leff to eat. We need to buy groceries.”

She looks up at me slowly, smacking loudly as she chews her food.

“The barrel is coming. Just wait.”

“But mom-”

“Denisha, hush you mouth. The barrel is coming.”

Disclaimer 1

There have never been men in these stories.

Throughout 16 years of storytelling over shouts of the Philips TV, snaps of plastic combs in Afro hair, and clangs of dishes being thrown on dinner tables, men were never mentioned.

When the adults thought all the children were already counting sheep, my ears searched for the whispers of gossip and sometimes I would find them:

The man that left Grandma Lu with 8 children and syphilis

The grandfather that stayed in England with his new family, leaving his wife and two children in Barbados

The uncle that got deported from America for petty crime

The men hide under blankets of shame and guilt. Aunties whisper their names; none of them are worth a mutter.

I stopped caring where the men were.

Grandma Hope carried the family on her broad, fleshy shoulders with a smile so wide that the gold teeth in the back of her mouth peeked out.

Great Grandma Lu walked 50 miles every morning from Eagle Hall to Oistins with a 40 pound wagon selling fertilizer until she had enough money to buy the family a home.

My mom sent two barrels twice a year: one for the family and one for the community.

My aunts organized every new family member's baby shower, baptism, and birthday.

The men do not belong in these stories.

In Between-ness

There is something jilting about belonging and not belonging.

Your body plays tug-of-war between two homes, both wanting to be victorious.

You dream of a place you have never been

They give you an ultimatum and beg you to choose.

Calling Cards

Mom used to take the spare change from her thin paycheck and stop at the Deli in Flatbush. 5 dollar Cherry, 2 dollar Boss. Your favorite was the 5 dollar Banana one. On days when it worked well, you spend 120 minutes nourishing your body with the gossip about neighbors and calls to your mother.

On the bad days, you sucked your teeth and yelled at the operator when they robbed your time. I'd always be scared when I'd hear you yelling at the phone, accent thicker than mango skin.

Sometimes, I walk to the deli and imagine myself sliding a 5 dollar bill across the counter, picking out a Banana calling card, pushing numbers into my cell phone, holding my breath as it rings, and exhaling at the warmth of your voice on the other end.

Alleys

Bosvigo gap had two alleys. One at the beginning nestled between two houses with rusted galvanized sheets acting as a fence between them. The alley was no bigger than three feet wide. Lemon trees blocked the sun from beating down on the cramped path. Rocks, rotten lemons, and litter made up the alley floor. The neighbor's chickens ruffled their feathers as people passed through. If you passed by in the evening, you could hear men yelling as they watched the cocks violently peck at each other, each wanting a win.

The second alley was in the middle of the gap. This alley had no lemon trees. It was wide enough for two people to pass through comfortably. At the end of the alley, there was a shop owned by an older man. He sold rum and beer to the men who played Dominos and pool in his shop. Occasionally, kids ran in for blue mints and cheesy snacks.

Both alleys led to Kings Gap.

I spent my summers running through these alleys; sometimes chasing friends, sometimes chasing the green lizards that scampered across the walls of the chattel houses. I used to think the lizards liked playing with me. They stopped to make sure I was still running after them, still chasing a desire to know what it would be like to hold one in my hands. Would it be slimy? Would it jump out of my hands? Bite me? I never caught one.

I was ordered to never go through the alleys at night. "It's not safe for a young girl." My mom said sternly. I nodded. But all my friends lived in Kings Gap, and at night was the best time to play all of our favorite games. Tag, Hide and go seek, Red Light, Green light. My favorite was

Tag. My long limbs spread like tree branches in the wind when I ran. The cool wind blew in the air like the roar of an airplane during takeoff. I thought of Usain Bolt when I ran, as if each step forward made them see me as more Caribbean.

One night, hide and go seek tag was our game of choice. Bosvigo Gap was my part time home but I knew every good hiding spot like I knew the birthmarks on my skin. We gathered around in a circle and decided that Keon would be it.

“I starting now! Go hide! 20...19...18...”

My slippers slapped against the concrete as I took off running, heading for the alley. I ran through, my feet kicking up dust clouds of gravel behind me. The cocks roared on the other side of the tall galvanized and men roared. Over the celebratory yells of the men, my foot twisted and slipped on the fallen lemons that rotted on the floor.

The entire right side of my body slid against the floor of the alley. Rotten lemons squirted against my skin and rocks impaled my ribs. My floral dress flew up with the dust and litter, exposing my shorts underneath. At first, nothing hurt. I stayed on the floor, rolling onto my back and stared up at the leaves of the lemon trees, watching the sky peep through.

Then, everything hurt. My upper thigh, my hip bone, rib cage, and shoulder burned. The wind blew a bitter breeze and my skin burned more. I heard a shriek in the next gap. Keon was starting to find people. I got up slowly, the rocks detached from my skin, tumbling down my body onto the floor. I dusted off my dress and pulled dried up leaves out of my hair. My knee pulsated and in the streaks of moonlight, I could see a scrape on the cap of my knee. Its redness glowed through the dirt on my skin.

“But wait doe,” Keon exclaimed as he ran up beside me, his sister Denisha following. I jumped at their sudden approach and rested my back against the cold galvanized sheets. Soreness gripped my muscles.

“Wa happen to you!” Denisha asked softly. I pointed to the scrape on my knee and they looked down, then smiled at each other.

“Run it under ah pipe and you will be alright.” Keon said, reaching out for my hand. We started walking down the alley.

“You’s e a real Bajan now, Yankee.” Denisha chuckled. I cringed at the nickname.

“What do you mean?”

Keon and Denisha shared a smile again, and stopped just before the exit of the alley. An adjacent street lamp illuminated the exit. Keon lifted up his cargo shorts slightly, exposing his ashy joints. Denisha did the same with her yellow dress, bringing the excess fabric right above the top of her knee.

In the light, on both their knees were thin faded scars, identical to mine.

Privilege

The funny thing about privilege is that it shifts. It can exist in one space, and be completely non-existent in others. Or, one aspect of your identity can make you privileged in a space, while that same aspect may be the thing that inferiorizes you in another space.

Both New York and Barbados are my home. They're both my identity. When I didn't know better, I used to identify myself as a Bajan. I lived with my Bajan grandmother in New York, could name nine out of the eleven parishes, could understand the dialect, and spent three months there every year. My family reunions were filled with platters of flying fish, Banks beer, and domino games.

But when I actually moved to Barbados, I was rediscovering the island I have always known as home. I was relearning the land, people, history, and my own identity in the process. There was a level of poverty I had a glimpse of but my own privilege blinded me to the true extent of poverty that a lot of the children my age were facing. They would joke that I was the rich American girl, and I would always take this as a hyperbole because in my own country, I wasn't rich. I was barely even considered American.

In America, I was poor. I didn't have privilege. But as an American in Barbados, my privilege showed itself even when I didn't want it to. I'd hear my peers joke about Barbados Light and Power cutting off their lights or having to walk home because they didn't have 1.50 for bus fare. 1.50 BDS is 0.75 cents in America. It was unfathomable to me that someone didn't even have 75 cents to their name.

12 Bosvigo Gap

Today, Ashleigh wears wooden sandals.

She struts through the gap, clicking the bulky heels against the gritty pavement. Her toes escape the sides of the brick-shaped shoes. The neighbors watch from their verandas, sucking their teeth but Ashleigh keeps walking. From the top of the gap, to the bottom. Until her supermodel strut turns into a slight limp.

Yesterday, she wore faded rubber pink and white slippers. The straps popped out each time she walked. She popped the rubber strap back into the small hole in the slipper.

But Ashleigh doesn't mind. She's used to holes and brokenness. Her brown chattel house with broken glass panels for doors is two houses down from mine. African snails play in the small garden filled with weeds. She grins when I come over and gestures for me to sit on the iron couch with ripped foam cushions. We watch Barbie movies and she tells me that she prays God gives her blue eyes with long blonde hair. I look at her shiny cocoa skin and matted black hair, forced into two puffs, and pity her.

Ashleigh's mother offers me sugar water with cheese on bread when I come over. I always say yes, because saying No is rude Grandma Lu says. She mumbles to herself as she cuts slices of cheese, stopping to itch the same spot on her until the skin breaks open once again. She

brings the sugar water and forgets the cheese on bread in the kitchen. Ashleigh's smile never falls. She grabs the food and asks me if there's anything else I need.

"I does feel for that girl," Grandma Lu sits on the veranda as Ashleigh continues her strut in her brand new shoes. "She mudda elevator don't go to de top floor, and neither does hers." Some Fridays, the chattel house is dark. Grandma Lu makes me bring over candles and matches on these days.

"That good for nothing father of Ashleigh's ain't pay the light bill again." Lu explains.

I've never seen Ashleigh's father, only a tall shadow once a month. Through the broken windows, I can see her bringing him plates of food, one after the other. Ashleigh and her mother pouring cups of Pinehill juice. When he cleans his plate, Ashleigh knows it's time to come over to my house. Her father ushers his ex-wife into the bedroom, stepping over the widening hole in the floor. He takes, and takes, until a smile is born from Ashleigh's mother's cries. He leaves the check on the pillow beside her.

Ashleigh's mom takes the check and buys her daughter the shiniest, bulkiest, loudest wooden sandals.

Welcome Home

Mi madre folded my clothes, until they were tiny colorful squares surgically placed. Her milky hands packed mini boxes of cereal, a can of sweet milk, and extra boxes of toothpaste. “Do I have to go?” I whispered. She shot me a silencing look and I knew better than to ask the same question again.

I sat still as she brushed my silky hair into two ponytails with pink bobos. I knew better than to whine when she snapped the bobo against my forehead. I watched her lay out my outfit for the airport: a pink Guess shirt with studded diamonds, Levi jean pants, frilly socks, and my new pair of air jordan 11’s. I ate breakfast before getting dressed. I knew she’d yell “Dios Mio!” if I stained the brand new clothes.

I waited by the door, hello kitty backpack on my back, holding the handle of the suitcase, watching her run through our small apartment. The city was waking up slowly in the background: the distant screech of sirens, garbage trucks churning, kids on their way to school. And mi madre, scattering files, searching for more things to stuff in my suitcase, muttering “diablo!” under her breath. I said nothing. I knew she’d throw the first thing she saw at me if I told her it was time to go.

We took the A train to JFK. The five dollars in train fare was more affordable than a 30 dollar taxi. I took the corner seat by the window and watched the train pull into the stations, people getting on and off in constant motion. “Bendito, wake up. Let’s go.” I could still feel the sleep weighing on my eyelids but I jumped up anyway. Mama glided through the subway like she was on ice skates. She was only 5’4 but the power in each of her footsteps added an inch to her height. Her long, wavy black hair followed behind her. Her right hand, decorated with short

acrylics, held my own softly, like she knew she was about to let me go. Her left hand dragged the 50 pound pink suitcase with a slight strain towards the terminal. I quickly rubbed fleshy, flushed cheeks. Even my body knew that we were almost there.

My suitcase weighed 56 pounds. The warm toffee complexion of mi madre turned a slight red when the crabby desk attendant refused to let it slide. “Tonto del culo,” mi madre exclaimed as she threw the bag to the ground and unzipped it. And there we were again. Back on the 12th floor of Jameson Projects, apt 12E, packing and unpacking. Mi madre scrambled through the suitcase, her bracelets violently banging against each other as she searched for the unwelcomed 6 pounds. 1 less can of sweet milk for Tia Maria, 2 less boxes of toothpaste for mi abuela. Mi madre pulled each item out with hesitation, like she knew there would be an argument about it later.

The airport lady came shortly after Mama removed the extra 6 pounds. “Hello Katerina, I’m going to be your friend today and help you through the airport, okay?” Those lines weren’t new to me, but I hated them more each time I heard them. I didn’t get why mama didn’t just come with me to Mexico. I’d hear her singing lullabies in Spanish while she cleaned, make flan when she had a hard day, and bachata at whatever family function would allow. “Come on bendito, it’s time” mi mama said. I didn’t want to tell her I knew it was time from the moment she pulled the suitcase out from the back of the closet.

Mama started whispering prayers in my ear. Her Spanish tongue showered me with the words of a God I’d never met. She nodded to the airport lady and ushered me away. We started walking. Away from the crabby airport lady, my pink suitcase, and Mama. I could still feel her eyes, branding my neck with their intensity.

Do planes make detours? I kept waiting for the plane to turn back around. I was too far away from New York; I could no longer feel Mama's eyes burrowing into the nape of my neck. I couldn't hear her prayers in my ears like lullabies. I am floating above the ocean, somewhere between loud distant relatives in Mexico and the smell of Mama's Arroz con pollo in New York. I am stuck in between.

The plane thrust forward like mi abuela was at the nose of it, coaxing it, telling it to bring me closer and closer to the warm sun and dusty roads. I can never picture mi abuela's face; my mind forms a blurry image of a small old woman with warm, wrinkly skin, jagged hands, and speckled skin. I can always remember her smell. Something almost like nutmeg. Her fat tongue spits English words out like they are shards of glass; foreign objects. Her Spanish tongue is graceful and feels like home, like the churro lady at the 45th Street station off the R line. And Manny and Willy who let me shoot the basketball when I pass by them in Sunset Park.

Mexico feels like a holiday. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, it doesn't matter which one. I know it's coming every year but it still slips my mind until it's only a few weeks away. Then it comes, then goes shortly after, allowing me to forget about it again for another year. Everything about Mexico is fleeting. Mi abuelas wet kisses escape my cheeks by the time I board the plane. My dark tan lasts a week in the frigid cold of the city. The remnants of my visit exist only in the

few Spanish words that moved into my brain and the stain on my tongue from mangoes with hot sauce, lime, and pepper.

I've asked Mama to come with me to Mexico every time since I was 5. "No Kitty Kat, I have to work. I need you to help me Bendito, please." I could never argue with her pleas. They were full of sorrow with a hint of longing. I blamed Abuela for being so far away. Sometimes, Mama would be on the phone in the living room telling Abuela to come to America. I could never hear Abuela's responses but it was clear from Mama's sighs that she was not coming. I used to call out for Mama after I heard her put the phone back on the hook. I would tell her I couldn't fall asleep just so she would come and cuddle me. After a few times, I no longer had to call out; she just came.

I woke up to the rumble of the plane as it hit the runway and the sound of hands clapping and cheering. The flight attendant mumbled some words over the loudspeaker in Spanish, and then in English, "Welcome to Mexico!" I waited in my seat for my assistant. A dark skinned woman with a short bob skipped up the aisle with a big smile on her face. Her navy blue uniform was ironed, each pleat of her skirt holding its crisp form as she maneuvered through the cramped walkway. In the corner of her smile, she was missing a tooth. With a thick accent, she introduced herself as Sophia and reached out for my hand as we walked out the plane.

The blast of humidity made my silky hair start sticking to my face. Two men handed out small cups of horchata to the white tourists. The customs line already started to slither around the white banisters. Sophia started filling out the form quickly. She asked me question after question.

"How old are you?"

“Eleven.”

“Who are you staying with here?”

“My grandma...She lives here.” I said shyly, fidgeting with my hair.

“Where is your abuela’s house?”

“Umm...I don’t know what it’s called.” I admitted, hesitantly. Sophia stopped writing and looked up at me. I looked away.

“Passport?” She asked, holding out the palm of her hand.

I reached in my backpack and handed her my green passport. She looked at it and ruffled her thick eyebrows.

“You’re Mexican?”

“I...” I whispered, trailing off. Sophia raised the arch of her bushy eyebrows.

I nodded silently, but I wanted to tell her that I didn’t know. My passport and birth certificate said I was. Abeula always tells me the story of how I was born.

“Your mama had been waiting for you for a long time. You were supposed to come on the 19th so we waited, but you didn’t. The next day, we waited again. I made your mama walk around the whole village to help you come, but you didn’t. On the 23rd, you were finally ready. Your mama was sleeping on the green couch in the living room when I heard her scream. I stopped peeling the corn and ran out the door to tell the other women in the village. Together, we put your mama in the bathtub and not too long after you came. But you were quiet so we worried! But when I gave you a little pinch on your fat cheeks, you let out the biggest of cries!”

She’d tell me this story, her hands flying through the air as she gestured, with a glimmer in her eyes, like she wanted me to remember it with her. But I remembered nothing. I didn’t dare tell her that the first memory I have is running through the sprinklers in Brooklyn Bridge Park

with my kindergarten class during the start of the summer. I know Abuela is disappointed that I know little of Mexico. The other kids from the village play hand games that I've never learned. In the shop, I admit that I hate the taste of Vero Mango and ask for a blow pop instead. I forget to thank Dios y Jesus for my food before I eat. The village calls me Americana as a greeting when they see me. Abuela watches and frowns, the wrinkles in her face deepening as she does.

Sophia ruffled through the pages in the passport, bringing me back to the humid airport.

“Are you Mexican too?” I wondered. Sophia smiled lightly, showing no teeth this time and continued filling out the form.

We waited for my bag at the long carousel. “Tell me as soon as you see your bag, we have to be careful of ladrones”. I nodded and waited for my pink suitcase to make her debut through the frayed black curtains of the carousel. I knew abuela would be waiting outside already. She was always an hour early for any place she had to be. Sophia and I walked down to the taxi stands and when the breeze blew, I could smell it: nutmeg.

Abuela's house never changed. The forest green clapboard exterior was now a dull swamp green, run down by the combination of dust and debris. One of the front steps had fallen in and the screen door hung off the hinge, banging against the house each time the wind blew.

On the inside was the same green couch where Mama's water broke and the white-turned-gray bathtub I was born in. The kitchen had bright yellow cupboards with matching yellow floral curtains in the windows. The newest thing in the house was the 50 inch flat screen. Mama left me with lunchables and microwavable dinners so she could do enough overtime to buy it for Abuela.

Abuela invited the whole family for dinner so they could come see me. The house was filled with Tios and Tias whose names I could never remember. They gave me bear hugs and smudged bright lipstick on my cheeks when they kissed me. These strangers knew me so intimately that it overwhelmed me. Over plates of arroz, machaca, and tostadas, they told me stories of me as a baby: me sucking on limes while I was teething, breaking my cousins toys, and always playing hide and seek from Abuela.

They told stories to me about Mama when she was young too. My Tias gestured for me to sit on the couch with the ladies and spoke Spanish slowly so I could understand. There were funny stories about her sneaking out at night and getting caught by Abuela, who'd have a belt in her hand, waiting.

"¿Te quedó claro?" One of my Tias stopped to ask.

"Si si." I lied.

We ate, and ate. My Tios washed everything down with big gulps of Coronas. My Tias told each other gossip while serving more plates of food to my cousins and me. I threw scraps of food at Rosco, Abuela's dog. My primo drummed lightly on the tabletop. Moths flew around the lightbulb of the small pink lamp. The cool air of the night felt like the first Fall breeze in New York but it was no match for the warmth of the room. I lost myself in the bellowing laughter, the rice, the hugs and wet kisses. And for a moment, Mexico finally felt like home.

She would be leaving work right now, rushing out the door to catch the 6:17 F train straight home. She'll be sitting in the window seat, playing candy crush for all six of the stops. She'll throw her purse over her shoulder, wincing slightly as she does it. She'll grab her keys out of her pocket and hold them in her hands, making sure one key was wedged in between her knuckles as she walked through the streets of Sunset Park, making her way into our large project complex. She'll enter the building and shake her head at the empty liquor bottles and McDonald's bags on the floor of the lobby. She'll pause for a second at the base of the stairs, contemplating taking the healthier option, before heading for the elevator that always smelled of old piss. At the base of our door, she'll wipe her feet on the square coir doormat that reads "Welcome Home" and look both ways before opening the door and shutting it behind her quickly. She'll throw her purse down on the living room couch and wash her hands in the kitchen sink before grabbing a Budweiser from the fridge. Without me to cook for, she'll probably order out. Chinese. Orange chicken with pork fried rice and broccoli. She'll flip through all the channels, but pick the same show as usual: The Bachelorette. She'll struggle to finish the meal and end up putting the rest in the fridge for tomorrow. She'll prepare herself for her shower. Wrapping her long hair up in a bun and covering it with her cheetah print showercap. Without me needing to go next, she'll take her time. Singing Selena songs to herself. Shampooing her hair. Shaving her legs. She'll get out when she notices the wrinkled state of her fingers. She'll kneel at the base of my bed and pray to Dios for me even if I'm not there. She'll do the same at her bed, this time full of sorrow. Shamefully whispering like Dios doesn't already know her sins. She'll lay in bed and try to dream of Mexico.

If I'm not there, who is there to kiss Mama goodnight?

We went to the beach today. Abuela woke me and mi prima Bianca up just as the sun started to erase the night. We groaned and remained in bed. Abuela left, returning with a cup of water. We jumped up at the cold of the water on our faces.

“Get ready, ahora”

So we got dressed for the beach. Packing our pails and cheap plastic shovels. Abuela pulled fruits out the cupboards: mangoes, guinepas, sapote. She filled the bags with small towels, water bottles, extra underwear, and rushed us out through the wooden door.

The walk to the beach was long. Bianca and I ran ahead of Abuela, making a game out of jumping over the cracks in the roads. We got bored quickly. Abuela hummed to herself and ignored our constant questioning, “Are we close? Are we near?”

The sun was almost settled into the sky by the time we arrived at the beach. Little things seemed to all be in slight motion. Fishermen’s lines threading through the water. Birds ruffled their feathers in the trees. Sand blowing into crab holes.

There were no other children on the beach. Most families came in the afternoon when the sun was at its peak.

“Abuela, why are we here so early?”

“The early sea bath is a healing one” She responded, placing her bags down on the sand slowly. She took an empty bottle out of her bag and walked towards the water. Her age showed in every step forward she took. Her back arched lightly. When she got to the line where the water meets the sand, she stopped. I looked at Bianca.

“She does this everytime,” Bianca replied in Spanish. I looked back at Abuela, who was now scooping sea water into the plastic bottle. The sun was right behind her, forcing my eyes to squint. She finally looked back at us and said,

“Vayan a jugar.” We listened. Our dresses hit the sand and we ran into the water, squealing as its coldness touched our skin.

Mama should be here. She needs this more than me.

Bianca was spending the weekend at her papa’s house, to Abuela’s dismay.

“Es un borracho.” Abuela mumbled under her breath as Bianca left the house with her papa. I knew this already. Sometimes when the family was over for dinner, Tio Miguel would always come late but full of energy. He’d compliment the women of the house and roughhouse with the men. He would pat my head, hard and ask me how Mama was. Abuela would make him eat outside because he always smelled like cheap beer.

But Bianca loved him.

“Él es mi papa.” She responded, when I asked her why she wasn’t going to be with us this weekend. Bianca didn’t smile often. She hated that her front tooth was crooked, the chubbiness of her body, and the dark complexion of her skin. But that day, she didn’t stop smiling. Abuela and I helped her pack some of her clothes and snacks for her. She combed through her short hair and put her purple headband on to match with the rest of her outfit. She waited on the couch for him, watching the clock, waiting for it to hit one.

Tio Miguel showed up at 1:47.

“¡Buenos Días!” He came in with a smile just as big as Bianca’s. The first thing I noticed was the tattoos on his arm. His entire arm was covered in thick black ink. Skulls, a snake, Roman numerals, a heart. He was only 32 but he had deep wrinkle lines in his forehead that made him look as though he was always angry. His thick mustache covered the top of his lip. He looked nothing like Bianca but they shared the same mood swings, laugh, and even the same clumsy walk.

Abuela stared at him sternly but didn’t say anything. She handed Bianca the lunch she prepared for her and gave her a kiss on her forehead.

“Que Dios lo proteja.”

I was never one to pray, but I whispered, “Amèn.”

Bianca showed up at Abuela’s house at 3 a.m, escorted by two policemen who looked like they were bored with their jobs. They explained to Abuela that Bianca was found inside of a park in town. Abuela’s face showed no expression. She thanked the officers for bringing Bianca home and quickly shut the door. The motor of the police car rumbled loudly through the sleeping village.

Bianca sat on the living room couch and said nothing at first. She had been crying. Her eyes looked puffy and droplets of water were still drying on her t-shirt. Her pink sneakers were covered in dirt. She sulked into the couch, sucking on her thumb.

“Dime Bianca.” Abuela commanded.

Bianca told her everything. She spoke in Spanish, and fast. Faster than I could ever keep up.

Abuela nodded along, pausing to ask Bianca clarifying questions in between. I understood little.

When Bianca was done, Abuela sat and hugged her. They sat together in silence. In their own bubble that I was not invited into. I left them there to comfort each other, in a way that I just couldn't.

From the little Spanish I could understand, I was able to imagine what happened. Tio Miguel spent the day in town with Bianca. They ate a bunch of food, watched street performers, and even shopped a little. Bianca got tired so they started to leave the town but Tio saw a bar. It was full of people and the music could be heard from outside. Tio walked Bianca to a nearby park and told her to sit on the bench and wait for him, he would be right back. Bianca hesitated and started to protest but Tio Miguel was already gone. So she waited on the park bench as the night grew darker. She fought off sleep by counting the stars in the sky, the number of homeless people that entered the park, and the birds that walked across the ground. She had no concept of time, but knew it was late when the town got quiet. She wanted to walk to the bar that she knew her papa was at, but she couldn't remember where it was. She got off the bench and started walking slowly towards a street lamp that looked vaguely familiar. She stopped. Did they take a right and then another left? Was it down the street and to the left? She could not remember. So she sat there. Even though the homeless man next to her was undressing her with his eyes. She sat, despite the occasional sound of gunshots in the far distance. She only cried when she remembered the story of Lisa, who went into town with her mother and let go of her mother's hand because she wanted to pet a cat. Lisa's mother turned around just in time to see her daughter's shoe fall off as she was thrown into the back of a van. Bianca stopped waiting for her dad, and started waiting for the men in masks to throw her into the van too.

The neighbors keep asking why the police were at Abuela's house the other night. Abuela jokes and says in Spanish, "They needed something to do!" When we're inside, she says,

"Vecinos Metiches"

Nosy neighbors.

Abuela's hands cramp often. I see it happen while she cooks. She cuts gently into onion but only gets halfway through before she stops, winces as she wiggles her slightly swollen fingers around.

I ask her if I can help her cook now. I peel the corn, cut the carrots, and stir the soup. Abuela hands me vegetables and meats. I cut it all up however she wants it.

"Cuidado," Abuela cautions as she watches me use the knife.

"Si Abuela." I reassure her, slowing down. She shows me how to bend my fingers into my palm so I don't cut myself. We sing along to Selena songs on the radio. She teaches me how to make all my favorites: empanadas, tostadas, and arroz con pollo. She laughs when I put too much salt in the arroz. She scolds me when I sneak and grab meat out of the pot to eat.

Together, we set the table. She hands me the plates, cups, silverware, and napkins. I put on oven mittens and bring the pots to the table. Bianca joins us as soon as the food comes out.

"Gracias Katerina." Abuela says, giving my arm a slight squeeze.

I spoke to Mama today. She asked me if I was ready to come home. For the first time, I didn't know the answer.

II. Growing Pains

Disclaimer 2:

These memories exist in the deepest crevices of my brain. They are blurred, scattered, broken, and torn. Gaps form like deep canyons, memories slipping through, until little remains.

I mourn the loss of my childhood: Every game of tag, the jiggle of my grandmother's laugh, and

I bandaged these stories with fiction to repair everything that has been forgotten.

Wooddove

My mom used to say that if an animal stuck with you for long enough, it was your ancestors checking in on you. A wood dove flew into the veranda a week after my great grandma Lu died. It took a seat on the railing, tilted its head, and stared at me. I swatted at it and it flew away. Through the thickness of Lu's accent, it was never a wood dove, but rather a wooddove.

Lu used to always ask me, "You'se a wooddove?" She said that wooddoves were the know-it-alls of all the birds.

"Dem does feel that they wiser than all the other birds..."

She said to me one night, as I was on my way out the door. She sat at the round dining table in the living room, kneading dough into balls. She was making dumplings. The ceiling fan rotated vigorously, its blades darkening her face with its shadows. The channel 8 news jingle played, announcing that it was 8:00.

"But dem is stupidest birds out of all dem birds."

She continued weaving the dough through her finger tips, making yeast coated spiderwebs. On the other side of the kitchen island, the lid of the pot rumbled. The soup was boiling. Lu wiggled her jaw back and forth, prompting her dentures to move in a similar motion. I leaned against the wooden door, alleviating the pressure from my feet.

"You goin' up de road to see that boy, wooddove?" The question buzzed in the air like a mosquito; I knew better than to trouble it or it would bite. The heat of my hands forced sweat out of my palms. The air was sticky, binding the sweat to my body. The question took a deep inhale,

sucking all the oxygen out of the house and leaving me with none. Grandma Lu slammed another ball of dough down on the table. On the news there was a car crash in Black Rock.

The boy in question was Keon, a lean, redskin boy that lived in the next gap. He was 14, making him only one year older than me but he knew so much more than I did. We had been hanging out every day that summer. One day, he taught me how to hunt the butterflies that lived in the pasture in my gap.

“Yuh does have to wait till them land...” He pointed at a small white butterfly resting on one of the tall blades of grass. He gestured for me to wait, simultaneously slipping his Tommy Hilfiger slippers off of his feet. In one motion, he flicked his wrist and slapped his slipper against the grass blade with little force.

“...Yuh don’ wanna kill it, just cripple it.” He whispered. Slowly he lifted up his slipper and dropped it onto the ground of the pasture, before wiggling his toes back inside. The butterfly lay on the blade of the grass, slowly flapping its wings against each other. Keon reached out to scoop its small frame into the palm of his hands but it started to fly away, before dropping to the ground. He bent over and retrieved it.

“Here, hold it.” I looked up at him. His tall frame broke the Sun’s rays into pieces, casting a cooling shadow over me. He placed his hands next to mine and poured the insect into my palm. It rustled slightly in protest but failed to move. Its thin legs blended in with the brown lines of my hand.

“I’ve never been able to hold one before.” I said so softly that it came out like a whisper. Keon heard me and responded by pressing his slightly chapped lips against mine, colliding, his

full of enthusiasm. His forehead pressed against mine and I felt the wetness of his perspiration mix with mine.

“Cawblen! Das how American girls do it?” Keon exclaimed after I pulled away. I laughed, a deep laugh that vibrated against the walls of my stomach. The butterfly stirred in my palm. I walked over and placed it under the breadfruit tree.

“Let’s do it again.” I said, smiling at Keon, who was already removing his slipper.

Lu stood up slowly. The wooden chair scraped loudly against the floor. With the silver bowl full of dumplings in her hand, she walked over to the pot to turn the blue flames down. She lifted the pot lid, releasing the scent of curry chicken through the house. She looked at me, still standing at the door.

“You think iz a johnny? Mrs. Cox from down de road did tell me she did see you and he in de next gap doing foolishness.” She paused, waiting for a reaction. I gave her none. I thought of the Greek statues in museums, and how they seem as though they were in action and someone just pressed pause. That’s how I felt; like a statue that someone had forced still.

Discipline

Grandma Lu really hated kids.

She would wake up early every morning, 8 am and just start cleaning. 93 years old, rolling around in her walker wearing those long floral nightgowns from the QVC catalog.

She had this idea that we were always tracking in dirt. She'd run us out the house anyways and tell us not to come back until the sun was down. If we dared to come back inside for even a glass of water after playing in the hot sun, she would yell and chase us out with the whip.

The whip came from that specific tree: long, super thin, tree branch because when it would swing, it would sting. It covered my flesh in long welts.

Once she got mad that me and Melanie were sitting on the couch, so she chased us and we ran in the bedroom, like it was a game. But the joke was on us. Grandma sat down in her walker outside the door, waiting for us to come back out. I

We were trapped there for hours. Lu just sat there waiting, yelling, "Come out nuh!" as she adjusted the sofa cushions.

Melanie had to pee. We devised a plan that seemed foolproof at the time. We would run out the room, jump off the sofa cushions and run out the second door of the house. Looking back, I realize that we had planned to commit all three of the sins in Lu's house: running in the house, jumping on the sofa (we weren't even allowed to sit on it), and opening the second door in the house. Nevertheless, we were prepared to use our youthful speed to our advantage.

We did not succeed. Lu turned around just in time and swung the switch back and forth, managing to hit us both as we ran out. The lash of the whip pierced our skin, forming a welt that expanded until it bled.

Rice Grains (Bruno)

Ma laid the orange wet rag on the ground near the wall in our kitchen. She shuffled through, searching through her grocery bags until she found a small sack of rice. She walked over to the rag with a slight limp, bent over and spread the grains on the rag. She pointed to the spot on the floor.

“Kneel.”

I did as I was told and wished for bad things to happen to Mr. Patterson in my head. Earlier that day when Ma picked me up from school, he stopped us as we were leaving. “You know, Bruno is the only one in the class that still doesn’t know his multiplication tables.” He looked at me sympathetically, like he was already thinking of what IEP class to ship me to. Ma turned to me, and I looked away, feeling her eyes burrowing into the back of my skull.

“Thank you for telling me, he’ll know them by Monday.”

Mr. Patterson chuckled.

I winced as the hard grains penetrated my kneecaps like tiny blades. She turned around and glared at me,

“Rice was all I had when I came to this country,” Ma mumbled, as she stuffed groceries aggressively into our wooden cabinets.

Cans of Tomato paste. Two packs of Gandules. Tortilla shells. Adobo.

“It fed us every day, until your father and I could afford other food.” She continued, slamming a box of sazon onto the counter.

“And here you are running! Running from these same little grains! Dios mio!”

I froze, even as the grains continued to poke into the thin skin over my knee. The grains nudged their way into the open spaces between my joints like a thick novel on a crowded bookshelf. The soreness from kneeling forced my thigh muscles to tighten. She grabbed a piece of paper and taped it to the wall in front of me. It was the times table.

“Learn it now!”

My eyes scan over the numbers.

12 times 3 equals 36.

9 times 6 equals 54

8 times 7 equ-

The rice felt as hard as wooden splinters gliding under the surface of my skin. I keep going.

9 times 2 equals 18

6 times 5 equals 30

The pain traveled down to my shins, paralyzing them. I wait for my body to collapse into tiny grains of white rice. My knees give in first, sending hot shooting pains to my ankle, until I feel the tips of my toes cripple.

I wonder if Ma will still cook me tonight for dinner if I turn into a pile of long grain enriched white.

I keep going, until there is no part of the times table that I haven't yet been acquainted with. Until I can say it in both English and my mother tongue.

“Levantate.”

But I cannot move. Ma sucks her teeth and yanks me up from the ground by my armpit, sending the rice scattering to the floor. On the floor, my knees leave behind a deep imprint on the orange rag.

Bending down slowly, she starts to pluck the stubborn grains that refuse to leave my skin. She glances up at me and sees the streams escaping my eyelids. She sighs.

“Mijo, stop crying. You think this is bad?” She said, gathering the rice grains from the floor.

“Your Abuela, that bruja was evil to me...I would come home, just 5...no, maybe 10 minutes late at most. It was my fault for thinking I was grown and could come home late. Walking in with a big smile on my face, giving her a hug and a kiss...Asking her about her day,” She paused.

“And she would kiss me back, and tell me about the viejas in the market that stole all her customers. I would even tell her, ‘It’s okay mama, you will sell more fruits next time.’ before I went to my room.” She pauses, resting her back against the kitchen counter. She stared far out to a place I’ve never been before.

“I loved to take showers as a kid. Abuela knew this too. One time when I came home late, she waited for me to get out of the shower. I opened the bathroom door and *BAM!* The hard leather of the belt slapped against my wet, naked skin. Then another hit, then another...By the time she was finished, I was hiding in the corner between the bathtub and the wall, red welts on my skin like tiger stripes.” Ma pauses, and for a moment I wonder if I will finally see her cry.

Instead, she releases a series of maniacal laughs, slamming her hand on the counter to match the rhythmic beat of her cackles.

I rub my knees, wondering if there are rice grains still stuck in me.

Barrel Babies 2

Flatbush had always been a boiling pot of accents, good food, and immigrants. I just didn't realize before. My apartment building, all six floors, had at least three Caribbean families living there. My next door neighbors, Ms. Patt and her daughter Ester were Bajan like us. Ms. Patt and my grandma were best friends. I'm not sure if they had always been friends since Barbados or only met each other when they moved in next to each other, but as long as I have remembered, Ms. Patt was in our lives. When my grandma would go down to Barbados, Ms. Pat would ask her to bring down groceries, supplies, or whatever else her family needed at the time. My grandma would do so without hesitation, filling one of her four suitcases with things the community needed.

My favorite thing to pack was the barrel. My grandma would buy the big brown ones that they would sell at the 99 cent store. My mom would drag it into my grandma's room, all the way in the back in the apartment and plant it on top of the shaggy red carpet in the corner of the room. As soon as I saw the barrel I knew we would be going to BJ's. BJ's is a wholesale supermarket in Brooklyn. We'd go and spend hundreds of dollars when it was barrel time. Laundry detergent, paper towels, tissues, carnation milk, oatmeal, rice cakes. We would buy everything in bulk and I'd help grandma bring the groceries into the back of the access-a-ride.

My job didn't stop there. We'd bring all the bags into her room and start packing the barrel. I was always eager to just get it done so I'd start throwing bags of rice and can milks into the bottom of the barrel one by one. My grandma would scold me. She explained there was a right way to do it. My mom would lift me up and they would put me inside the barrel. I wasn't

even tall enough at the time to reach the rim of the barrel, but something about it felt comforting. The brown cardboard surrounded me with a draft of cool, crisp air as I stood in the darkness, waiting. Then I would see my mother's hands reaching into the barrel, handing me the first can of carnation milk. She told me, "Pack it in a circle. Line each can against the wall of the barrel until it fills up the bottom. Step up, and do the next row."

And that was my job. Packing the barrel with a nerve wracking intensity for an 11 year old. But I'd love it. Partly because I knew that they would also ship the barrel so it would come right in the middle of the summer when we'd be in Barbados to receive it, but also because I knew I was doing a good thing. About half of the goods went to my family, but the other half went to the neighbors in our gap and their families, and close family friends. I packed several barrels as a child and each time we gave it to our people.

We're expected to always come bearing gifts. I felt the weight of this expectation from young but never understood it. I knew we weren't rich. We weren't even middle class, but I could understand that we had more than they did. This was the "immigrant tax". We were fortunate enough to make it out and better our lives, therefore we must help those who couldn't.

Peanut butter (Ashna)

Every day for lunch, I ate the same thing.

Hilsa curry.

Mama always used Sunday for cleaning the entire two bedroom apartment and filling the big Dutch pot with food that would last me and my sisters the week. We would help her, mainly because we didn't have any American friends to play jump rope and hopscotch outside with. So we sat at the small wooden table in the living room and prepped vegetables for our lunch for the week.

The whole process took 2 hours. During eid, Mama could make 10 separate dishes to feed 15 people in less than four hours. But on Sundays, when it was just Baba, Mira, Numi, and me, she took her time. She pulled out spices that Baba brought back from Bangladesh out of the wooden rack on the counter as she added each one into the pan lightly.

“She cooks like a sloth so she doesn't have to deal with Baba.” Numi leant in and whispered to me at the table.

“What?” I questioned. Numi smirked at me. Numi, being the oldest of the three of us, loved to trick Mira and I by making up lies about people in the family. One evening she told Mira that Titi

Ameena was pregnant again and Mira got in trouble for telling Titi Ameena, “Congratulations on the baby!”

“I swear it. She doesn’t like him, I heard her say so on the phone.” I rolled my eyes and looked over at Mama who was stirring the contents of the pot with her favorite dark wooden spoon.

“Five sprinkles, that’s all you need.” She said to us as we watched her start seasoning the food.

“I want to try, Mama.” Mira exclaimed, jumping out of her seat. Mama ushered her over and handed her the glass bottle of turmeric. She picked Mira up, grunting slightly.

“One...two...three...” Mira and Mama counted together softly. Numi and I peeled carrots effortlessly, as we watched Mira squeal in excitement.

When our taste buds were tired of Hilsa curry, mama made biryani the next week. When our stomachs turned at the thought of another bowl of biryani she cursed us silently in Bengali and made chingri malai, and when even roti didn’t satisfy us anymore, she rummaged through the worn out black suitcase, filled with cans and different types of rice that Titi Ameena brought back with her on her last visit to Bangladesh.

I brought each of my lunches to my new school, Greene Preparatory, a tall red brick building in Fort Greene. My old school building had one floor and 50 students. Green Prep had 400 students and four floors with a football field, indoor gym, and track field. The other kids wore shiny

sneakers and pulled at my hijab. On my first day, my homeroom teacher introduced me to the class and one girl raised her hand and asked,

“Do you know Bin Laden?”

“We are running out of things from home.” Mama said gently as she sat on the couch next to Baba who was reading the newspaper, squinting at the small words over the frame of his glasses. I sat at the table, circling the subject of each sentence for my English homework while Numi and Mira laughed loudly from the bedroom in the back.

“We have been here for months,” Baba said dryly, flipping over to the next page in his paper,

“What did you expect?”

Mama pierced her lips and took a deep breath. “Is anyone going over soon?”

“Not that I know of. Your sister was just there, wasn’t she? You used all those things she brought back already?”

“I still have some, but it won’t last much longer. And the girls need lunch for school.” Baba placed his paper in his lap briefly, looking at Mama and then back at me. I buried my head back into my homework.

“I thought that school provided lunch. Have them eat that for a while like normal American girls.”

Mira, Numi, and I were all in different grades. Numi was in 5th, I was in 4th, and Mira was in 2nd so we never saw each other in school. Our lunch periods were staggered but sometimes if I got out of 4th period early, I'd catch a glimpse of Numi packing up her lunch and heading back to class.

The teachers instructed us to line up for the school food unless we had our own. The other kids stood on the line, fidgeting, pushing each other, and arguing over who skipped who. The lunch ladies stood in a row, grabbing trays over the silver counter and plopping brown mush onto the plates. Some kids shook their heads at the mush and pointed to the peanut butter sandwiches wrapped in plastic on the back counter.

I grabbed my lunch bag and sat at one of the tables in the corner of the cafeteria close to the window. I opened my thermos and pushed the Hilsa curry around in the jar.

“Ewwww!” I looked up and a group of white boys passed me with their noses turned up, holding cardboard trays of school food.

“That shit stinks!” One boy exclaimed. I looked around the cafeteria and saw other kids making the same face, fanning their noses. I fumbled with the thermos lid, quickly slamming it on the thermos and left the cafeteria. I walked down the long hall of the first floor, passing the auditorium and elementary classes, until I found an empty staircase. I opened my thermos again and gobbled down the rest of my food.

“I want peanut butter sandwiches.” I said to Mama the next night at dinner. Mama and Baba both looked up at me simultaneously.

“Yeah! Me too!” Mira exclaimed.

“Peanut butter?” Mama questioned.

“Yes Mama. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich. They have it in the cafeteria at school. All the other kids eat it!” I said, twisting my fork around in the pile of rice.

“Do not eat that American food. It is bad for you and filled with nonsense. You have good food here at home.”

“But Ma-” Mira whined,

“That’s enough! From both of you.”

Baba sighed and got up from the table, taking his plate to the kitchen. We finished dinner in silence.

The next morning, we got ready for school. We did our usual routine: shower, dress, and breakfast. Baba adjusted his tie in the mirror by the front door. Mama sat on the couch brushing Mira’s hair into a ponytail.

“Girls, grab your lunch and hurry. You’re going to be late!”

I grabbed my lunch bag off the kitchen table, waited for my mom to walk to the backroom to grab Mira’s hijab, and stuffed it in the fridge before running out the door.

“No lunch today, Anna?” Mrs. Walton asked me as I stood in the lunch line.

“No, I forgot it at home today,” I responded, biting my thumbnail. “My name is Ashna.”

“What was that?”

“My name is pronounced Ashna, Mrs. Walton.”

“Sorry dear! It’s such a unusual name!”

I smiled back at her and moved forward in the line. At the front of the line, the lunch lady shot me a look.

“What do you want?”

“Peanut butter and jelly please.”

She turned around slowly and grabbed the sandwich off of the counter and dropped it on the tray.

“Thank you!” I smiled. She grunted in response.

I grabbed the blue carton of chocolate milk and an apple and made my way over to the table in the corner. I unwrapped the peanut butter and jelly sandwich and rested it on my tray. The white bread absorbed the indent of my fingertips as I held the bread in my hand. The thin line of the gritty peanut butter seeped out of the sandwich. On my tray, a drop of jelly splattered against the cardboard.

I opened my mouth wide and took a big bite into the sandwich. My saliva wet the white bread. I began chewing, but the peanut butter stuck to my lips, then my tongue, then the gaps in my teeth. The dry bread tossed and turned in my mouth like a rag in a broken washing machine. Tiny pebbles from the peanut butter scratched the roof of my mouth.

I cringed, wanting to escape the heavy, sticky webs of the peanut butter sandwich. I grabbed the chocolate milk and chugged it, now craving the taste of biryani, hilsa curry, anything but this American monstrosity. I threw away the rest of the sandwich. My stomach rumbled, a loud rejection of the sandwich.

When I came home that day after school, my lunch bag sat on the table. Next to it, steam drifted out of a plate of biryani. My mother handed me a fork.

“Eat.”

#6

It's been 5 years and I am still scared of the #6 van.

The last time I rode the white minivan up to Bush Hall was on an energetic day in June. A bank holiday loomed around the corner and the whole country was excited for the long weekend.

The weather was great too. Sun rays penetrated the glass windows of my room, the curtains casting a peach hue after 4 long days of rainstorms. A slight breeze softened the searing heat. I opened my window and let the crowing of the roosters awaken my sleeping family.

I took my time getting ready that day. At 14 years old, my pubescent body constantly stretched and curved, like a winding road. There was a new pimple, scar, stretch mark, every time I showered. I went from an a cup to a c cup in the span of 2 months. My jeans gripped to my thick thighs. The clothes that used to fit, didn't anymore: My favorite pink crop top, my acid wash denim shorts, my flared white skirt.

"Yuh leaving de house like that?" Grandma Lu asked me when I came into the living room. She was sitting on the red velvet couch that was covered in a miserable, hot plastic protector. Her glasses hung on the bridge of her nose as she unraveled spools of yarn. I wondered what corny phrase she was going to embroider on the canvas today.

My outfit of choice was a sky blue skin-tight sundress that wrapped around my body like saran wrap. I accessorized it with my gold necklace with my name on it, a beaded blue bracelet, and my newest sandals with golden straps.

“Yes, what’s wrong with it?” I smiled, spinning around to show her the full outfit proudly. She stared at me and I could see an argument brewing behind her eyes,

“Your great-great Grandmother is rolling all in she grave.” She went back to filtering through the yarn, saying nothing more to me as I strolled out of the house.

The #6 van was a 15 minutes walk from my house. In the hot sun, with the noise of car horns, and lack of sidewalks, it became a 20 minute walk. By the time I caught a van, I was sweaty and exhausted. I flung open the door and walked to the back of the van, plopping myself on the red plastic seat by the window.

I opened my arms and legs slightly, to let the breeze cool down the beads of sweat off of my skin. A man sat across from me, facing me, on the small seat behind the driver. I fanned myself lightly, feeling his eyes on me. I was used to Bajans staring at me. “American” was tattooed on my forehead. It showed itself in my elitist mannerisms and brand new clothes. I was used to ignoring the stares; they all stopped eventually.

But he kept staring. His eyes were brown but his pupils were speckled with piss yellow spots. His thick dreads were tied up into a stocking cap. He was wearing a purple shirt with small holes in the neckline, and jeans that had been clearly cut into shorts.

The man started leaning to his right, his back hunching over like he was looking for something he dropped on the ground. I looked away but still felt his gaze over me. I looked back and the man was peering underneath my dress, searching for the most private parts of me. I shut my legs, but the short length of the dress failed to cover everything when I was sitting down.

He kept looking, hunger in his yellow eyes, a slight smile on his face. I shifted, and pulled at the dress, begging it to grow 4 more inches. He remained hunched over to the side,

craning his neck to see all of me. The van, full of people, said nothing, as he searched inside of my dress. I looked out the window next to me and fixed my eyes on the vibrant rainbow of small shops, all piled on top of each other. The heavy traffic produced smoky, black clouds of exhaust. I was nowhere near my stop, nowhere close to anything I could recognize. His gaze cornered me into the corner seat of the van and trapped me there.

In the corner of my eye, the man raised his arm and I flinched. The van slowed to a stop. He opened the door and jumped out. I shot a look at him through the window as the van started to pull off. His eyes met mine.

He smirked.

Fast (Kiara)

When Kiara finally tells her mother that Uncle Dennis touches her every Tuesday night when he comes to visit their quiet house at the end of Seaview Road, her mother scolds her.

“You does tell bare stinkin 'lies.’”

Kiara stares at her mother, who takes another swing of her beer. Outside the house, the wind howls as the thunderstorm continues to roar, the pitter patter of raindrops dance on the tin roof.

“But it’s true, mummy.” She whines.

She tells her mother the details. How he waits until her mother goes into her room to call her boyfriend that lives in St. George and slips into Kiara’s room, putting a finger over his lips. How he smells of the tobacco he chews and sweat after a long shift at the mechanic shop. The dark birthmark under his beer belly, the rugged skin of his nail beds as they scratch the inside of her, and the soft grunt he makes when he finishes. Her mother grows angry at Kiara’s stories.

“Foolish girl! Stop telling lies in this house! You feel I supposed to believe that? That Dennis would want to touch you?” Her mother sucks her teeth and looks Kiara up and down.

“I’m not lying Mummy, he does come in my room when you sleep! Just ask he!” Kiara exclaims, rivulets of tears streaking down her puffy cheeks.

Kiara's mother slams her hand on the table in front of her and Kiara stops breathing. They glare at each other, saying nothing. The winds of the storm shake the house. Kiara's mother breaks the silence.

“And even if he touch you, das what you get. You too fast. I does tell you about these little skimpy skirts and tops you does like to wear all about the place, all in front of the men like you'se a little whore on Nelson Street or sein. Go from in front of me.”

Kiara rushes to her room and throws herself on the bed, burying her head in her pillow. It still smells of tobacco.

`Chattel Houses

We still build chattel houses.

Even though there is no white man to run away from over land disputes, we find an open patch of land and set up the foundation. Brick by brick under the hot sun, Uncle passes a gray cement brick to Father, who passes it to Brother, who passes it to me.

We take a break and sit in the field full of weeds, fanning the mosquitos that buzz in our ears, eating the sweet peach colored pulp of the ackee.

The wooden slabs come next. We bought as many as we could afford from a carpenter that lives down in Fairy Valley. For the rest, Father and brother searched in the hills of St. Thomas for remnants of houses blown away by hurricane winds.

Our assembly line continues. Brother steps out to smoke weed with the men down the block playing dominoes. Mother takes his place, her hands moving quickly. Father, Uncle and I take a break finishing the last of the water we brought but Mother continues until we have four walls. Our first section of the chattel. Uncle adds the galvanize for the roof.

“We will finish the rest tomorrow.” Mother says firmly. We nod and pack up the rest of the materials for the house so they are not stolen by another family searching for a home. We leave our four walls of brick and wood.

The next day, we return and repeat the process. Uncle spits into the grass. Mother’s dress soaks in sweat underneath her arms, in the crevice of her breasts, and the arch of her back. Father plays soca music on a portable radio. Our new neighbors watch us work, gossiping amongst themselves.

“Where they coming from?”

“Them windows is crooked.”

“I know them from down the road, them family to Marcia from Baxter’s road.”

“At least the men could wok.”

By nightfall, our wooden slabs and cement bricks become a home. Without cement, a hammer, or even a nail, the chattel house stands. Even as the wind blows through the field, the house does not flinch.

“What does hold the house together?” I question.

No one responds.