

Is it Love?

...a triangle gone square

Stephen A. Dantes

Is it
Love?

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1663 Liberty Drive
Bloomington, IN 47403
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Book Cover Concept and Design by: Tricia Gretel Fenold
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ISBN: 978-1-4685-4526-5 (sc)

ISBN: 978-1-4685-4525-8 (hc)

ISBN: 978-1-4685-4524-1 (e)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012901056

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By Stephen A. Dantes

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info@stephdantes.net

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For
My daughter,
Stephie-Ann Allenyaw Faith Dantes

In a final attempt to persuade the *love of her life* to give her one more chance at love with him, she spoke as softly and clearly as she could.

“Greg, you can have any other woman you want if you don’t want to have me alone. I wouldn’t mind, as long as you keep me as your home girl.

I want to be yours and yours only. I don’t want any other man. All I need is for you to want me. I really don’t care if I am not the only one you date, but please, all I ask is one last chance.”

Her desperation eclipsed her wisdom and she was prepared to accept second best. And if that meant settling for only a part of Greg, she was willing to accept whatever she got. Greg shook his head in repudiation. His heart broke into a thousand pieces when he heard Bernice’s final plea. He wanted so much to shout out ‘yes’ to her, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t tell her the truth behind his refusal either.

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PRESENT DAY

“Hey Tan-May, do you truly believe that I can get through this? I mean, this is real hard on me. I have never felt this way before. Will I really get through this?” Greg questioned.

He foolishly wondered if his great-grandmother could see the whites of his eyes turn to a bright colour of green because of the strong wave of jealousy crashing over him as he told her of the excess attention that Larna was getting from some men. So Greg slowly turned to face the wall with his back towards Tan-May.

Larna Matthews was his girlfriend, but she was not the only woman in Greg’s life.

Greg thought that his jealousy was so strong that tangible evidence of his condition seemed entirely likely, even for a blind old woman.

However, Tan-May had been medically diagnosed visually impaired for about two years now and old age had transformed her once elegant body into a crippled figure, bed-ridden and plagued with numerous ailments. Her body was wrinkled and covered with loose folds. White, full, stiff hair was pulled together to give her four huge plaits positioned perfectly, one on either quarter of her head.

Simply clad in her wool pyjamas, Tan-May still displayed the essence of a once exquisite figure that she had been in her youth.

“Anyfing possible, son. All you do is believe,” she whispered, turning her aged body from her back to her left side to ease the fiery pain she was feeling from the bed.

“You fink you in love, eh boy? You know what love is, eh?” Tan-may enquired. This time the words came out slower from her mouth than they had with her previous statements.

“But May, I...” Greg paused. His eyes searched the walls of the room for the remaining words

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to complete his sentence. Or maybe he was looking for the courage to say what he had been meaning to say to his great-grandmother days ago, weeks ago... months ago.

This couldn't be a more perfect time. He needed to get the words right and truthful. Greg wanted to say everything that he needed to say.

The temporary halt in Greg's speech did not worry Tan-May for she was all too knowledgeable about love. It was as if she could sense the sincerity and intensity of her great-grandson's emotions. So she said nothing, but waited for him to continue.

Moments passed, then Greg caught up with his thoughts just about the time his eyes discovered a beautiful painting by Calhienté Modeste – a locally acclaimed painter – in a nicely polished wooden frame fixed on the wall opposite him.

"I know it's not all about how I feel, Tan-May. It's more than that. I know that it is more. But, but the feelings are stronger than anything else. It's different from before. This is a new situation... a new person," Greg slightly bellowed to satisfy Tan-May's request for repetition.

"Son, what your will can not do, your love do it for you." Tan-May paused. Then continued, "I been wif Pappy for eighty years. From time I a likkle child in teenage. I ninety-eight years ole now and I doh regret being wif Pappy. He do anyfing for me. He stick by me frough fick an fin. Son, love is what you do. Not what you feel. An is we love dat..." There was complete silence.

Then suddenly, the silence of the room was discombobulated by heavy coughs that seemed to take away Tan-May's breath. Her daughter, Brenda Smith – Greg's grandmother – affectionately known to the family as Mam and often called Granny, stepped into the room at that exact moment with a quizzical look that turned into worry as she spotted the dry on Tan-May's cheeks become moist.

This occasionally happened to Tan-May. She would cry every time she spoke passionately of Pappy and how they had loved each other. Pappy passed away about ten years ago and Tan-May missed him ever so much.

Sometimes when family and friends came to visit Tan-May, they would inform Brenda that they had heard Tan-May speaking to herself and singing soft loved songs about Pappy. She would pretend that Pappy was having a conversation with her.

Nonetheless, Tan-May was perfectly fine psychologically. She retained all her senses, but sight. Even after losing her husband, her faculty remained intact. She remembered everything about everything. It was like senility was only unfair to her in the areas of sight and locomotion.

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Tan-May's grand and great grand children often referred to her as a 'tough old lady', not just for physical reasons but spiritual and emotional.

Brenda often told people of stories about her mother; stories that she grew up hearing from the folks in her neighbourhood. These stories made great conversation whenever visitors encouraged Brenda to share some of her mother's secrets.

Legend had it that Tan-May and Pappy had a love that was unconditional and unprecedented. The two *love-lings* overcame oppression and persecution by both their parents for much of their young courting lives until they got married. Tan-May and Pappy overcame many struggles and faced many obstacles together, both before and after they bore children without as much as separating or succumbing to pressure.

As their lives drew closer to their twilight years, Pappy suffered a stroke which left him speechless and partially paralyzed for two years, which eventually led to his passing. During that two year period, Tan-May carried on normally with her life as if nothing was wrong with her husband, performing all her chores as usual. She continued to care for him as if he was as healthy as he had been prior to the stroke; frequently soliciting the help of her grandchildren to move him around as she continued to engage him in full conversations in his unresponsive state.

When Pappy died, Tan-May was left to face the uncertainties of life on her own. Time was all that she trusted to give solace to her. With her *soul mate* gone, there was no one to fill the void and Tan-May has not been the same since.

Greg had forgotten that. In his realm of '*confused love*', he allowed his selfish desires to compel Tan-May to sink into a world of nostalgia. Her coughs sounded deeper and longer. Brenda quickly got Tan-May some water and settled her down. Greg watched with rapt nervousness at the events that unfolded before him as every second ticked by. Finally, Tan-May was settled and he released a lung-full of air which he was unaware that he had been holding.

"I am so sorry, Tan-May. I..., I..., I was thinking of myself. I forgot that you are not in the best of health," he said with a soft shuddering sigh as soon as Brenda left the room to fetch Tan-May another pillow to elevate her head. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"No, it ok." Tan-May murmured and took a long pause. "I love Pappy so much. I dunno how to explain. We can talk tomorrow. Come see me. I feel weak. So come tomorrow," she finished.

Without any hesitation, Greg kissed Tan-May goodbye on both cheeks and headed towards the living room with his head bowed in shame and pain. He felt pain because he had not completed

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the conversation with May, and he really wanted to hear what her diagnosis and prognosis of his emotional entanglement was.

The incomplete discussion left a void in him. *But at least she asked him to return tomorrow*, so he felt a modicum of comfort in that request.

“Oh mehhhhh!” Greg exclaimed to himself. “I need answers.

God I need answers,” he then murmured with each slow step that mimicked a funeral procession. His desire to talk to his Tan-May about his love life had yet again failed. It hurt that he did not speak his mind or get the answers about his passion for two different women. He continued stepping away with his head hung low.

“Boy! Look where you going!” Brenda thundered as she crashed into Greg near the corridor. Her *Alcolado* bottle went crashing onto the floor. Thankfully, the pillow shielded her from getting hurt.

“Mam, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t looking,” he quivered.

“The same way your women does make you blind and you cannot see, uh? Is look you not looking! Pick up the pieces of glass,” she protested, pointing at the scattered bottle pieces.

“Sorry,” Greg gulped and was on his hands and knees trying to clean the mess after fetching the closest dust pan and scoop.

When he was done tidying up the floor and disposing the shards of glass, he wanted so much to escape; to just leave in an effort to conceal the shame and embarrassment that he was feeling. But he had earlier promised his grandmother that he would stay until dinner.

“Mam, I’m going for a short walk down the road. I wanna go check to see if a friend of mine is at his house. I won’t be too long,” Greg informed and was out the door, not even waiting for confirmation from Brenda.

By the time that he returned, the afternoon sunlight was been stolen by the angry clouds that had been trying to blanket the sky throughout the day. As night drew nearer, the clouds worsened and darkness crept in at every surreptitious chance it got. The night silhouettes fell perfectly into place as a result of a bold and early moon peeping through any holes found in the cloud’s apparel.

Dinner was served hot. Brenda’s favourite dish of Dasheen and Yam slices with stewed lamb neck had perfumed the air for almost an hour and was finally on a plate at the dinner table. It tasted just as good as its boastful aroma.

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Greg finished his meal then bade farewell to his grand and great grandmother. His destination was his home.

He stood outside of the house. Part of him was happy to be outside and not having to return for the night.

Whilst standing there, he took one last look at his grandmother's house which stood like a secluded guard on duty. It was surrounded by what seemed to be a vast shrub and herb forest, with the nearest house being a few hundred yards away. The wooden structure had lost its pink colour. It stood as a silhouette in the dim lights of the moon and lamp post. The shingled fascia boards were the only parts that remained true to its structural integrity and history.

This was Brenda's house in the community of Babonneau after she had long ago relocated. This was the house where she and her husband, Bobby, called home. It was the only place that felt like home to Greg.

Brenda and her family had once lived in Rose Hill. Greg and his mother, Sherine, lived there with her when he was much younger. But for both Greg and his mother, there were too many painful memories attached to Rose Hill. Eventually, Greg's mother relocated to Bagatelle, a few months before Brenda moved to Babonneau.

Bobby, Greg's grandfather, was out of the country. He was away in America visiting his first daughter, Josephine – Greg's aunt. He had been gone for three and a half months and still had quite a bit of time left to enjoy the American culture.

Greg caught a glimpse of his watch. It was 8pm. He had a few hours before his date. *"I can't stay staring at a house that will be there tomorrow. Besides, I have to come back tomorrow to speak to Tan-May."*

So Greg raced down the winding footpath leading to the main road and started a short walk along the road leaving the light from the lamp post behind him fading into the darkness.

As the darkness enveloped him, he was aware of the eerie sounds of night insects and his face confessed discomfort. He tried fighting off the crazy thoughts the insects imbued as well as his reluctance to challenge the thick country darkness to get to the next lamp post. He didn't have to fight long.

He heard a vehicle approaching and within seconds, saw its headlights. He instantly breathed a sigh of relief. He shot both his hands into the air and waved frantically to signal the oncoming

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vehicle to stop. A black 2000 Nissan Sentra pulled up next to him and offered him a ride. The vehicle then disappeared into the darkness.

It was not 10pm when he got to his home, so naturally, Greg thought that he still had ample time. He had over an hour to spare. The car had taken him straight to town, and from there, a bus took him less than five minutes to get to Bagatelle.

Greg swung open the front door intending to rush for his cell-phone which he had left at home earlier to avoid being tracked by Bernice, his ex-girlfriend. His date with Larna was scheduled for 11pm this very night and he wanted no drama. It was a date that he had spent an entire year waiting for.

Greg was unaware of what was waiting for him inside. His mother, Sherine – Brenda and Bobby’s second of two children – had been waiting in the living room for some time now. She wore a flowered red dress touched with tropically decorated horizontal colours which draped the floor at her feet. Her dress code, however, was not reflective of what emotions lay beneath.

Sherine had just tucked on a South Pole sweat-jacket to get some much needed warmth. It was unusually cold. Even vapour appeared to come out of her mouth as she yawned after all efforts to contain it was futile. On her feet were her favourite bedroom slippers –SpongeBob scuffs.

“Goodnight, Ma. What you still doing up? Your bed time is eight and it is after nine already.”

She did not answer. She only stared at him. Her eyes were sizing him from head to toe.

Jen and Nye, Greg’s stepsister and stepbrother respectively, lay languorously across the room on another chair. They were the non-identical twins of Adam Simon; Sherine’s abusive ex-boyfriend, and Noleen Greer; an African-Asian woman who had retired deeply into drugs when the kids were just past their first birthday.

Sherine met Adam a few months after Noleen had left him, and she entered into a common-law union with him solely for financial security. Sadly, Sherine had Adam forcefully evicted from the house by the police when his abuse worsened from verbal to physical.

That day in question, he had been drinking heavily and hit her so hard that he bloodied her face. Greg immediately called the police as soon as the row had started. And although the police

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showed up on time, Greg felt badly that he had been too young to protect or defend his mother like a man should.

After that day, Adam agreed to leave the children with Sherine for a few reasons; one being that he had been fired from his job, another was because the children preferred to be with Sherine instead of him. A third reason was because the police would not have allowed him to take the children as the Social Welfare Agency had stepped in and was arranging for alternative custody.

The children felt safer with Sherine for she had shown them love as if she had given birth to them both; love that was totally different from what she showed Greg - a tale of irony that no one really understood. Adam subsequently signed over adoption papers to Sherine and he stayed faithful to his monthly welfare allocations even though his social visits declined to a halt.

Jen and Nye looked at Greg with questioning eyes. They did not miss Adam in any way. Greg slowly made his way through the short corridor that led from the front door into a rectangular expanse dubbed the living room.

The room was scarcely furnished with luxurious furniture. Only a mahogany tri-leg coffee table polished with expensive veneer with an elliptical glass top, and her two prized possessions; a 17th century Jacobean wooden chair ornately carved with intricate designs, and a 16th century Italian Renaissance Cassone – a Venetian marriage chest popularized during the Renaissance. The piece; featured with carvings of classical scenes with winged figures on the corners called caryatids and the feet being carved in a shape known as paw feet was invaluable.

These antiques had been in the family for generations. Tan-May's parents had originally given it to her and she in turn, passed it over to Brenda who subsequently gave it to Sherine. It was said that the family had gotten hold of these antiques from their descendants who were slave masters who once ruled St. Lucia.

Everything else was ordinary household furniture neatly arranged. The carpet on the floor was the average black and white square decorative piece found in just about every house in the neighbourhood, and the walls of the living room were painted white. Greg kept a handful of his own amateur paintings that boasted complacency on the walls of the living room. They were protected by cheap copper frames and glass. A chandelier was fixated in the centre of the room which lit the entire room and corridor when it was switched on.

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Greg walked all the way in and sat cautiously next to his mother. He realized that something was wrong with her.

“It is probably my fault,” he thought.

The way that Sherine looked at him made him feel guilty.

“It is definitely my fault,” he murmured.

“Gosh, what did I do this time?” he thought to himself.

As he spoke these words internally, he remembered that a few years earlier, he had shocked Sherine with the news of his then pregnant girlfriend, Bernice. His Mom had not known that he had had a serious girlfriend until the dreaded night of September 23rd, when Bernice gave birth to a healthy, but premature baby boy.

Now, years later, Greg saw that same pain in his mother’s eyes as he had seen that night when he had informed her that he had fathered a child with Bernice Watson.

Sherine stared at Greg blankly.

Greg became more convinced as the seconds crawled by that something was terribly wrong with his mom and that it had to have been his fault. He started growing uneasy. Yet, he tried to assure himself, with a retrospective mental flashback, that he had not done anything wrong. Well at least he thought he had not.

“Jen, Nye, go to your room,” was Sherine’s behest in a soft, but dictatorial tone, as she turned around to finally look her son.

His siblings sped off to their rooms without uttering a word to each other. There was a deafening silence for over two minutes.

“What the hell is your problem, boy!?” she shouted. *“Huh? What is wrong with you?”*

Greg wasn’t sure what to answer. To make himself feel better, he thought of pretending that it was just another case where his mother would snort at him accusingly for anything that went wrong in the house, notwithstanding her underlying issue – the anger and animosity she felt towards his father, Tony, for deserting her.

Sherine normally acted as if it was Greg’s fault that his father had deserted them and forced her to live through a sorrowful, lonely and loveless life that erased the glow on her face and killed her smiles.

Maybe it was because he had spent the entire day at Brenda.

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“No,” he thought to himself. “*Something else is wrong. Mommy wouldn’t have that vile look on her face if it was just that.*”

Sherine stared at her son with the horrified revulsion most people reserve for cold-blooded killers.

“Boy, what did I do to be cursed wit you? Whha.a..a.a.t...? Oh God! Why? Why this happening over again?”

Streams of water rushed down her face. Greg wasn’t sure whether he should comfort her or sit still.

“Ma, what happened?” he forced out of his mouth pleadingly.

“What! What happened? Is you dat happen! You! You waste of... Is yoo-oo-oo-ou.” Tears stole her speech and she could not contain herself.

“Get out!” were the only two words she could find to say.

SMACK!

A slap echoed on his left cheek as it accompanied her disenchanted words. The pressure jerked his face and destabilized his body.

“Out, now!” Sherine shouted.

She got up and made her way to the front door. She opened it and stood motionless. Her sweater was covered with tear-trails as she sobbed uncontrollably.

Greg was panic-stricken. He had absolutely no idea what was going on. Never before had he been thrown out of his home. His mother’s house. That did not happen when he had revealed his secret about Bernice, *so why now?*

This situation was troubling. His mother did not offer any answers and provided no details.

“Can I get my cell-phone, Ma?” he called out from where he was sitting.

“I said out!” Sherine fired back.

Shocked and confused, Greg got up reluctantly. He strolled to the doorway and stood next to his mother. Sherine was fixated in a trance and did not notice him staring at her or even saying that he was sorry. Her crying intensified with every minute that passed.

Greg was confused. He did not know what was going on.

“I ain’t crying for shit I didn’t do,” he murmured, loud enough for only him to discern.

Greg had not cried for a long time. If you heard it from his family, they would say he had not cried in years. None of his family members could point out a day when they saw or heard him

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cry, other than when he was little. To them, it was like he did not know how it felt to let his feelings of pain and hurt out.

In truth, Greg always kept things inside. For as long as he could remember, he kept his oppression to himself. He kept them shut safely in an emotional bottle that was *never to be opened to family or anyone else* for that matter.

An example was the time at school when he had been beaten by three girls in his class and never said a word to anyone in spite of the lacerations on his lower abdomen. Another was when the people of Rose Hill verbally assaulted him as an infant for having no father and being illegitimate, and another was when their sons bullied him after school.

Even the time when his step-father, Adam, first accidentally hit his mom in Bagatelle, or when he continued occasionally. Greg had bottled the sorrows then too. He was a “bottle of pain walking”. He counted many other terrible experiences that he dared never to reveal to anyone, some of which involved abuse.

“*I will not cry,*” he bit his lower lip. “*If my mom doesn’t want me, then I got love on my side.*” These words were spoken in an attempt to reassure him of his security, but in truth, they were far from his reality.

His reality; Greg was madly in love with Larna - someone he could not have openly - had a baby with Bernice he had not planned for, and was unsure of the next move in his life. A life he seemed to be losing the hold on with each wrong move he made. He just could not see or count any blessings in his life, no matter how fortunate he got. He was a teller at Royal Commercial Bank, but not even employment did he consider a blessing. Everything to him was a curse. And the curse was deeply rooted in the way he was treated by his mother.

Greg collected his thoughts, composed himself and looked at his mom again. She had not stopped crying. The tears kept rolling down her face with soft sobs.

“Ma, I’m really sorry for whatever I did. Just tell me what it is, Ma. Please. I don’t know what it is.”

Scepticism redefined his facial features. Or was it confusion..., maybe even pain?

Sherine did not answer him. All she did was open the door wider, as far back as the mat would allow it. Greg stepped out onto the porch and stood there with his back to the door. He stood there a stiffer picture of his father – the man Sherine despised so. The one she hated with all her

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being; the one she would kill with her own hands given the chance, the man she once painfully loved, but now abhors.

Greg looked just like his father, unbeknownst to him. He stood there a clueless version of his old man.

“Ma, I am sorry for whatever it is I did,” he turned around to say to her.

“You sorry? Go tell that to Larna!” she exclaimed and slammed the door shut leaving him out at the front bedazzled. Sherine’s eyes grew bigger with every tear that emerged.

“Why is this happening?” She questioned.

Greg, now a broken image of a man, stood staring at a door with his eyes beckoning to see inside.

“What! She knows about Larna?”

He was astonishment. As he stood beyond the door of the house he knew as ‘my crib’, he was left to stare and be plagued by meandering thoughts. Then at that very moment, he understood that something was awfully wrong.

“Yes she did. She did mention, Larna.” His jaw dropped to his chest.

No one in his family except his cousin, Shem, knew about Larna. Shem was Josephine’s son. Greg made him promise never to reveal to anyone that he was dating Larna.

“Still, finding out about Larna does not warrant being thrown out of the house. Something else has to be up,” he thought.

One thing Greg knew for sure was that it could not have anything to do with pregnancy, because he and Larna had never had any sexual intercourse, although they had tried a few times to. *There had been no sex, so there could not be any baby.*

“What could be wrong?” He thought.

“What did I do this time?”

Greg quietly made his way to the back of the house next to Nye’s room. After getting Nye’s attention with some persistent, but soft knocking on the glass window, Nye came to see what was creating that sound.

“Nye, go take my phone for me fast. Don’t let mommy see you. If she asks you anything, just tell her that you’re going to get something you forgot in my room. Make something up.”

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His brother did not hesitate although it was passed his bedtime. Within a few seconds he was back with the phone and told Greg that his mother was standing at the door crying, and that she did not see him.

“Do you know what’s going on?” Greg asked.

“No. I doh know uh. Mommy got a phone call when we were having dinner and her mood change. She went to her room and stayed there for about two hours. When I ask Jen, she said she doh know either.”

“Thanks garcon. Go back to bed,” Greg directed. “I will see you later,” he whispered to his little brother with less surety and conviction than he had done earlier when he had spoken those exact words to him before he had left for his grandmother’s house.

Chapter Two

TRAGEDY

For a brief vain moment, Greg studied his slick new *Blackberry Torch* Smartphone as if to congratulate himself for having such good taste in technology. Then he quickly browsed through his phone to see if he had any missed calls, bbm's (Blackberry Messenger messages) or new text messages from Larna. Strangely, he had none. Nothing from his girlfriend.

"How weird is that?" He questioned himself. "It looks like the universe just wants me to go searching for answers myself. Ma don't wanna tell me anything. Nye and Jen have no idea and Larna did not contact me at all. What the hell is going on?"

Greg looked at the time stamp of the last call from Bernice. "Two days ago. Ok." He fumbled about, slid the phone open to key in Larna's name to check her time stamp as well. "Wow. You mean I didn't even call yesterday to confirm our date? Well... I guess our date was guaranteed so neither of us needed to call."

He tried to comfort himself with those words, but that did not help.

"Gosh! I can't wait to find out what's going on. What the h..."

He was forced to stop. The words were stolen from his mouth as he stumbled over the root of a mango tree in the footpath that lead to the main road. He managed to maintain his balance and avoided tripping over.

"Gosh! What else?" He sucked his teeth. "Lemme call Larna. Let's see if she has any answers."

Since he was now far away from the house and there was no way for Sherine to hear his conversation, Greg anxiously punched in the numbers to reach Larna's cell. About five seconds passed before he got any sound on the other end. And when he did, it was her voicemail.

Ordinarily, he would have left a romantic message after listening to her tender voice saying, "*Hi, it's Larna. Not here now so do your thang at the tone. I'll hit ya back later,*" but he

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couldn't. He needed to get in touch with her. He tried copiously, about twenty-five more times, but was greeted with the same voice message every time. The only difference was that her voice sounded sweeter and sweeter each time.

Greg was getting frustrated. He needed to talk to Larna. He had every right to be anxious, nervous and curious because Larna never went anywhere without her cell phone, not even the bathroom. It was glued to her like an extra body part given to her from birth.

"Something must be terribly wrong with her."

A barrage of crazy thoughts inundated him as his curiosity turned into worry. He started thinking of all sorts of things. Greg was getting scared.

"Maybe Larna and Bernice had a fight." He tried to convince himself to justify his mother's action. *"That is the only reason I can think to explain mommy's behaviour. But if they fought, how the hell did..., what did ..., why was...?"*

He didn't want to complete any of those sentences mentally. That trend of thought was not accomplishing anything and neither was it comforting.

"Damn it!" he shouted and crossed the main road to wait at the bus stop opposite the footpath. "What the hell is going on?"

As he waited for a bus to come, the minutes grew more excruciating with each taunting second of ignorance that crawled by. His insecurity and worry were evident in his untiring continual sitting and pacing under the shelter. Greg tried to reach anyone via phone whom he knew to be a mutual friend to Larna.

That contact list was not many. To be exact, he only had two phone numbers of two persons who probably knew Larna's whereabouts; her sister, Hope, and her aunt, Calista.

All his calling efforts were futile. A bus screeched and pulled next to the stop after Greg hysterically flagged it.

"Driver, Castries. Town. Please," Greg commanded in parts as he closed the door of the minibus. "Here's your money."

He wasted no time with small talk and sat in the seat closest to the door. He tried Larna's phone one last time as the bus drove him to town, but there was still no answer.

Not once in his frantic state did he even consider his mother's wellbeing – whether she was still crying or not. He tried calling Hope again in his endless rotation of three cell numbers. He

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was unaware that he was trying Hope's number fewer times because the two of them had had an argument a few weeks earlier.

Maybe he did remember. Maybe he was trying Larna's number more times than the others on purpose. Maybe.

"Hey, Greg," came a softly spoken voice from the other end of the phone after it rang four times. "I can't talk to you now."

"Wait. Hope? Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"I was just trying to get in touch with Larna. I have been calling for the longest..."

"I hate you, Greg. I hate you." Hope's words cut his explanation short and shocked him.

"Everybody in the family hates you!"

"Why? What did I do? Is Larna ok?" he asked sheepishly, but curiously.

"Greg, no she is not. She had an argument with dad over you earlier today, then out of rage went and did something extremely stupid."

Hope could not contain her tears as she tried unwillingly to give out information. Although she and Greg had had their tense moments, Hope was extremely fond of Greg and liked him for a possible in-law.

"She is in the hospital right now. But please don't come because daddy might just kill you out of anger. Why couldn't you just stay the hell away from us?" she cried and then hung up.

Greg was dumbfounded.

"Hospital? Huh?"

He did not understand what was going on. He stared into eternity.

"What could Larna have done to land her in the hospital? What could have caused her to do anything even slightly stupid to end up there? Why would she argue with her father? I spoke to her about that attitude already," he paused.

"Why is mommy so repulsed at the sight of me right now? Why can't somebody just tell me what's going on? Why is love so painful? Why is love so painful? I love her," Greg was murmuring to himself not realizing that the bus had pulled into the offloading zone and he was the only one left on board.

"Bossman, you eh going down?" the driver asked.

"Oh, sorry. Didn't realize that you were here already."

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He quickly got off the bus and found the closest pavement and attempted to call Hope again.

“Hope, I can hear that you are mad right now, but you do know that I love your sister and wouldn’t do anything to hurt her. Can you please tell me what’s going on? Please?” Greg pleaded after getting her on the very first attempt.

“I know, Greg. I know that you love her. But that doesn’t make it ok though, cause right now she is lying in a hospital bed and we don’t know if she’s gonna pull through. Call me later and just keep your fingers crossed for her.”

“What happened to her, Hope? Please tell me before you hang up. What do you mean by keep my fingers crossed?”

Silence emerged with some sniffing.

After a minute or so, Hope managed to say in a cracking voice, “She drank some poison. Mom found her on the floor of her room when she went in to check on her. We don’t know what she consumed. The doctors haven’t told us what it is yet, but they said that if ever we believed in prayer, we should use it now.”

And there it was. His world just stopped.

“This can’t be true.”

His countenance fell as sharply as his heart hit the ground.

“No! God, please, No! Pleassee. No!”

Greg was left with tortuous thoughts, a call-dropped tone and utter confusion. Hope had hung up, but her words echoed in his heard and stabbed him viscosly, plunging deeper at his vital organs with each tick of the watch on his arm – a flashing Tag Heuer Men’s Legend. He clung dearly to his cell phone as if he were hanging on for dear life. He was stupefied.

“Larna, in the hospital? Poison? Larna? Poison? Hospital? Me? Why Lord, why? Why her? Why?”

Tears started to run down his cheeks as he repeated these questions in his head. He had stopped walking and did not even notice a curious crowd of onlookers were gathering near him and enquiring from each other why he was crying. He did not even noticed that he had accidentally, but forcefully, held down one of the keys on the phone and it had speed-dialled a co-worker, raising his post-paid cellular plan over its limit. He did not even notice that the end of his left thumb was sore, almost at the point of bleeding, from him biting on it to hold back his screams.

He did not even noticed that this was just the beginning of his pain, or even, his mother’s pain.

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Sherine dropped to the floor and leaned her back on the door. She had relied on that same door to support the weight of her burdens in the past – a door that presently hid her tears from her son, from her neighbours and from the world. That door remained true to her when everything and everyone had not.

In times past, when she had been with Adam, that door was also her physical support as it would be the only object of contact on the other end of his slaps or blows.

That door shielded more blows than Muhammad Ali's gloves. It offered more love and comfort than Mother Teresa's hands.

Sherine's tears carried on doing what they had always done – run wild and surreptitious. Her heart ached with pain. Her life, her dreams, her hopes; none had turned out the way she had planned. Three children were more than she had planned – one biological and two adopted. Sadly, none of her kids were planned. Not one.

Greg was the first. After Greg's dad – Tony Mitchel – disappeared, Sherine grew extremely lonely, bitter and cold and she was desperate for a companion. She was desperate for a *knight in shining armour*, a saviour. She craved security and support every time she thought of her future.

Her loneliness became insufferable and Sherine grew overly desperate for male companionship. However, even in her desperateness, she held fast to her hate and revulsion towards any male who bore the slightest resemblance of Tony. Her hate was so sinister that she was mentally fighting herself from succumbing to that overwhelming temptation of killing baby Greg and herself.

Ironically, every time she held Greg, his smile and light heartbeat drowned every compulsive thought that she had. And every time he suckled milk, her inexperienced maternal skills would have her singing soft nursery rhymes to him, in the hope that he'd fall asleep as soon as he was full. It so happened that every time she held her baby her anger subsided and joy replaced the ill feelings. That was until the baby stage ended.

When Sherine was not holding baby Greg, it was back to the furtive lurking of her repulsion which grew with every bit of oppression that she faced at the hands of her parents as a result of her early pregnancy by a man she loved whom had forsaken her. The same man she was warned innumerable times for.

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The weeks had gone by quickly and as baby Greg grew in size and affection, Sherine's crushing desire for vengeance dwindled and she was more and more willing to save her bitterness and avenge her life when she saw Tony again, and not before that.

"The day I meet Tony or find him, wherever he is, that day will be my revenge. Until then, I will stay alive for my child sake. Take day after day, one day at a time. But for now, I prove my mother wrong. I will survive with my son," was a short song she made-up to comfort herself, and hummed to Greg when he was crying.

There were those moments too when Sherine would verbally lose it.

"That son-of-a-bitch get me pregnant and he is nowhere. I will kill his ass." The words were most reassuring for her ego, but they were always followed with tears.

Until I get that Tony, I will not take it out on his child, she thought to herself with every passing birthday.

For now, I will see if I get a man to take care of business. Her thoughts intensified when her financial needs and sexual urges reminded her of her loneliness, incompetence, failure and mortality.

That was when Sherine eventually got herself Adam. That was the time that she had allowed another man to get close to her. And she did so for all the wrong reasons.

Sherine was temporarily distracted from her nostalgic daze as she forced herself to keep from coughing. She was still at the door, sitting on the floor. Her eyes were scary red with the nerves evident in the chandelier's fluorescence and her clothes were drenched. She did not care. She shifted her pose from the aching leg that had gone numb under her, to a languorous stretch that overcompensated for the effort she used to lean on the door.

Sherine, then oblivious of the world around her or even the gravity of the predicament that Greg was in and went straight into a reminiscent bemusement of her teen nightmare that had redefined her life, before now, before then, before Adam and the occasional involuntary and unsatisfactory sex.

She was about to mentally relive her experience of giving birth to Greg at the hospital.

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Her memories were as vivid in her mind as they had been when she was taken home from that cold hospital bed. And tonight was no exception. The door behind her welcomed her reminiscence.

February 14, 1987, Valentine's Day, was the darkest day in Sherine's life – *the dreadful day*. A day that ironically was supposed to epitomize love and goodness was far from it.

It was three months from her seventeenth birthday. It was on that day that she sat on a hospital bed alone; no mother, no father and no Tony there to extend moral and physical support.

She was completely lonely, emotionally disfigured and pregnant. The doctors had informed her that she needed to have a *Caesarean section* in order to give birth. Her baby was quite big, and her body was not fully prepared for a natural birth.

“Damn you, Tony!” she wailed before the doctors came into her room to administer the anaesthetics.

Her scream echoed through City Hospital and frightened two of the other females who had been waiting to give birth. Greg was born on that *dark Valentine's Day* – cut out of his mother's womb. *He cursed her to bear a child in any way, but natural.*

Sherine was unconscious during the operation, but somehow her sub conscience had acquired the scene of the exact moment that the baby was held up by the doctors. Maybe it was the effect of the anaesthetics she was given or maybe it was an image from the many pregnancy books that she had forced herself to learn. Whichever, she remembered a little figure crying profusely and then everything went black.

Hours after the operation was completed, Dr. Ramsy offered a handsome baby to Sherine. She glanced scrupulously around her. She had to make sure it was a dream. She wanted to be sure that this predicament was all a dream. It wasn't. It was more than real. It was now her life.

“Sherine, aren't you going to take this gentleman from me?” Dr. Ramsy asked, still offering the baby wrapped in a white cotton blanket, to his mother. She was hesitant at first, but when she finally took the baby, her heart sank.

“You have a fine lad here. He is extremely strong too. For some reason, he resisted my nurses when they were trying to clothe him,” Dr Ramsy chuckled. “I even think he tried to make a pass at them.”

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His humour coerced a momentary smile on Sherine's face.

"He is already displaying his father's irresistible personality," she thought. "What more can he do to ruin my life?"

She spent two unbearable weeks in the hospital, most times alone, hardly ever seeing visitors before she was sent home. Greg was the start of all Sherine's troubles. At least that's what she thought. Brenda thought otherwise. Brenda thought that Tony was the source of the problem.

The relationship at home with Brenda deteriorated rapidly. There were constant reminders of what Sherine had done and how Tony had ill-treated her – a *drive-by pregnancy*. Brenda was relentless with her castigations. Bobby abdicated his warranted ruthlessness and went from being garrulous to reticent, then to completely stopping all communication with Sherine.

Bobby's initial silence was attributed mainly to guilt; because of the way he had treated Sherine when he found out that she had not seen her period. The subsequent hush was because of shame. The atmosphere at home was torturous.

Sherine spent every day, agonizingly, at the house. The non-existent relationship with her father was excruciating. She had been attached to her dad even though he was sometimes ignorant and arrogant in behaviour. To Bobby, she had been the little princess that no one but himself could discipline. No one, not even Brenda could have laid a hand on her when he was present. Bobby was used to pampering Sherine at any cost. Unlike Josephine, the older daughter, Sherine had been Bobby's little princess. But that was before she got pregnant.

Brenda however, was persistently aggressive after Greg was born, a total opposite of what she used to be. *Dear old, angelic mother* turned into a constant nag at any chance she got. She found fault with everything. From the way Sherine cared for the child to the way she cared for herself. Even the things Sherine did to help in the house were criticized; like keeping the lights on too long, or turning the television on too early, or using the electric kettle too often. Everything was a problem.

It was like Brenda had waited impatiently for the baby to be born to begin her monstrous mission. She probably had feared a miscarriage so she waited until Greg's birth.

Sherine hated her life more at home than at the hospital because of her mother. She would choose the hospital's loneliness any day over her mother's presence. And her father's ostracism did not make things better.

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“I pay how much money to send you to school and dat’s what you go and do with yourself, huh? You doh even finish school. I want to see dat Tony, Tony! Where him now?” her mother protested, occasionally.

The transformation from good mother to bad mother seemed to evolve every day with more hurtful words; some leaving deeper wounds than others, but all being incurable. That was not all. Aunty Elizabeth and Aunty Joy, Brenda’s sisters, would always remind Sherine of how stupid she was to get pregnant with every visit they made. Brad, Brenda’s brother was maybe the only person who said nice things to Sherine when he came over. He would always carry some baby items with him when he visited.

As for Bobby’s side of the family, they were almost non-existent. Sherine never saw any after she got pregnant.

Her sister, Josephine, was in her early twenties when Sherine gave birth but remained silent on the entire issue. She asked Sherine once about Tony, but that was before Greg was born. Josephine was hardly at the house anyway. She was trying out at being independent. She had gotten herself an apartment to rent and was making a reasonable amount of money from her job.

Sherine lost touch with all her school friends. Thhe people from the community sometimes said bad things to her about being a single parent. Life in that little place called Rose Hill was terrible. Although there were not many people living there, gossip was lucrative employment for everyone with “project-Sherine” as their mission.

“O, ou pa tan sa ki wivé ish Brenda-a? Wi mwen di’w. Tifi-a alé chaché an bouden èk boug la kité’w kouman. (*Oh, didn’t you hear what happened to Brenda’s daughter? Yes, I tell you; she went looking for a belly, got pregnant and the guy left her*),” Patricia, the famous community gossip explained to anyone who found themselves within her grasp.

The insults piled up in direct proportion with the criticisms and abhorrence. Its mission was to destroy Sherine’s character. Sherine was slowly losing her sanity, but she pledge to avenge her fallen fate.

“I will make it through,” she would say to herself. “God is my father, too.”

Even in the face of all that oppression, nothing was worse than the fact that Sherine had not seen Tony. He had mysteriously disappeared the same day she informed him that she was pregnant, even after he promised to return. *The love of her life* just vanished with no word. Not even the whereabouts of his parents were known. It was a bit worrisome, but Sherine pretended

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that the absence of Tony's parents was all in their ploy to run away from her and the baby. This made her feel more rejected.

Most times, Sherine would curl herself on the bed with her baby cradled between her chest and thighs and she cried herself to sleep. And the times when she was not crying, she was silently screaming inside. Every day to her felt like the day before. Only, the pain of the reality got worse. She had no friends to share anything with and no one to support her emotionally.

"How Tony love me one minute, then go away next? I mean he say he was happy. He say he want the baby. Did he love me? He ever love me?" she questioned herself daily just before she cried herself to bed.

All the love that Tony claimed to have had for her was gone. Never to be found. Never to be proven. All that happened because of Greg. *A child, supposing to be a blessing, a Valentine's blessing, was more than a curse.* The irony of it all sank deep into Sherine's veins, embedded itself within her bloodstream and forced erratic jolts of passionate hatred out of her periodically.

"To hell with Valentines!" she said every year that his birthday came.

Her life had been more 'sad' than happy, more 'bad' than good. It infused rage and nurtured hate in her heart. Her love had been slowly turning into detestation towards her mom and everyone else.

Finally, Sherine became repulsed by every mention of Tony. As time went on and Greg developed to be a mirror image of his father, she hated her life more and grew angrier at her memento. It was as a result of those physical transformations of her son when they moved to Bagatelle that she started blaming him for everything that went wrong in her life. She started to do to Greg what Brenda did to her, and she did not even realise it until late.

Sherine's heart grew to be its coldest and hardest. When she endured hardships, it was not because she wanted to, but that she knew she could emotionally handle the pains that accompanied. Yes, she loved her son and yes the desires to kill him were gone. But no, she could not close her eyes to the Tony duplicate that stood before her, reminding her of the evil that ensconced on a '*once-upon-a-love terrain*'. Sherine both consciously and subconsciously persecuted her son for his father's sake.

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Now, it seemed as if Greg had put the final nail into his coffin and Sherine's life as she knew it presently, would never be the same.

Sherine mustered every ounce of strength left in her shattered body and clutched the door knob to help her stand up. She did not care that her clothes were soaked with tears or that one side of her slippers had fallen off her foot. She cared about nothing at that moment. She pulled herself up and managed to keep her balance.

She then slowly made her way to the living room and stood next to the chair, exactly where she had slapped Greg. Five minutes passed as she stared aimlessly at anything and nothing. Sherine then walked over to where the house phone hung on the wall and disconnected the line. Afterwards, she dragged her feet lightly to her room whilst holding her head.

YOUNG LOVERS

Sherine locked the door. Then she plopped down beside the pile of clothes that she had left on her bed earlier that afternoon. She was shaking violently. She switched off the miniature contraption of neon lights that lit her dresser.

The room was not totally absorbed with darkness. One of the two opposite windows from the bedroom door was positioned beneath the breath of light that emanated from the only utility pole that supported an electrical transformer. The transformer was the control point of all of Upper Bagatelle's power. The light that filtered into the room through the curtain was enough to chase the darkness away.

Sherine pushed the pile of clothes out of her way and spread her legs on the mattress. She paid no attention to the clothing she wore; how wet they were, how cold they would make her body feel or how sick she might get for keeping them on.

Time was no friend to her in this moment so she let out a soft groan and wrapped the bed sheet about her feet. Her coarse Negro hair appeared mangled and tangled, and some parts stretched out of form and looked frizzy.

"What else could happen?" She began sobbing. "Why you forsake me again, Lord? Am I the worse person?" Sherine's belly-groans synchronized with the solemn moans. "Twenty-five years of my life and this happen?" A rhetorical contortion followed. "Lord where I go wrong with him? I fai... failed. It is my fault?" She paused to analyze the question.

"No, it not my fault. I doh treat him like before. I changed. Greg Smith is evil like his father, Tony. Dat dog, Tony. Is because of him his child so evil," she proclaimed and settled into an uneasy hiatus.

After she believed that she had waited long enough, she continued, "Why You make him leave, Lord? Why You take Tony from me? Why You make me go through pregnancy alone? Is like

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You doh even answer my prayers these days. What did I do to deserve this life? Is love not the key, Lord? Is it not? You know I llllllllllllooo.... love... loved him,” she bit her lower lip tensely as she forced the words out of her mouth.

“Why You leave me to suffer, God? Do You even see me? Do You even hear me? Do you even care that I am hurting?” Sherine buried her head in her pillow.

Just as she had remained in perpetual ignorance, so too did most of her relatives. None of those knew what happened to Tony or where he was. After the first year of his absence, no one had cared anymore because Sherine appeared to have accepted her life of single parenthood. And whether she had accepted it or not, it had been the consequences of her own actions that she was living with, so her relatives welcomed it as a great act to imbue wisdom. *She would learn through experience if not through obeying instruction.*

“Love can go to hell for all I care!” Sherine blurted out as she pulled the pillow harder on her face.

She wanted to completely erase Tony from her mind. Sherine wanted more than anything to be free from love, free from this prison that she had been put in years ago and start living her life. But more desperately, she wanted to be free from the hatred that had settled in her in places where only love and innocence had existed; a hatred that made her bitter and cold. But she could not.

Sherine wanted deliverance. She wanted freedom. She wanted closure. Fate wanted something totally different for her. Life seemed to only want her submerged in an ocean of sorrows clinging unto a *drowning-man's* last breath, never to be rise above the relentless undersea currents.

Although there were undisclosed aspects of the events that had transpired years ago when Sherine had been under her love spell – aspects that could have probably assuaged or even made her into a completely different person – not many people cared about how her life turned out. And those who did, were too busy with their own lives to show concern.

It happened years ago when she was just starting out life and embracing the world.

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Sherine was attending a new school and was slowly getting over the loss of most of her primary school friends. The new environment at Castries Comprehensive Secondary School left her lonely most times and she yearned for acceptance and social integration.

It was at the early age of eleven that she met Tony at that school. They both were in Form-1 (grade 7). They shared the same Homeroom class. Although they had been neighbours for almost one year, neither of them knew or took notice of the other until secondary school.

Sherine was from the community of Rose Hill, almost from the heart of the city, and Tony was a southern boy from Vieux Fort. Tony's parents had recently moved to Castries to try out at city life.

Tony and Sherine grew extremely social as time went by. For most of Form-1 and -2, they learnt the smaller details and secrets about each other. They spent a considerable amount of time at school doing group work whenever it was possible. When it wasn't school work, they were just hanging out. When they both were commissioned by their parents sternly to focus on their school work because of fluctuating grades, the two teenagers shrugged off the warnings and engaged in more play and social behaviour.

As they grew older, they started *dating*. It was not really dating; it was more like acting out dating simply to get into the 'hot-club' at school. You were considered to be a 'hottie' if you had a boyfriend or girlfriend. And so they did.

Sherine and Tony were transferred to different Homeroom classes in Form-3 because of the variation of subject-streams that they chose. They welcomed the change of class so as to be socially validated as a couple by their peers. But what had started out as a follow-through game, changed into *puppy love*, morphed into infatuation and quickly blew into a full and uncontrollable love affair.

Their teenage love impulses and hormonal surges were out of control. They felt a sense of completion with each other. With every sight or glimpse that they caught of each other, their hearts skipped beats and *butterflies* filled their tummies. They were both willing to sacrifice anything for each other, even if it meant suffering. Tony and Sherine grew more attached to each other day by day.

Sherine ached whenever Tony was not around. Tony grieved inwardly when she was not. By the time that some of their peers discovered the seriousness of the relationship, it was too late to do anything. Most of them thought that the two had grown overly obsessed with each other.

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After futile attempts at warning Sherine and Tony that this love affair could ruin their school lives and affect their academic performances, their peers slowly distanced themselves from them. This didn't stop the couple. They fell deeper into the emotional pit that had swallowed them. They grew more attached with each other with each week that passed.

"I cannot eat or sleep properly when we mad," Sherine whispered to Tony as she fixated a deep gaze through his eyes and into his soul.

"Words can't explain how I feel. I will try, but they can't do justice to my affections. You are the blood in my body that keeps my heart beating. Without you, I will wither and die," Tony replied with a gentle kiss on her forehead.

Their affections grew daily. Each day, they loved each other a little bit more than the day before. A love game had now turned into something more. Something called love – the real love.

Love; a dream that many wished for and most never got, was being experienced in all its glory by two immature teenagers who barely knew anything about life. Love was a fairy-tale that was disseminated by the print and electronic media, a fairy-tale that Sherine's and Tony's parents read to them from books by foreign authors, but a tale that neither parents ever lived or experienced at such tender years.

Notwithstanding, their loose use of the word love was never a true picture of the degree and intensity of emotion that had befallen them. Sherine and Tony never understood the type of love that they had. All they knew was that they could not live without each other. All they cared for was that in order to see the next day, or to move past the present, they had to see each other for a brief moment, whether in or out of school.

It didn't take long for their relationship to become visible in the community, albeit they tried hard to keep it as secretive as possible. Their efforts were in vain. Sherine's father, Bobby, was informed by someone that Sherine had been spending lots of time with some boy. The news got him pretty upset.

However, he loved his princess dearly and did not want to scold her just on hearsay. So, he gave her a stern warning about school and threatened to take her out and send her to work if her grades continued falling. And in as much as Bobby tried to be serious, he made the situation into a laughing matter. This did not dissuade Sherine.

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The next report that Bobby got from a neighbour mandated a visit to Tony's home. He spared no time when he arrived home from work that night. He placed his bag of tools down and headed to his neighbour's house.

"I doh want that Tony boy of yours to interfere with my girl. She is still a child and I want her to finish school," Bobby commanded with spittle spraying out of his mouth, and then he turned his back and started to walk away.

Angela Mitchel was speechless for a moment. The look on her face was priceless. For the few years now of being neighbours with this man, Angela had never uttered a word to Bobby before like she had with his wife, Brenda. She was surprised that he had come over to her house, and did not know how to react. It took a few seconds for her to notice that he was leaving, and when she did, she thought of a quick comeback.

"Bobby, this is my son you are talking about. You make it sound like he is some animal. Who the hell do you think you are?" Tony's mother fired back angrily. "I will ask him to stay away from your girl, Bobby. If you think your daughter is so much more of a person than my son, well I will ensure that he stays away from you and your family," she finished and slammed the door as Bobby walked away without even turning back.

This was the first conversation that Bobby had with his neighbour. He had never spoken to Angela or her common-law husband, Kennedy John, before. That was not the only surprise. Bobby did not even know who Tony was or what Tony looked like. It made for a *hard sell* since the two houses were a stone's throw apart, separated in view by some Hibiscus hedges and a beautiful Flamboyant tree that was decorated in red and orange flowers seasonally.

Bobby went off to work daily, early every morning with a construction contractor at around six-thirty and got home about seven in the night or later. Sunday was his only day off and occasionally, he spent part of it in church and the rest at home recuperating from physical and mental fatigue. But most times, he just stayed at home resting that entire day. This had been his routine for over ten years, way before his neighbours moved into the neighbourhood.

This explained why he was ignorant of Tony's identity. Still, it was just mild compensation for his arrogance. The thought of his princess having a boyfriend angered him. Sherine's older sister, Josephine, never gave her father that type of worry. Just that fact made Bobby even more upset with his princess.

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The thought of a stranger getting too close to his princess was not comforting. Bobby didn't care to discover who Tony was either. He only needed Tony to stay away from his family. So he gave Sherine another stern warning. That did not deter her.

Again, there came another report of Sherine and Tony being spotted somewhere in the Boulevard, in the centre of Castries city. The informant whom told Bobby about the encounter, told him that they saw his daughter enveloped in the arms of a school boy, kissing in an alleyway between some shops. Bobby did not go to Angela's house this time. Instead, he went straight to Sherine's room as soon as he got home.

The merciless pounding on her door frightened Brenda. He was furious.

"Come here child. Open that door!" he exclaimed.

No sooner had the door slightly cracked open than Bobby pushed it forcefully, knocking Sherine to the floor where she hit her cheekbone on the edge of the bed. The next thing that followed was a fierce vocal snap.

"I doh want you to talk to that boy!"

"Bobby!" Brenda shouted, running from her bedroom to Sherine's room. "What you doing? Bobby!"

The rage that consumed Bobby was too much to allow him to reason. It was too much for him to answer Brenda. He stood in the doorway staring down at his princess who sat on the floor and he did not care for what his wife was asking.

"If I ever hear from anyone in Rose Hill, or anywhere else that you are seeing this Tony boy, I will skin you alive with my belt. I will do it! You will hate me for life. I will not have any child in this house looking for man. No child of mine, as long as they under my roof, will have any man. Never!" Bobby shouted.

He paused to take a breath.

"Kissing? Holding hands? Hugging in the Boulevard? Child! Doh ever let that happen to you again! Doh ever let that happen to you! Cause you going to hate me. I not joking. Doh ever, ever, ever let that happen!"

The shame of his daughter kissing a boy in her school uniform was so overwhelming that he did not even want to say the words out loud for too long. Bobby spent the next few minutes staring at Sherine. He examined his princess who was at the floor of her bed listening to her

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father intently and trying to control the tears that were flowing unrestrainedly. The sight broke Bobby's heart. He slowly turned away and brushed passed his wife. Brenda said nothing further.

That night was unforgettable to everyone in the family. That was the first time Bobby spoke that way to Sherine, the first time that the princess felt the rage and anger from her father – the respected and revered King. It was her first form of abuse from her treasured icon, but not the last. It was an unforgettable night.

That night, both she and her mother lost all sense of comfort and security from the King. Josephine was lucky to be away. The relationship between King and Princess was never the same since.

Sherine did not go to school the next day. Her face was swollen from the accidental blow and she did not want her friends to ask too many questions. She kept her room locked all day and did not even open when her mother begged her. She only gave verbal confirmation of her safety and presence. When she finally came out, Brenda was waiting to embrace her. Both mother and daughter cried. Brenda seized the moment to initiate conversation and present an environment conducive for open speech.

That day, they spoke to each other like best friends. Brenda made the atmosphere so comfortable that Sherine shared most of her secrets with her. She told her everything there was to tell about Tony, everything including the few times that they had kissed and their town meetings.

Brenda tried her best to comfort Sherine.

“Sher-sher, boys come and go. You still young. Right now you need to do your school work. I know a lot of people who was just like you. They fall in love young, just like you, but they doh last. As soon as they finish school, they move on with life and forget about that love. All of them were hard-headed and did not care what their mother and father say. I know that you think your father is mean to you. I hate him for making you knock your head on the bed last night. But Sher, please understand, boys come and go,” Brenda explained.

“You need to be all you can be, now. You need to focus on school. Try to make something out of yourself. Try to achieve what your sister did. Your father working hard to support this family. Don't throw your life away my girl,” Brenda paused. She took a deep breath and then continued. “Take your time. You will meet better guys later in your life. Or maybe you and Tony can wait

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for each other. Please, just take your time. I love you my sweetie. And I want what best for you. Your father also want what best for you. You are his little princess. You know that he love you.”

At the end of their conversation, Sherine thanked her mother. Her face was still swollen, but the pain was no more. Brenda agreed to speak with Tony to satisfy Sherine’s request to ease the tension between the two families.

The following day, Brenda went over to Tony’s house. It was about 4:00pm. She knocked lightly on the door. Angela was the one who answered.

“Hi Mrs Smith, what do you want?” Angela was rude and abrupt.

“I know what been going on. Can I come in to talk with you?” Brenda asked.

With reluctant consent from Angela, Brenda followed as Angela led her into the house and entered the living room where Tony was seating and writing in a notebook. Tony went into his room immediately after Brenda greeted him. He was an extremely polite boy. Brenda noticed his courtesy and commended him before he left for his room.

The two parents had a long conversation about their children’s love affair. They discussed many things. At times they disagreed, and others, there was concord. At the end of their conversation, the two females shook hands and Tony was called into the living room. Angela explained to him that his education was more important than anything else, and that he needed to focus on school. She informed him that, they, the parents, had come to an agreement to allow them, the kids, to spend time with each other under their supervision – Sherine and Angela.

Brenda agreed to make up an excuse for Bobby if the need ever arose. Tony and Sherine were prohibited to spend time anywhere else, but at Brenda’s house. Their prohibition also included the banning of socialization at school. This move was an effort to protect both of the children, and to keep them under control. It was also a move by the parents to deter the kids from making *stupid* decisions.

When all the terms were explained to Tony, Brenda left. Upon arrival at her house, she explained those terms to her daughter.

After a week at home and a doctor’s written permission for leave of absence, Sherine went back to school. Her face was back to its flawless detail.

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However, despite the attempt that Brenda was making to allow Sherine to focus on school and be friends with Tony at the same time, Sherine wanted more. Naturally, both Sherine and Tony wanted more. They felt imprisoned under the supervision of Brenda's hawk-eyes.

When Tony came over, they mostly did homework together. At the times when they had no school work to do, especially on Saturdays, they spoke casually about anything that came to mind. Brenda always stayed in the vicinity, either in the kitchen or somewhere in the balcony. Most times her attention was not on them, but she would never leave them in the house alone. This was disconcerting to the teenagers.

They wanted more. They had not kissed in a long time. The closeness they shared physically was agonizing as they were forbidden to speak anywhere, but under the auspices of two women – their parents. They did not want to ignore the raging emotions that flooded their bodies as they spoke to each other occasionally. So they silently planned on taking back their freedom, a seemingly inevitable outcome.

It was by accident at first that they bumped into each other one morning on the way to school, next to the standpipe near Ma-Jane's shop. Then, that serendipitous act – owed to the fact that Tony's stepfather had recently changed jobs and that Tony no longer had to leave the house together with him on a morning – was repeated about twice every week from that day on, next to the same pipe, near the same shop.

The standpipe became their secret meeting point. From the road-end near the standpipe, a spot drivers used for reversing, it was a right turn down a concrete footpath with steps, to about one hundred feet where the road divided into two legs; one leading to Sherine's home on the right and Angela's on the left. There were hibiscus hedges all along the way that beautified the path and also concealed sight.

There were not many houses near the road-end either; only five, to be exact. Tony and Sherine spent as little time together when they met by the pipe as they possibly could, in case people from around the area came to fetch some water or grocery shopping.

The purposeful accidental meetings then turned into orchestrations. They graduated from their levels of pretence into promiscuous morning hellos.

On mornings, before they left home, they would try to catch a glimpse of each other through the branches of the Flamboyant tree that hindered full sight from either house.

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Tony knew that he could not allow the people in the community to see him spending unsupervised time with Sherine, so he tried his best to make it look like happenstance when they were at the same location, at the same time.

Over months, the two teenagers earned some leverage from their mothers for good behaviour. Neither parent knew of the silent meetings. While they were satisfied with their decision to allow the teens to associate under supervision, they had no idea that that very decision had stirred up desires in both teens that resulted in them seeking more unpermitted opportunities.

In as much as Tony and Sherine were getting the stolen chances to spend unsupervised time with each other, it hurt that they could not walk to school together every morning. It hurt that they could not return home with a refreshing walk through Castries in the afternoon, like they used to before they had been discovered and boundaries had been set by their parents.

Though Tony and Sherine concealed their relationship from the community, they didn't care for much secrecy at school as they flaunted ostentatious love gestures in full view of their peers. The teens disobediently spent their lunch and break time at school, together. They even went as far as planning and carrying out occasional secret meetings at Vigie beach.

Their out-of-boundary dating continued secretly until Form-5 (grade 11). Surprisingly, no new reports were ever brought to Bobby and he never discovered that his wife was allowing Tony to visit Sherine at home.

The teenagers occasionally extinguished their burning desires for each other with passionate kisses whenever it seemed safe and isolated, especially at Vigie. However, they never planned or tried to go beyond kissing. It was forbidden. It was something that they understood was forbidden, and something that they promised themselves would never become an item for discussion. *No messing around with sex.*

However, life sometimes never happens the way we want it to. For Tony and Sherine, theirs was a typical example. Even with their religious background and parental guidance, the teens crossed that line. It happened twice, unintentionally, unprepared and uncontrollably. They indulged in the act willingly, knowing fully the consequences of their actions.

It happened that very day that Tony told Sherine that his parents were sending him to the south, at some relatives, to prepare for his end of secondary school – CXC – examinations. He would

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have only been allowed to come up to Castries on days he has exams. That day was a Friday and he was due to leave the next day.

Tony mentioned that his mother was trying to keep him away from Rose Hill, and that was the reason she chose to send him to Vieux Fort, as far south as her residing relations allowed her to venture.

Tony told Sherine that she even told him that he would be spending most of his Castries visiting hours with his grandparents in La Toc – a five minute drive from Sherine's house, but an eternity to walk.

It happened on that very day. They crossed the forbidden line. It was also the very first time that Sherine visited Tony's house.

She snuck passed the hedges and tree and went over to Tony's house after school. She knew that her mother was out for the afternoon, and that Tony had been absent from school that day. He had never missed a day at school before. She wanted to know what was wrong. Her intention was to ask Angela if he was ok. She never expected to find him alone in the house and his mother out to town. Upon knocking on the door, she was welcomed in and she saw that Tony was packing items of clothing in duffel bags, and placing books into boxes.

Tony was home alone. Both parents were gone. No one was there to supervise them.

And that's when it happened, without any fear or apprehension – the completion of their fairy-tale love.

Tony came over to say goodbye to Sherine the next day. It was Saturday, a market day for most families. He called twice at the door and Sherine came running with tears in her eyes.

“Please doh go. Please.”

“Is your mother in? Why are you crying? Aren't you afraid that she will see you crying?” were the first words Tony could utter. But after Sherine convinced him that her mother was out and would be gone a long time her relaxed and then continued. “I have to, baby. My mother is waiting. She said that I had ten minutes to say goodbye,” Tony answered, more composed than Sherine was. Their teenage love was justified by her tears and characteristic hormonal imbalances.

Sherine pulled him inside the house and said, “My mother gone and daddy at work. He not coming home early at all. And she not coming back until five. Please, make love to me one more time, before you go. Please. Let's make dat ten minutes count.”

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The words had not escaped her lips before Tony pressed his against hers.

And it happened, again. Their raw teen passions travelled along a forbidden road and trod the same dangerous terrains that it had the day before. For a second time, there was no one to supervise them.

They said goodbye that day, May 9th, and dared not to close this chapter of their lives. They swore an oath to secrecy and promised to love each other more with every passing day. Sherine logged that date into her memory banks so far in that it was impossible to ever forget.

As promised, Tony made occasional visits to Castries. On days when he had exams, he slept over at his grandparents' house at La Toc because his mother did not want him to come to Rose Hill. He got to see Sherine at school on days when they shared the same subjects.

If absence did anything to them, it made their love stronger. Both Brenda and Angela were oblivious of the fact that their children were hopelessly and deeply attached to each other. To the teenagers, it was called, *unconditional love*. To the parents, it was nothing but stupidity.

In a stunning turn of events, as time went by and CXC exams became demanding, Sherine noticed that her period was overdue. The last time she had seen it was before they had sex. It had not really been an object of concern because she was trying to focus on studying for exams. But now, it was. She grew scared, but said nothing.

Sherine waited for a few more days before she grew a panic.

"I think I should tell Tony," she murmured to herself as she prepared herself for her final exam.

Tony's final exam was on Tuesday, June 30th, a day after Sherine had hers. And his parents had been planning to send him back to Vieux Fort on the weekend, indefinitely.

Tony begged his mother to allow him to spend one night in Rose Hill so that he can spend some time with Sherine before saying goodbye to her indefinitely. After much hesitation, Angela agreed. Not only did she agree, but she also gave him three days to come home; from Thursday to Saturday morning.

On Thursday afternoon, Tony went over to Sherine's. Brenda was shocked to see him. She had noticed his absence, but she had refused to ask Sherine anything about him so as not to give her the impression that she cared or even condoned her relation with him.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Smith," Tony greeted with a smile on his face. "How are you?"

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“Young man, I doh see you for a while. I guess you been working hard on your exams,” she responded, motioning him to come in and then continued. “I’m fine thank you. You come to see Sherine?”

“Yes I was. I had to spend as much time in the books as possible. And yes I did come see Sherine. Is she here?”

“Oh sure, lemme get her for you. Her father will be here soon so I doh think you should stay long. It is his first day off.”

Brenda had grown fond of Tony during the times that he had been visiting. She admired his discipline and helpfulness. He always offered to help her with stuff when he came around. Yet she did not make her favour obvious to him or to Sherine.

Brenda thought that the teens would soon grow out of their love phase. The fact that Sherine spoke less and less of Tony reassured her that she was getting over him. *Besides, they would soon fade from each other’s memory when school was over in a few more days.*

Sherine came running downstairs and hugged Tony. The move didn’t please Brenda as she made her way back into the kitchen, but she pretended it was ok. *As long as he didn’t stay too long, it was ok.*

Sherine invited Tony to sit and they started conversing.

The chattering and giggles from the two were ok, but there came a point when there was a long period of silence which troubled Brenda. She was unaware of what turn the conversation had taken, so she grew uneasy.

“Hey Tony, do you know that we moving to Babonneau soon?” Brenda asked, leaving Sherine in amazement.

Although Brenda knew that they were not due to relocate to that community any time within the year, she felt confident in her husband’s ability to save enough money to buy the property, so she confidently divulged. Albeit, it was done partly to discourage Tony.

“Mom, why you eh tell me? When would I find out?” Sherine asked mildly, but fully surprised. “That’s how you tell me about us moving? When you plan all this? And why? How Tony get to know before me?”

Brenda was not afforded a chance to respond to the questions before Bobby arrived. He had gone to town to carry out some banking transactions that he missed out on the month before. Brenda expected his arrival and was well prepared.

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However, for Tony, it was something totally different. He was far from prepared. He grew extremely uneasy when he saw Bobby appear in the doorway. A short while later, after Bobby simply passed by to place his bags in the room, and said nothing more to them than ,“good afternoon,” Tony relaxed a little.

“Good afternoon, Sir.”

“Good afternoon, daddy.”

The discomfort in the air was suffocating to both Tony and Sherine. The subject of their conversation that had changed their laughter earlier made them both fearful. The danger was now becoming more than potential.

“I wonder if he knows me. He didn’t look upset. Am I still alive?” Tony asked himself softly.

It did not feel safe to be at the house anymore so he decided to leave and return the next day when Bobby was at work until late.

“Nothing can keep me away baby,” Tony whispered to Sherine with a convincing grin. “I will be here first thing in the morning. If I have to sneak out I will, but I will be here.”

“Please make sure. We need to finish talking. Please, please,” her whispering tone expressed some worry.

“I promise I will be here. I promise.”

Tony then got up from his sit and bade farewell to Brenda and informed her that he would return the following day.

“You’re listening to your number one sound, the supreme leader. Stay tuned as we bring you the best of the best of Caribbean Calypso,” blasted out of Bobby’s radio as he tuned in to listen to his favourite genre of music. The vibration from the bass could be felt through the floor. Even the glasses and cups in the kitchen cupboard were jumping to the pulsation.

Sherine entered the kitchen to get some water from the refrigerator. Brenda had been pondering the possible reasons for the long silence she had witnessed in the conversation earlier. She was curious and wanted to know. She had thought long and hard, but she could not come up with a reason for the silence.

“Were they kissing in my house?” She thought then shrugged off the audaciousness.

Then she waited for a few seconds and something came to mind instantly. She prepared herself and then asked.

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“Ay ay, Sherine, how comes I not seeing or hearing you talk about your period yet?”

Brenda tried her best to speak those words softly, but it came out a little too loud in her attempt to speak over the volume of the radio.

She waited. And when she felt safe enough to speak because she figured that Bobby was still in the room listening to his loud music, she breathed a sigh of relief.

There was no way he would have heard their conversation in the kitchen.

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THE CONFRONTATION

Sherine froze. She was astonished. She was caught off guard.

“Did mummy hear our conversation,” she thought to herself.

Brenda’s question hit her like a golf ball on the knee and her legs weakened. Her caramel complexion turned to blue, then pale. Sherine had lost track of exactly how many days or weeks now since she had last seen her period. *It might have been two months or there about.*

How was she going to say that to her parents? “They will kill me then bury me behind the house. Nobody will know I gone.”

Sherine was dumbfounded. In a futile attempt to respond to her mother, she could not move her tongue. She had no clue what to say to her mother. Yet, she did not want to make her predicament obvious.

“I know I doh speak those words that loud,” she thought to herself again, speeding through possible scenarios in her head, to try to rationalize why her mother was asking her such a question. *“I know mummy doh hear us speak. Oh God! What will I say to her? She will kill me.”*

These words tried desperately to jump out of her mouth. She had to keep her calm. She had to remain settled.

“What you mean, mummy?” she asked in a calm collected voice.

“You hear me child... when?” Brenda asked again, subtler than before.

“Ti mamay ou pa tan (*Child didn’t you hear!*)?” Bobby exploded.

Whenever he spoke in Patois to any of his children, it was a bold confession of his anger. Brenda’s calm revolted into discomfort. Her blood pressure began to pulsate in vicious spasms. Sherine was not allowed the chance to respond to her mother. She was jerked off her stance by a powerful pull from behind.

Bobby had overheard his wife’s interrogation when he was about to enter the kitchen to get himself a cold bottle of beer. The opportunity presented itself for eavesdropping.

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And the fact that he had seen a boy in the house earlier whom he said nothing to, made his eagerness to hear his daughter's response even more dire. So he had waited sneakily.

"What I hear, uh? Uh?"

The awkward moment that it had been when Brenda first asked the question, quickly changed into a tension-filled atmosphere as Brenda allowed her husband to take over. She had no choice at times like this when his ignorance gave birth to either a defensive mode or an offensive one that made his voice seem to overpower the irritating sound of the late afternoon tolling of the Cathedral bells.

"You doh see your period yet? What I hearing?"

His muscular body towered over Sherine who stood like a Siamese cat about to be attacked by a 120 pound Bullmastiff. His charcoal-black complexion glistened from the remains of sweat droplets still sliding off his body from his walk around town that afternoon. His face was full with a thick, dark beard and moustache.

Bobby's coarse, harsh, masculine voice silenced Sherine's puny whimpering and sent chills through her tender bones.

"Bobby, let her..."

"Quiet, Woman! Lemme speak to my daughter," Bobby snorted at Brenda who sank immediately into a wooden chair at the homemade kitchen island.

The model-like slender legs that exalted Sherine's fully developed teenage body trembled like a *shak-shak* (a shaking instrument) in a musician's hands. Subtlety fled the scene and she was defenceless.

An awful silence emerged, but only this time, Sherine wanted to hear the silence again to be reassured that she was still alive, and still standing. However, in her father's mind, it was just a few more seconds spared for her to defend herself and render his suspicions about his lovely princess, incorrect.

Arrogance could have been seen jolting up Bobby's body through erratic shudders of his shoulders. Bobby could not believe that this nightmare was haunting him again. *He must have been a stupid man to think that the absence of reports about his daughter meant that the boy was no longer in her life.*

Bobby did not want to think of this possibility. Anything, but this possibility, especially after he had accidentally caused his princess to hit her head on the bed the last time he had confronted

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her about that boy matter. He did not want a repeat of that. And he surely did not want to find out that his princess was no longer a virgin. *This was every father's nightmare.*

Thoughts of possible scenarios filled his head. He tried to refuse thoughts of pregnancy, but in his mental disenchantment and physical fatigue from walking too much in town that day under the hot Caribbean sunshine, that was not possible. This made him angrier. He was mad at himself for all the wrong reasons and angry with his daughter for all the right ones.

“So I eh give you enough time to answer me, uh? I will make you talk if you cannot talk.” Bobby disappeared through the side door of the house – a door he normally used to go to an outside building which was his tool shed – and left an explosion of words trailing him. He did not once second-think his intention.

Brenda knew what was going to happen. Somehow, Sherine did too. She saw how this moment had slowly progressed into what seemed like the inevitable.

What better time for the second hand on the kitchen clock to take minutes to complete its task, she thought to herself, sarcastically.

Bobby's voice faded into inaudibility and Brenda gathered some strength and rushed next to Sherine who was all in tears now.

“Sher-sher,” – a nick name that Sherine loved to hear from her parents, but presently offered her no comfort – “you do anything you not suppose to? You know what daddy going to do. I doh want him to hurt you. What going on?” Brenda's voice pleaded, literally, for her daughter to respond.

But Sherine could not. Her legs had given up and she had collapsed to the floor and was crying her heart out.

“Sherine, you see your period already?”

There was no answer. Just, tears.

“Why you not answering, child?” Brenda grew suspicious. “Did you sleep with that boy?” she inquired as she shook her daughter into realization.

Brenda was becoming impatient and more convinced. A moment ago, she had only asked the question to quell her arousal of an unspoken secret, a question which she thought would serve as conversation to ask about the silence. Now, she was convinced by her daughter's unwillingness to speak that her suspicion held some truth.

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“Sherine, stop crying and talk. Nobody touch you yet. Bobby not going to hit you if you talk. He just angry. So c’mon. Hurry up. You getting me vex. Why you not answering a simple question?” Brenda tried to explain.

The teenager was scared. She had never been so frightened of her father before, until the incident; that accidental blow which kept her out of school for an entire week. She was terrified of him since. And it seemed like it was moments away from a replay of that cold night.

“Sherine!” her mother shouted. “Dammit, what going on? A little question like that you cannot answer? So you sleep with the boy for true then?” she continued.

These words were not entering Sherine’s ears. She was frightened and disoriented.

“*Wicked parents!*” Her loud crying slowly turned into sobbing. “Why daddy so wicked? I hate him! I hate him! I wish he would just die! I wish I would die.”

Her words caught Brenda by surprise. It was evident now that her daughter was terrified of her husband.

“*How this happen? When this happen?*” Brenda was shocked. So she paused in disbelief.

Bobby made his entry.

“Oh, so you rude these days?”

Those words were sinister. From anyone else it would have sounded like praise to a teenager, but from Bobby, this meant *trouble and worries*.

“I ask you a question and you cannot answer, well I will make you talk.”

In Bobby’s hand was whip that one of his friends, Peter, called *Set-you-straight*; a thin, but sturdy whip cut from a Tamarind tree, with four neatly intertwined branches that projected as a long, straight plait. Peter occasionally soaked it in a tub of sea water so that the salt could harden it. It stung terribly.

Peter was known for his strict disciplinary actions which no one in the community approved of.

“It only take one strike,” he would say, “to set dem chil’ren straight.”

There was truth to that statement. Everybody knew that Peter only struck once with that whip and his kids would never commit the offence again. No *Rose-Hillian* dared to mention anything to Peter because they did not want to be casualties of his swearing tongue. It seemed like he was a disciplinarian both verbally and physically, something he, Peter, considered as a noble ancient lineage.

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The whip was a traditional symbol that Peter could not get away from. His family history was tainted with flogging as a form of punishment, but more so a means of correction to stubborn or misbehaving children. Age was not even a deterrent to receive correction.

Their sustained motivation for that type of disciplinary action was a bible verse; Proverbs chapter 13 verse 24 which stated, “*He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly.*”

Neither Brenda, nor Sherine saw that coming. Their eyes opened widely when they saw the monstrous abomination in the hand of their dearly loved, head of the house.

“Daddy, pleeeeeeease,” Sherine wailed as the whip greeted her flesh from Bobby’s first strike.

“Who sen’ you to have sex! Why the hell you...,” he readied himself for another attack.

“I see..., I see my period already,” Sherine screamed.

The words barely made it out of her mouth as the whip landed flat on her back. The pain forced another shriek from her and she sprang from her position.

Bobby’s hand was already in mid-air again for a third strike. His attempt to pull back the whip when he interpreted Sherine’s words failed. ‘*Set-you-straight*’ took her on her buttocks with lesser force, and completed a violent wave of three.

Brenda stared at Bobby with shock. She had never experience this type of abuse in all her years with him. He had never laid a hand on any of his girls. His anger had never moved beyond the point of verbal cruelty. Brenda had never seen this side of her husband.

The screams from Sherine drew Angela’s attention and also notified distant neighbours that the bushes and hedges hid. Angela stepped into her balcony and looked over to her neighbour’s house. She too, had never heard Bobby beat his daughter before.

“Wow, Sherine must have done something really bad. Poor girl. I was beginning to like the child,” Angela stated to her partner, Kennedy, who joined her as he sought to identify the unceremonious screams that had caused him to drop his plate of food.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that Tony went over to your mom’s place already. This would have surely disturbed him,” Kennedy said. He held Angela and then hugged her.

“At least we’re leaving this God-forsaken neighbourhood, Ken. I don’t think I would want to experience another one of those. Gosh! That man is wicked. And to think he esteemed his child higher than Tony. What a hypocrite!” Angela offered as therapy.

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“Well baby, this is none of our business right now. Let’s go inside. We have some dirtying, cleaning and some packing to do,” Kennedy teased with a sexual innuendo. Then with a contemplative look on his face as they both made their way back into the house, he concluded, “Poor girl, she must have done something really bad.”

Bobby took a few steps backwards.

The words that he had wanted to hear were floating in the air and they did not mean the same. Something did not feel right about them. Yet, that was the confirmation he had needed. *Had he just punished his daughter wrongfully?*

“She see her period. It means that she doh have sex? She is a virgin? Did I jus’ beat her for no reason?” These thoughts rushed in.

He stood there in disbelief.

“You see; you rude. A little question your mother ask you and you doh answer. You dunno that only when people pregnant they doh see their period? I deh talking to you and you not answering. Your mother ask you a question and you not answering. You want us to think you have sex already? Huh? You want me to think you pregnant? Go inside! Go! Just Go! I don’t even know why I beat you now. Just go! Rude girl.”

La-la, a friend of the family who lived somewhere behind their house but used another footpath near the standpipe to get to her house because of the thick bushes and tall Glory Cedar shrubs between the two houses, came over to the house as soon as she heard Sherine’s shrieks.

She was just in time to hear Bobby admit to flogging his daughter wrongfully. The sight of Sherine in tears, struggling to go to her room whilst rubbing the areas that the whip had bruised, was heart-wrenching to both Brenda and La-la.

“Mwen pa kwè sa. Ou bat ti manmay la pous anyen? Awa awa! (I don’t believe that. You beat the child for no reason? Oh no!).

La-la made her way into the kitchen. Her words and appearance energized Brenda to start an argument with Bobby. All along, she had feared to challenge him alone. Now, both she and La-la attacked him viciously.

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Sherine managed to reach her room upstairs and was nursing her excruciating pains. The places where the whip contacted her skin were all sore and blue. Some areas were swollen with redness. Minatory thoughts crept into her mind and she welcomed them.

“I had to. I had to. Dat idiot would kill me if he find out the truth. If I did not lie, he would beat me to death. If he find out dat I sleep with a guy, he will get a stroke or go insane. Worse; if he know that it is Tony, he will kill me and make no funeral. Why he so evil? I hate him. I hate him...”

“But what if I pregnant? What if...?”

These thoughts were as painful as the bruises on her skin. Tears trickled down her face as she thought those things.

Sherine was naturally a gorgeous girl. Her face was smooth without a spot, wrinkle or pimple. Her eyebrows were naturally thin and dense, just the right thickness to compliment her caramel-coloured eyes. Her hair was Negro-ebony mixed with some trace of Indian, draping in bushy sheets in all directions over her head to reach her shoulders. The light-brown complexion she got from her mother’s side augmented all other features.

Sherine was a beauty. A young beauty. Well, that was before today. Before her tears and her predicament. Now, her beauty was subsiding. Her physique was scarred and damaged. Her pride was destroyed. *And pretty soon, her youth would fade into parenthood if she became pregnant in truth.*

“I cannot be pregnant. I cannot. Not now. Not yet. Not as daddy around. Oh God I sorry I lied. Oh God, Oh God. I had to. I had to.”

Her thoughts were not accomplishing what she wanted them to. She was trying despairingly to think the pain away. Instead, she was making them more intense. The places where *Set-you-straight* had visited told of the bitter conflict between whip and skin. Sherine was still feeling the unbearable pain where the bruises were and felt that this was a colossal failure on the part of her grandparents, for they must have socialized Bobby that way.

“How could Mama Giffa raise daddy like that? Or it Papo fault? Why daddy such a monster?” She thought to herself.

One would have thought that time would have healed her, but it seemed liked time was at war with her. This was the first time she had ever felt what Peter’s children had been feeling all those

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years. This was the first time that her dad purposefully abused her, but the second time to disfigure her body and trust.

Bobby had bruised her tender heart one more time. Only this time, *he meant to do it. He meant to hurt her. He meant to take away her love. He meant to destroy her.*

“Oh Tony, I think I pregnant.” She mocked. “How stupid was I? This can be my cycle dat changing. I not pregnant,” she tried to assure herself in a low voice.

“It don’t mean that I pregnant. Could it?” Her thought process took over again as an internal battle waged war inside her.

“What if I am for true, what if...?” She rubbed her lap vigorously.

The chafing action didn’t make the feeling any better. The bruises stung horrendously. She got up in search for some white Petroleum Jelly to place on the bruised areas.

“He doh accept dat I growing. I will need a boyfriend just now. He doh care dat I leaving school in a few days. He treating me like I ten years old. Why Brenda marry mate? If he touch me again, I swear, I...”

Sherine could not finish her thoughts as she fought with an overwhelming urge of throwing up. She was not going to succumb to it. She was too angry. She was mad at both her mother and her father.

“I wish I was pregnant. In his ass! He would just choke and die,” she comforted herself.

Sherine reached over her bedroom dresser, forgetting all about the Petroleum Jelly and took a black and white coloured photo of Tony that she kept hidden behind her mirror. She stared into his eyes like she had all the other times before she went to bed, and whispered, “I think I pregnant for you. I know you will be the best father.”

Tears trickled down her cheeks as she gently passed her fingers on the picture.

“What will I do? What will I do? This is hard. Tony, I need you. I wish you was here. I sorry. I sorry. I love you unconditionally, baby. I love you.”

Sherine forgot all about the agonizing pain as she sank into a river of love thoughts.

For a full hour, the house went quiet. Still, Sherine’s thoughts continued to speak in solitude to her.

La-la and Brenda managed to break Bobby’s stronghold. He regretted every word and action. He left the house as a result to seek a secluded place of refuge.

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“*Bondye’ padon (Lord I’m sorry),*” he whispered to himself, as he settled between the roots of a huge mango tree a great distance away from his home, higher up into the hills of Rose Hill. He sat there and allowed time to crawl as he pondered deeply.

Although Bobby was arrogant and ignorant occasionally, he was a loving father, a supportive husband, and religious man who always sought redemption from God. His surroundings did not offer him much peace. He was continually disturbed by the war-dogs of Rose Hill and Marchand that met occasionally to test their testosterone levels and mark territories somewhere at the back of the hills. This was disconcerting to even the cats that stayed hidden inside houses when the riots began.

Bobby was deeply moved by his actions. The watch on his wrist sounded six o’clock, but he was unaware. It was not until the last five tolls of the usual twelve from the bells of the Castries Cathedral that he was sounded into cognizance.

While he was under the tree, he thought of many things; his past life, his present actions, and his future with his daughter. It was the first time that he had intentionally hit his princess. That caused him much anxiety.

He was sorry for what he did.

Bobby tried to think away the image of Sherine helplessly begging him on the floor as he lashed out in anger, but the image would not go away. Long after the action had been executed, the image remained as detailed shards of memories in his head, poking at his conscience. Then, they grew into a mental portrait detailed to the microscopic figment.

He kept on seeing the image of his helpless princess crying in pain as he stood over her like an ironic dark-skinned slave master ensuring that his orders were carried out. The images of that day *killed* him. He could not hold back the tears. Bobby gave in to the overwhelming remorse as his eyes swelled in preparation for tears. His entire body detested the events of the day and he was filled with great indignation.

He broke down. He cried like a baby in need of food. He could not believe that he had singlehandedly destroyed his princess.

It hurt that he had probably killed his princess, who although would continue living, would probably hate him for the rest of her life.

“*How will she look at me again?*”

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Bobby slowly got up. He didn't know how to face the next minute. He didn't know how to face his wife. He didn't know how to face his daughter, but he had to.

He headed home, born a new man; dead to the whip, dead to hurtful words. Dead to anger.

Earlier that same day; immediately after Tony had left Brenda's house, he went across to his home to collect a duffel bag and then left to go to his grandparents'. His intention was to walk the entire way to deal with his disillusioned state of mind, as slow as possible. He did not know how to react to what Sherine had said to him.

When she had spoken her words, he went mute. His bubbly and chatty mood had vanished in an instant. And the fact that he could not at the time discuss it with Sherine had been agonizing.

He knew that he had promised to return the next day, but he felt like he needed to talk about this today. If Bobby had not been at the house he would surely have gone back forthwith. As a matter of fact, he would not have left.

"Oh Lord, what am I gonna do? What have I done to Sherine?"

Tony kicked an empty plastic bottle that was in his way. He was the only school boy walking on Jeremie Street, but was surrounded by all *walks of people*. Yet, he felt alone.

He could have heard Sherine's words echoing in his head; "*I think I pregnant. I did not get my period.*"

The expression on Sherine's face when she had softly confessed her predicament to Tony was like one seeking seclusion and exile in the hands of her lover just before they elope. The happiness that had been found in the comfort of their seats in the living room at the time, and the covert savouring of each other's company with borrowed seductive stares, had been interrupted instantaneously by the news which left mixed emotions.

The news of being pregnant froze them both and they went silent for a few minutes. This was the silence that Brenda had witnessed. The arrival of Bobby had not helped. It had made them uncomfortable. Tony had been so nervous and scared then that he almost peeped on himself.

Tony was now walking on Jeremie Street slowly and he was halfway to his destination. He was plagued by the repetition of Sherine's words. It felt like an echo in his head. He looked like a wreck in his leather sandals, three-quarter jeans and white Polo shirt. This was his favourite

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outfit. It always brought him joy when he wore it. And he always wore one of his best outfits whenever he went over to visit Sherine.

Today was different. His *Sunday-best* went unnoticed. If anything, it brought him more pain than joy. The stress of his mistake, overweighed. It was indeed a huge mistake. A possible pregnancy haunted him.

In those days, although the Rose Hill folks celebrated news of a pregnancy, they despised single parenthood and teenage pregnancy. They condemned such relationships. Even when the children of such families had grown to be adults, the stigma followed them, all the way to their grave.

Twenty-nine year old Glen, forty year old Ben and twenty-two year old Tricia were present victims of that society.

The people of neighbouring communities of Marchand, Entrepot, Mon Du Don and Paveé knew of that “*character flaw*” in *Rose-Hillians*, as they were called.

“I love her so much. I wish I could have stayed. Tomorrow? Mehnn, tomorrow is like forever. If only mummy had allowed me to stay home. I would have gone there early in the morning. We could have planned to meet in the school and make up an excuse.”

“Oh Yeah! That’s what I’ll do. When I go over tomorrow, I will tell her mother that we have to report to school for preparation for graduation. Yes! And my mother won’t send me down so soon. Yes.”

Tony smiled as his words brought some form of joy and comfort to him.

“I will see my sweetheart tomorrow. I told her that I would come back, and I will. I hope she isn’t pregnant though, just for her father’s sake. I don’t even know how I should feel.”

“Wow! If she is pregnant, it means I will be a father.” There was a long pause.

“Bobby will kill me. But at least Sherine and I will have each other. Gosh this is hard.” The father-to-be finally left Jeremie and crossed the road over to Bridge Street. It was just as crowded with people.

“Baby I love you. I will be here for you. We will face this together. You are the love of my life. I will never leave you. You give my life purpose and that’s the best gift ever. You are my reason for living. Do you want a boy, a girl?” Tony practiced his lines for the next day.

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If she was pregnant, only time would tell. *But he wasn't ready to leave her. And he sure as hell would not go back down to Vieux Fort. He had to man up and take care of his responsibility.*

“No! I'm staying in Castries. Nothing will get me down to Vieux Fort. I don't care what my mother says. And Ken better not tell me anything. I love Sherine too much to let her go through this alone. It's my Son! My baby! Mine!”

Tony did not realize that he was speaking loudly or that he had given the baby an identity – his son. He was getting close to his grandparents' place. He was climbing the incline at the base near the La Toc playing field. He had thought long and hard about his quandary with every step that he had taken.

However, it was not until he stood in the footpath which led down to his grandparents' house that overlooked the Castries harbour, that he got an idea. His teenage mind concocted the most outrageous plan ever.

In retrospect, the only plan which was close in degree to his, was one that Joe – La-La's brother – had committed way back when La-La was ten years old. Joe was fifteen then, and 'mischief' was his alias.

Tony started second-thinking his plan.

“Is this really a good plan?... What the hell! It doesn't matter.”

As he got nearer to the house, Tony looked down the path to see if his grandparents were in view. At his location, he could only see a fraction of the house. The bushes and overhanging branches from the nearby trees claimed most of the panoramic detail of the house and the surrounding patches of roses.

The blue plywood house trimmed with white edges, stood innocently on concrete pillars. Tony took one step backwards and looked piercingly at the house again. He took another backwards step, larger than the first step, and stumbled over a stone in his way.

He glanced sharply at his object once more. Still, there was no one insight. Tony then made a complete 180 degree turn and burst into sprint motion. He raced back down the hill, passing the wall houses stationed strategically along the roadside that boasted their owners' economic statuses. He took the sharp right bend with ease, the one that narrowly missed the Mental Hospital by a few feet.

He ran as fast as he could for as long as he could without stopping. He did not care to look behind now. He cared less about the consequences. All he knew was that he had to keep on

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running, he had to keep on in order to reach his destination. He was not ready to be stopped by anyone or anything.

AT THE HOSPITAL

“Hey, garcon, you ok?” a grumpy looking man asked Greg as he stood directly in front of him.

“Huh?” Greg responded.

“Are you ok? You look like something is wrong. Is everything alright?” The man explained his enquiry.

“Yea. Yes, I’m ok. I’m good.”

“Are you sure, my dear?” a lady dressed in a black three-piece suit, like lawyers are, joined in with a concerned look. “Something must be terribly wrong for you to be crying.”

“Crying? I’m not... I am ok, miss,” Greg hinted courteously. “Really... I am. Just having a bad day. That’s all,” he tried to assure the young lady who bore a striking resemblance to Bernice’s mother.

“Well ok, but you can’t fool me. Whatever is the matter seem to be unusually bad because you have successfully attracted a curious crowd who have been gossiping about you. Guess it’s not a usual thing to see a grown man cry in St Lucia,” the lady continued in an unsuccessful attempt to make him smile. “It’s late, so maybe you should try to go home or something. We can help if you like.”

“Yes,” the grumpy-looking man interjected, “we can help if you like.”

“I’m not headed home. I’m going to the hospital. I... It’s just ... I got the worse news,” Greg started, but changed his mind. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. Sorry if I made you guys worry. Thanks for being so kind though. I’ll be fine.”

Greg quickly composed himself then left the scene without waiting for any more questions. He hastily crossed the street, not once looking back at the crowd of gossipers. He hurried down Chisel and turned left onto Brazil Street at the first intersection he got.

All the convenient stores were closed, but town was full of life. The bars and restaurants seemed to be livelier at night than daytime. The drunken guffaw of grown men and the slamming

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of dominoes on wooden tables were all too familiar on this street.

“I hope I get a bus. These bus drivers normally go to bed so early. I don’t want to wait at that stupid bus stand.”

Greg jumped two drains and crossed over to Coral Street. He passed the building which housed the National Treasury and thought to himself, *“Damn government. Always taking poor people’s money. I can never work for those fools. First, they fool you at election time, promise you the world, but as soon as they sit in their fancy chairs they forget all about the people who put them in power. Then, they wait a full five year term before they come to beg for your votes again.”*

“People are so stupid; they run to the polls and vote these same bastards into office. I don’t understand why my country is so party orient. Why can’t we think of ourselves? Why is it either you red, or yellow? Gosh I hate politics. All of them are liars and thieves the same.”

Two more intersections or there about and he would be at the bus stand. Time seemed to be taking forever, especially since he was forcing himself not to think about Larna.

Though he was walking as fast as he could, the bus stand seemed to be getting further and further. He never noticed how far 200 metres was until now. And just as he had thought, there were no buses on the stand.

“Dammit! I might as well just walk the damn way.”

He turned around into the same direction he came from, to go back unto Brazil Street.

“I will just go down through there instead. It should be faster.”

Greg had all but forgotten about the situation. He tried to think of many different things, as he possibly could, so as to keep his mind off the possibility that lurked around. As he walked the streets of Castries, he found himself making mental portraits of the number of buildings on both sides of the Street.

He tried adding historical value to certain areas on Brazil Street; one of which was the location where the great Castries fire of 1948 had started. The entire city had burned down. A famous poet had dubbed it, *A City’s Death*.

His efforts, however, were in vain as he finally succumbed to the mental carnage.

“What am I going to do when I see Larna? Will they let me see her? I only hope that Jennifer is at work.”

Jennifer was one of Greg’s schoolmates who worked at the hospital.

“I know she will get me to see Larna. If Hope thinks that a few words will keep me away, she’s

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wrong.”

At that very moment, Greg erased all fear of Larna possibly dying. To him, the doctors would take good care of her and handle this situation quickly and professionally. *That’s what they are paid to do.*

With his new perception and optimism, he hastened his steps and forwent keeping mental souvenirs of the roadside buildings which stood ostentatiously along Brazil Street. He tried to forgo associating them with memories, until he came to one – a chic yet intimate café called, Charms Café, that he and Larna frequented.

This was the same café they were supposed to have visited tonight for Greg’s special date. As he approached it, he tried not looking. But he could not. He could not prevent the images of hearty laughter and blushing smiles that connected them to that place. He felt weak at the knees.

“Baby, you will make it through. I’m not giving up on you. Please don’t give up on us. Please don’t give up on us.” Greg tried to get his mind off the café.

He hung his head in sorrow and continued his journey to the hospital in tears.

Meanwhile, the scene conspicuous to all who were at the City Hospital, somewhere close to La Toc, sent cold chills down people’s spines. Both patients and their companions occupied every sit in the waiting area, and the walls were clustered with persons standing or sitting along.

There were many sick persons, but none of them were suffering from anything life threatening.

Most patients were actually there as a result of having symptoms of a strain of the common flu, H1N1, called the Swine flu by the public media.

It was reported that this strain was far more deadly than the ordinary flu and that there had been many fatalities daily in Mexico and the United States. Some St. Lucians grew hysterical after hearing of the third case discovered on the island involving an entrepreneur who had recently returned home after visiting Mexico – the origin of the virus.

Surprisingly, all of the patrons who were at the hospital because of the flu-like symptoms were later discovered to be suffering from self-induced paranoia – none actually having the disease – all in an effort not to be a casualty of Swine.

However, what left much repugnance at the hospital was the sight of a man who was brought in by a stranger and who was bleeding in convulsive flows from the side of his head. Soon after, another male walked in through the entrance of the waiting room hopping on one leg, with his

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other leg wrapped in a bloody sheet. Later it was learnt that the two incidents were caused as a result of a vehicular accident and that these individuals had been taken to the hospital privately.

Within the hour, the ambulance came in with two more victims. Word spread through the waiting area and it was learnt that the accident involved three vehicles, resulting in one fatality. It had happened after some public event in Babonneau, a large community in the northeast of the island, the same district where Greg's grandparents lived presently.

Soon, the imagery and memory of the bloodied victims of the accident faded with them as doctors tried their best to attend to as many patients with the flu-like symptoms as possible. Voices rattled and clattered as remaining patients and relatives in the waiting room complained about having to wait for long periods before they were attended to, even when it was obvious to everyone that priority was given to the most serious of cases or injuries.

The Chief Nurse had to be summoned thrice to restore order in the area. This didn't ameliorate the situation completely. Each time she left, an argument would ensue involving a group and a patient with flu-like symptoms. Some people in that waiting room resented having to be in the same room with the patients with flu-like symptoms *and possibly, Swine flu*. The atmosphere became extremely rowdy and disorder continued until additional help was sort from the Royal Police Force.

The police, along with the officials from the hospital, including Jennifer, were able to bring the situation into one that was conducive for both working and co-habitation. This allowed the doctors to work diligently and also gave the nurses some liberty to properly document each patient as they were attended to.

Some employees of the hospital who were on leave were also called in to help deal with the flu patients who were subsequently transferred to another location at the hospital for examination. It turned out, that none of them had the Swine flu. They were given some antibiotics and vitamin prescriptions, and then all sent home.

Apart from the general waiting-room that existed for persons walking into the hospital to seek medical attention, there was also another waiting-room for relatives of patients who were receiving immediate medical attention in various wards from doctors.

Hope, her father, mother and brother, were all sitting in that waiting-room. They formed a little prayer circle and were oblivious to the happenings of the institution. They were taking what the doctors had asked them to do, literally – prayer. And even if they had not been asked to, this

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family would still have.

Larna's parents were devout Christians. Prayer was something that they did daily, both morning and evening, at devotion time.

They adored all their children. But for some reason, Larna was favoured. They treated her like she was a queen. She got whatever she wanted from her parents and siblings. They loved her very much. The thought of her dying was not being entertained.

The Matthews family were in their own little world of prayer and oblivion, as they were desperately trying to fight a tragedy with the power of *conversations with God*. They took no notice of anyone's misfortune, but theirs.

"Oh God, please let Larna survive. Don't let her die. We need her Lord", Ronny uttered with tears rolling down his cheeks.

Ronny Matthews was a strong-willed, robust and confident black man. He was a fine father and excellent provider for his family. He was educated, intelligent, funny, savvy and Godly – a combination of qualities that most women in St. Lucia crave, but is in *almost-to-non-existent* short supply.

In spite of having an endless list of qualities that the majority of men lacked, Ronny had never allowed himself to cry in the presence of his children. They thought that he was, most times, the only level-headed person in the family who was not overly emotional and who always saw proper reasoning even in tough situations.

Today was the first time that they saw him cry. That reality did little to reassure the family emotionally, for their superman had finally stumbled upon his kryptonite.

"We love her God. Please don't let her go, Lord. Not yet. Not now... not at all. She is still young and has a lifetime of memories to create. We promise to help her change and obey you in all things. We promise to serve you. Whatever you ask, we will do it. Please, please, please God", were Gary's words – Larna's brother.

The women of the family remained non-verbal. However, their tear-drawn faces spoke all the words that needed to be spoken. It did all the talking that was needed.

They continued their soft prayer session as the doctors tried desperately to keep Larna alive in the operating room.

Dr. Carlos Rodriguez was the supervising doctor attending to Larna with two other doctors. He had been the family's physician for as way back as Hope could remember and was recently

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attached to City Hospital after years of private practice and specialization.

“Sir, I don’t think she’s going to make it,” one of the doctors said.

“Was that conclusion drawn from our medical analysis after we have exhausted all possibility and time, or are you taking a personal stance because you are ready to give up?” Rodriguez questioned one of his doctors. The look on his face confessed his anger at his colleague.

“No sir, it’s just that...”

“Keep working and shut up,” Rodriguez scolded him. “We have to do all we can for this young lady. So please, stay focused. If it means putting her on dialysis yet again to filter the blood, then so be it. But we are not giving up until that monitor does. And even then, we are going to use every amp of current in that defibrillator.”

After what seemed to the Matthews family as hours had passed, and the sounds in the waiting-room had reached another intermittent pause, a cool breeze blew through the almost-shut louvers at the back of the room.

It caused a slight shiver in everyone. It did not, however, stop the on-going prayer circle. The family closed their eyes tighter and held each other’s hands even firmer. They were not going to give up on their daughter for anything, not even for their own health.

None of them had eaten any food from the time that the incident had taken place, yet not one felt hungry.

Initially, they had planned a morning fast – as was customary each year – that was supposed to have culminated in the consumption of Betty’s lavishly appetizing dishes that would have decorated their dining table for the festive occasion – Larna’s birthday.

It was indeed her birthday today. And Greg had waited all year for his glamorous date with her. This day, she was supposed to have enjoyed with her lover, unbeknownst to the rest of the family.

Larna and Greg had planned the perfect late night birthday getaway that they both had been impatiently waiting for almost a year now. To keep it secretive, Greg had promised to not call her as often during the week of her birthday. He was supposed to have spaced out his calls.

The two had reserved a night at one of the finest intimate cottages affiliated with a leading hotel on the island, and had documented every proposed action from the time they would meet at Charms Café on Brazil Street to the moments that would lead to them eventually *doing it* at the Cottage.

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This would have been their moment. This would have been their first time. They would have gone the whole way. They would have *done it* tonight.

They would have finally swathed each other's love in their crocheted layers of hopeless devotion and burning passion. Then they would have spent the rest of the night in each other's arms and wake up to see the best sunrise ever.

That could not have been made known to her parents. Larna had to keep it a secret. Greg had to follow through. Larna had made the perfect excuse as to the reason she would be away from home that night. Her plans all would have worked had her father not received a phone call from someone, at which point he confronted her and that regretful argument ensued.

If Ronny could have taken back those hours of his day, he would. He would have allowed Larna to date this young man, whoever he was, without saying a word to her. He would not have questioned her at all.

He *should have pretended he knew nothing*. Sadly, he had no way of telling the future and it was too late to take back anything.

The still of the air had something eerie about it. Betty felt a cold chill creep down her spine that made her clench unto her husband's hand so tightly that he got jolted from his reverent posture as the pain yanked him forward.

Ronny opened his eyes to see an indescribable expression on Betty's face. Her tears had dried up. Other than two trails of tears on her face, it was as if she had not been crying at all.

The prayer circle at that moment broke and everyone stared blankly at Betty.

"What's wrong, Betty? What... what's wrong?" Ronny asked as he started trembling. Sweetheart, talk to me. What's wrong?" He pleaded with her.

Betty remained motionless, fixated in a trance. Her half-conscious state did not even respond to the persistent vigorous shakes that Gary gave her.

It was like she was staring at something at the far corner of the room right above the exit door and it was beckoning her to keep looking, as if to say to her that *this was a once in a lifetime experience and that there was never, ever going to be another exhibition*.

Tiny facial muscular twitches were beginning to appear on Betty's face as the family stared questioningly.

"Mummy!" both Hope and Gary slightly shouted to get her attention, but that didn't help either.

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Betty remained focused and kept staring at that one position, at something that only she could see. That something was right above that door. Her face began to tighten and the muscle twitches were more convulsive. It warped her face.

A tiny smirk appeared which instantly disappeared, as if to travel from her mouth to her ears and then down her long black, *relaxed* hair. In its place, a surprised contortion emerged which then settled for the same initial blank and indescribable stare.

At that very moment, Dr. Rodriguez entered the room with one glove completely off his right hand and the other half out. He was silent for a bit. His face was ready to deny any impulsive assumptions that anyone of the family members could have made.

He was calm. It was like he knew what to do and how to do it, like he knew what to say and how much to say. Everyone was expectant. Everyone, except Betty. She was still in her trance.

Dr. Rodriguez came around and stood between Hope and Gary and he placed his gloveless hands, one on each of their shoulders.

He said nothing. Two minutes passed without a word. There was perfect silence. Amazingly, during this silent moment, even the groans from the patients faded into the night's air and the night insects paid respect with silence.

Dr. Rodriguez said nothing. He only focused his attention on Betty. Ronny noticed that his wife's tears were beginning to reappear on her face.

"Betty. Betty," Ronny calmly called. "What's the matter, Baby? What's the matter?"

The events that followed could not be put into words. In a matter of seconds, Betty's face illuminated with every possible facial contortion known to man. And what remained as a permanent display of pain to her onlookers, could not be described as she spoke two horrifying words.

"She, gone."

"What are you saying? What are you saying Betty? Who's gone?" Ronny turned to face the doctor. "Rodriguez, what's going on? Is Larna ok?" he asked vehemently.

The desperate plea by Larna's father for answers from the doctor about his daughter's well-being subsided as Rodriguez repeated the most hurtful words to the family, with the same blatant subtlety and truth that they were vocalized with by Betty.

"She is gone."

No one understood what Betty had said when she had uttered those words, but they knew

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exactly what Dr. Rodriguez meant when he said them.

Rodriguez tightened his grip on the children's shoulders in a sort of consoling way. These words took away four lives that day. These words took away four reasons for life, for living, in the hearts of four family members who remained.

"I'm sorry. Larna; she didn't make it. We flushed out a large quantity of the poison, but some of it had already reached her vital organs. We tried our best, but our best was just not good enough," the doctor added in an attempt to appease Ronny's questioning eyes.

Suddenly, Betty's face regained life and tears began to roll down her face. Yet she remained motionless, and otherwise, lifeless. The only evidence of her connection with the world of the living was the river of tears that broke freely from the fountain of her anguish.

Ronny clutched his two children and began sobbing. He clung unto them with dear life, as if to let go would mean to give them up to the fangs of death itself. He tried reaching out for Betty but his hold on her was not strong enough to budge her from her trance.

Betty remained motionless as the rest of the family lay prostrate to the torment and misery of their tragedy.

Then, Betty let out a sharp piercing wail that struck fear into everyone in the room. It could have been heard by the persons in the other waiting room on the other end of the hospital block.

Ronny struggled to contain her as she resisted any solace.

Greg, unawares, walked into Jennifer's office at the time of that scream.

"Wow. Jen, what in the world was that?" he asked, half frightened.

"We had quite a busy night today, Greg. Things went from calm to chaotic, and then to catastrophic. We even had to call the po..." she paused. "Why are you crying, Greg?"

Greg was not aware that the tear-marks were still visible on his face.

"I have a friend who was brought in here earlier today. I was told she drank poison or something. Her name is, Larna."

"You mean the young lady who consumed the poison is the same Larna girl I heard about? Your, Larna? Your girlfriend, Larna?"

"Yes."

"Are you serious?" Jennifer asked in disbelief.

"I came to see her. I didn't want to believe that it was true." Greg still had not completely

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stopped crying. The tears flowed at every chance they got.

“I know of the incident. I was in the waiting-room when they came in. That was hours ago. I can find out if they are still here for you.”

“Please, please do. And I would like to see her if she is still here.”

“Ok. Let me see what I can do.”

Jennifer excused herself from the office leaving Greg seated on one of the two visitor chairs.

Greg searched his ambiance for familiarity. He had not been in Jennifer’s office for over two years. The last thing he remembered when he had taken his younger brother to the doctor some two years ago for food allergies was that Jennifer had a picture of her fiancé framed and proudly displayed on her desk.

There were no additions. As a matter of fact, the framed picture had disappeared altogether. This would have made some interesting conversation for the two of them over breakfast or lunch if his presence in her office was for any other reason, but his present predicament.

“Jennifer is taking unusually long. Why?”

Greg could not wait. His thoughts were about to go haywire. Everything in his life that day seemed to be happening in absence of his acknowledgement or knowledge. He was either ignorant about something, or had no control over another.

Thankfully, he had finally put the pieces together and figured why his mother had thrown him out. His present knowledge had dealt justly with his uncertainty and bewilderment, but did not justify or present motives for Larna’s actions.

“I just can’t understand why Larna would do such a thing.”

How could an argument about him drive her to do such a thing?

“Why would she hurt me like that? Why would she try to kill me too? If she dies, I will die.”

Just as he was about to stand to retrieve his cell phone from his pocket to call Jennifer, she walked into the room. Her face, the explanation that it presented and the tears that she tried to wipe as she entered the room, was all that Greg needed to make his own assertion.

His fear had finally been realized. His world had just ended.

She was gone. *Larna was gone... forever.*

WARNING SIGNS

Today was the worse day in Greg's life. Nothing could have prepared him for the loss. Nothing had warned him of it. He was shocked, speechless, clueless, confused and dumbfounded. Nothing could have made him strong enough for such a brutal reality. Nothing could have prepared him for Larna's death. Life was cruel.

One moment, he had been spending time happily with Larna, and the next, he was questioning the rules of happiness and misfortune. One moment, he had been trying to avoid getting calls from his cell phone, and the next, he was obsessive over using it. One moment, he had been mentally creating images of what their night could be, and the next, he was questioning God and wishing that He would take away his pathetic life.

None could have prepared him. Not even his mother's actions insinuated such calamity. Ultimately, Sherine had kicked him out and now he faced his sorrow with no place to lay his head. Larna, someone who meant so much to him, was taken away without any warning. Time did not even allow Greg to say goodbye.

If only he knew that this would have happened, maybe he would have never agreed to lessen the frequency of his phone calls. He would have never allowed days to go by without telling Larna how much he loved her.

Maybe he would have drunk the poison it instead. Maybe he could have convinced her not to. Life seemed to only be offering 'maybe-solutions'.

"How could she do that to me?"

Never – not even when he had hurt her insufferably – did he think that Larna would have done such a thing. She had loved him too much; way too much.

"Why would she leave me alone and not take me with her? Why would love make her hurt me that way? Why would love choose to be selfish and not share? Why would love think only of itself and not consider me? Why is love so wicked?"

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“Why did it bring so much pain, so much suffering? Why did it bring death? If this is love, what is hate? Where is hate? Where is God?”

Nothing seemed to interest Greg as he lay lifeless on Jennifer’s sofa on that dreadful night. Nothing Jennifer said interested him, and eventually, she retreated into silence and left him to his own peril.

Greg’s eyes were closed and his head faced the ceiling. His hands were stuck deep in his pockets and he glued them to his lap. He rocked his body back and forth and exiled himself from an unfair world. He did not want to speak to anyone or see anyone. His tears were becoming shy and disconnected. Life for him ceased to exist.

The morning of the next day came and went. Afternoon came and went. Greg remained in the same spot that he had discovered when Jennifer brought him over to her house. The most he had said to her was, “uh huh,” when she had asked him if he was ok being left alone as she went to work.

Jennifer lived alone. She was renting an apartment in the city for almost a year now. Before then, she had been living with her fiancé who eventually went to England to complete his Master’s in Business Education.

Jennifer’s intention had been to stay the period during his absence with his family, but when she found out that he was cheating with some woman who had mysteriously tagged him in a Facebook photo, she got herself an affordable place and broke off the relationship. She tried her best to rid herself of everything that reminded her of the guy. She did not even want to hear his name in her daily conversations.

Jennifer had come a long way, on her own, since then. She had recently been promoted in her job and was also one of the doctors sitting on the hospital’s Board of Directors. She had not allowed her relationship woes to handicap her.

On a point of recognition, she was like a guidance counsellor or psychologist to her girlfriends. “Life is like a coin,” she’d say, “you can spend it anyway you like, but you can only spend it once.”

Her girlfriends always looked forward to sharing their problems with her to solicit her intelligent advice.

Greg paid no attention to anything Jennifer said to him. He had not showered or eaten anything

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and completely disregarded her offers. It was now officially twenty-four hours since he had been at her house and he had not moved an inch. This was worrisome to Jennifer. Yet, she allowed him the moment of ostracism that he had unceremoniously taken.

As a responsible friend, Jennifer took it upon herself to send in a Sick-Leave request to Greg's employer, as rules stated that someone was entitled three days from work immediately following a death of a close relative or kin.

Jennifer had also charged herself with the duty of contacting Greg's mom and disclosed his location. She was unaware that he had been kicked out. Sherine welcomed the news with a sigh of relief, but said nothing.

Jennifer also contacted Bernice – the mother of Greg's son – and informed her that Greg would probably not be able to come over to spend time with his son for a few days because he was sick. She did not disclose the true nature for fear that she might have caused some trouble.

However, Bernice had already learned of Larna's death. The news was all over the media. Thankfully, the Matthews family were not aware of that publicity.

Strangely, Bernice felt responsible for Greg's loss, so she asked Jennifer to see to it that he was taken care of, however long that he stayed at her place.

"Junior will be fine. Please make sure that Greg eats. Whenever he is too sickly, he refuses food," Bernice explained to Jennifer, pretending that she knew nothing of what was going on.

At midday the second day, Jennifer came home to check on Greg. He was still in the same spot.

"Greg? Greg! You can't go on like this. You need to eat. I'm sorry she passed away, but please, please, for your son's sake eat something."

"I'm not hungry."

"Yes, but at least let me get you some juice or a chocolate shake."

"I will get something when I'm ready for it." He turned away.

"I am not allowing you to do this to yourself. If you don't start taking care of yourself we might just lose you too. God forbid. We don't want that to happen."

"What reason do I have to live now? What reason?"

"Your son! That's why. Do it for him. He needs his father," Jennifer rebutted.

Greg looked at her ashamedly, as if to apologize for his questions.

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“Yes Greg, do it for him. Life is short. And Junior needs his father. Children sense sorrow too so it means that you cannot do it half way. You need to do this the right way. Let me help you. I know you are hurting. I can’t pretend to know how it feels because I have never experienced death so close to me, but I can tell you that I am here for you. I am here to help you. So please, let me. I can take it a day at a time with you. Whatever you want... just let me help you.”

The reality of his situation was made more real with her words. Junior indeed needed him.

“My son,” he pointed out, “I don’t know what I would do without him. Does Sherine know?”

“Well, I called her and told her that you were sick, but I didn’t mention anything about Larna. It wasn’t my right. Besides, I don’t know the details of you guys’ relationship.”

“I don’t think she knows that I was dating Larna. I don’t even think she knew that we were friends.”

“Well she understands that you will be away from Junior for a while so no sweat. She did not even bother to ask why. It was like she understood some unspoken words. Anyway, let us focus on what’s urgent now. You need to eat something and then shower, like immediately. Or maybe you should do it in reverse,” she said firmly, but managed to crack a smile on her face. “I don’t want you to start smelling you know.”

Greg did not even bat his eyelashes to say the least at the humour in the statement.

“I will eat later. Just need some time alone.”

Jennifer knew that his statement sounded foolish, especially since he had taken almost two full days for himself, but she said nothing to that effect. Somehow she was coming to terms with the degree of emotion that Greg felt for Larna.

“I will go back to work and will check on you later. I have to go to this family retreat thing after work so I might be here at nine. Please eat something.”

“Sure. I will,” he confirmed, with less sincerity than he intended.

“And please take a shower Greg. I can go buy you some clothes now if you like.”

“No need to, Jen. I will wear what I have. I will change it after I get some clothes from my house. But thanks anyway.”

Jennifer left Greg on the sofa, the same place she had left him the night of the death. She returned a few minutes short of 11:00pm and found him in the same spot.

“Dammit. You mean Greg didn’t move an inch? Damn!”

Greg was lying in the same spot that she had left him and it looked like he had not even

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showered. Jennifer grew more worried.

The only good thing from the imagery was that he was fast asleep. That was the first time that she believed he had slept since the death. She had taken occasional quiet and sneaky peaks at him during the past nights.

“At least he is asleep tonight.”

She left him alone and submitted to her waterbed until morning.

“We going to get you clothes and food, whether you want to or not! Get up from there! If you think you don’t shower, I will pour this jug of water over you!” Jennifer looked pissed. “I am not having you die on my account. If you wanna starve yourself to death then you might as well go at your home to do that.”

Greg looked up at Jennifer in astonishment.

Today was her day off. It was the morning of the fourth day after Larna’s passing and Greg had not eaten or showered. Jennifer had reached her limit and would not tolerate his suicidal behaviour anymore.

“I am not kidding!”

“Ok, ok,” he said in submission. “I will. Just let me...”

“No! Get up now!”

She flung her arm and splashed the jug of lukewarm water on his face and dashed into the kitchen to mix some more. By the time that she was back with two jugs of water, Greg had managed to free himself from the chair.

As he stood there fighting to take the wet clothes off, his legs rocked from side to side under his weight.

“You see, you cannot even stand up on your own. You’re going home. I don’t care what you say. You are going home! You are not going to die here on my account.”

Greg put up no fight. He knew she was right. He could not go on another day without food. *Mentally he could*, but physically his body was not going to allow him to. So at that moment, he had no choice, but to give in to her commands.

SPLASH! Both jugs of water hit him over his body as he held his breath to avoid some from getting into his nose.

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Jennifer meant business. She was not allowing him anymore time to bask in his sorrows.

“Ok. I said I was going to. I am up. Stop!” Greg forced out.

“You had best gather yourself cause we leaving now. You have twenty minutes to be in my car. That’s all I’m saying. I don’t care if you shower or not. Just be in the car in twenty minutes,” and she left to replace the jugs in the kitchen.

“Don’t you want to go to the funeral? Do you even know when the funeral is going to be held?” Jennifer asked as she with Greg drove through the city.

Greg pulled the collar of his shirt into his mouth. His shower seemed to have been of no significance.

“I want to,” he answered softly.

“Do you know that it’s tomorrow?”

Greg took a while before he answered. For a moment he didn’t know what to say. The reality of Larna’s death and eventual funeral pained him more.

“Why did she do it? Why did she kill herself?” Greg asked.

The rest of the afternoon was sombre. Jennifer took Greg to his house, but then he informed her that he wanted to go to his grandmother’s to spend some time there instead, so she waited on him.

Sherine was at work when Greg got to the house and his siblings were at school.

At the house, Greg quickly fetched all the clothes he could shove into two suitcases and then left. On his way to his Brenda’s, he asked Jennifer to take him to see his son.

Junior was excited when he saw his father. He was only four and had been querying his daddy’s absence. Greg held his son tightly and kissed him. He tried to avoid eye contact with Bernice, but she wouldn’t let him.

“Are you ok?” Bernice asked.

“Yea.”

“I’m sorry your friend passed away. Would you like me to go to the funeral with you?” she asked sheepishly, and half expecting him to say no.

“Do whatever you want,” he replied, not intending those words to be harsh. In his brief response, Greg did not even realize that Bernice had referred to Larna as his friend. He did not even notice that she knew.

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“Well I’m here if you wanna talk, or need a shoulder to cry on. I know how much she meant to you...” Bernice paused and contemplated her words cautiously, and then continued, “...how much your friends mean to you.”

Bernice tried sincerely to console him, but her recollection of her past actions made her feel hypocritical.

Greg still did not catch on to the reference of Larna as his friend.

Although Greg had heard her words earlier, he didn’t catch up with the “*I know how much she meant to you*” part until he was shoving his suitcases under the bed in the room that his grandmother gave to him.

“*What does she mean she knows how much Larna meant to me? Did she know I was dating Larna?*”

His question remained unanswered as he locked the bedroom door and sat on the bed. Next to him were two journals; one with Bernice’s name on it, and the other, Larna’s. Greg occasionally kept record of the notable moments in his life that *took his breath away*.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he freed himself self of Sherine’s words. He took a small key that was in a pocket at the back of the book and opened Larna’s journal. On the first page, were the words; “It feels like I am where I need to be. Nothing in life feels so sweet, so warm.”

Greg turned to the other page and on it were the words, “Love is like a ribbon when it flies.” Reading those words took him back to a place in history when they were first uttered. He had never understood those words thought he had written them down the very day that Larna had spoken them

Larna had whispered them into his ear the first time that he tried to kiss her, and she had walked away. Those words had remained a mystery just as many other things did.

“How can love be a ribbon? What happens to a ribbon if it is blown in the wind? What do people do with ribbons? All you do is tie a knot or bow...,” he tried to break the code.

After minutes in a mental battle to decipher the meaning of Larna’s words, for maybe the millionth time, he closed the journal and gave up.

He picked up the two journals and pulled the closest suitcase then tucked them in the front surface pocket. As he pushed them in, he felt something hard. He emptied the contents and

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realized that it was his cell phone. He had not charged it yet for about five days now.

He found the charger and plugged it into the closest outlet, then he retired into bed thinking that *tomorrow would be the hardest day in his life*, whether he made it to the funeral or not.

That same night, maybe it was because her conscience was eating at her, Bernice felt an overwhelming urge to call Sherine. So she did.

“I am sorry I told you about Larna. I didn’t mean to cause you so much distress,” she said apologetically.

“It ok, dear. You say what you had to. Strange, though. I dunno how to feel about this situation. I dunno anything anymore. I dunno who I should feel sorry for; you or that poor child who kill herself. Anyway, Brenda beg me to go to funeral with her so I will talk to you another time. By the way, how is Junior?” Sherine fitted all into one breath.

“He is ok. He misses his father,” Bernice responded as if to hint that she missed Greg as well and that her nights without him had been torturous; as if to indicate that she had been longing for Greg’s presence from the first day that they had broken up, and more so when she discovered he was dating Larna.

“Well, look after that boy. I guess now he will see his father more,” Sherine said slyly, only to regret those words after she hung up.

How much more wicked could she have been to even slightly delight in a death of one for the benefit of another. How twisted would life become?

The media had done its part to inform the nation of the girl who committed suicide. They populace had missed out on the reason behind it as the reports always mentioned that police was continuing with the investigation. However, the autopsy revealed that she died from haemorrhagic shock secondary to ingestion of poison.

Persons who did not know Larna showed up at the funeral to support the family in their dire time. Larna’s past school friends and co-workers, all wore T-shirts with a photo of her on the front.

People at the funeral were unaware of Greg’s relationship with her – everyone, excepting her family, his family and their mutual friends. As the service proceeded from the city Cathedral to the cemetery about a mile away at Vigie, the police blocked off certain parts of the streets and redirected traffic.

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At the cemetery, the choir tried to comfort persons who joined the service. But when Hope read Larna's Eulogy, almost the entire congregation burst into tears. Family members supported each other as the reality of the death was realized.

Greg was standing in the congregation a few feet away from Hope and he had maintained his disposition up until she spoke some words that had a more intimate meaning to him than it did to the other people – *Love's a ribbon when it flies*.

Greg could not contain his tears so he broke down and gave up his pretence. He let out his cry as deep and hard as he could. His mother and grandmother had just arrived at the cemetery and were to the back of the congregation when they saw a glimpse of him.

To much of Greg's surprise, and that of Ronny, after Hope completed her reading, she came over and embraced Greg and they both allowed their tears to stream down their faces.

Lowering Larna's body into the tomb sealed the final doubt. It was done. She was really gone. Larna was dead, gone, by choice. She had left everyone to moan and weep as she went over unto the other side. The loud thud that the coffin made as it hit the bottom of the tomb caused screams to wail throughout the cemetery.

A scuffle emerged as relatives quickly carried Betty's fainted body away. Soon after, they did the same with Ronny's.

As the ground-keepers sealed the tomb with concrete, one thing was certain; there was no way of getting Larna back.

Greg was the last to leave the cemetery. He was still visibly shaken from the ordeal when he closed the door to his grandmother's car. Brenda and Sherine had waited for him patiently without as much as a thought of frustration. None of them spoke a word to each other whilst seated in the car.

Greg was still feeble and appeared to have lost some weight. Thanks to Jennifer, he had eaten some food yesterday and his grandmother had ensured that he had had some breakfast today. However, he knew that nobody's effort could make him stomach anything tonight. Not after the funeral.

In a period of about a week, everything Greg *had in his world* – *all that he saw himself as, all that he cherished and all that he desired* – was swept away in one foolish act, all in one moment. It felt like his life had been taken and all his years on earth meant nothing. Life will *have no meaning* now without Larna by his side. Without his *Larna there to love* him.

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When they got to Babonneau, Brenda did not come into the house. She informed Greg that she had to go drop Sherine off and pick up some items from her house.

Brenda returned home as soon as she dropped her daughter off so that she could relieve the caretaker who was watching over Tan-May whilst she attended the funeral. Greg resorted to comfort in an all too familiar posture, on the chair in the living-room.

“Do you want to talk?” his grandmother asked.

“No,” he replied without even looking at her once.

“I wish Bobby was here. I wish he was here,” Brenda whispered to herself and left the room.

Although Brenda had no direct connection to Larna, she could not endure watching Greg in his state. It seemed like he was getting worse by the hour. Then Brenda started feeling guilty because of the way she had treated Sherine in the past when she had given birth to Greg. The memories brew some repulsion towards herself. This here now, was the same Greg that she persecuted Sherine for.

“How could I hurt my poor boy? Look at him. He look just like his father,” Brenda confessed. She paused. “*Just like his father.*”

She was puzzled. For the first time, she realized that Greg was a spitting image of what she remembered Tony to be on the last day that she had seen him.

“Tony. He look just like, Tony.” Brenda finished.

Sherine never found out where Tony had disappeared to or what had happened to him and his family. Tony never returned the next day as he had promised and Sherine discovered some time after that his parents had vacated the house. As to when exactly they had left, she did not know. It could have been the very day that her father had flogged her, or a month later, Sherine was not sure.

She did not know where Tony was. After several pleas to Brenda to find out where Tony’s family had gone to, Sherine was left to suffer her fate. *Brenda didn’t try hard enough*, and at the time it appeared like she was not even concerned.

Bobby had stopped communicating with Sherine altogether and life seemed to have ended for her. And although Bobby’s reasons for withdrawal had been primarily because of guilt from the brutal beating he had given his daughter, he felt more humiliated when it was discovered that she had been indeed pregnant.

Everything seemed to have worked against Sherine. She had been clueless then, just as her son

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was clueless now. The only person who seemed to be knowledgeable about something was, Brenda.

“He look so much like that boy... like his father. Twenty plus years. Now this. So much time...” Brenda sighed.

At that point, she became aware of the repercussions of history. She had been holding something inside. It seemed that the secret had gestated into more secrets and it wanted to get out now, forcefully.

The day after the funeral was a Sunday. Things were not better, but the atmosphere was friendlier. Brenda fixed Greg an effortful breakfast and was trying her best to make conversation with him, asking his opinion on little things that would ordinarily be of no significance to him.

Greg fed the dogs for her and even cleaned his bedroom. He seemed livelier than the day before. He seemed to be accepting the heartbreak and seemed to be moving on in phases.

After a few *up-and-down*'s about the house, Greg realized that he had not spoken to Tan-May at all. The last time he had seen her was the same day of the incident. That day had been filled with so much drama that it was almost impossible to recall.

Greg remembered that when he had been here the last time, he had caused Brenda to scold him. And he had not gotten to tell Tan-May what he had intended. He remembered promising her that he would have returned the following day to continue their conversation. Nothing had happened the way he had wanted.

So at the risk of humiliating himself, Greg went in to see his great grandmother.

Tan-May was already informed of what had happened to Larna. She was anxious to share her wisdom. Greg was not too anxious.

“Hey, May. You ok?”

“Is you?” she asked in response to his question.

“I'm ok.”

A brief moment passed before any other words were uttered. Whilst waiting for words to be verbalized, Greg felt less convinced of his decision to come in to see Tan-May, so he decided to go to his room.

“You love her, din't you?” Tan-May asked before Greg could get off the spot on the bed where he was sitting.

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“Like crazy. I don’t know what I will do,” he answered shrugging his shoulders.

“Wat bout you child mother? Is you love her too?”

Tan-May was never so pithy with words before. She seemed so brief and precise. Silence followed that question.

“Do I love Bernice?”

Greg hadn’t thought of that since... He could not even remember the last time he thought about whether he loved Bernice or not. And in that moment, he thought that he should have stayed away from Tan-May. He would not have been placed on the spot.

“How does she expect me to be thinking of Bernice now? I’m still lamenting Larna’s death. And what does that have to do with anything?” He was beginning to doubt Tan-May’s wisdom.

“Son, is you love her?” she asked with her inconsistent English.

Some days she seemed to speak it well. Others, not so well. The question, however, simply got Greg to think.

Did he really love Bernice? Was he around her only for his son? He didn’t know how to answer.

“I don’t know, May. I don’t think so.”

“If she die, will you cry?”

“Why would May even say such a thing. I mean c’mon. After all that had transpired?” Greg thought.

But there seemed to be a point to her questioning that he was just starting to get. She seemed to know something. *Maybe she was wise after all.*

“May, I love her as a friend, but I am not in love with her. We broke up a long time ago,” Greg explained, not realizing that for the first time since Larna’s death, this was the only time he had been so expressive about his feelings to a family member.

Although Tan-May was not well versed in English, she understood it fairly well. That’s what made talking to her sometimes so fun. The only time you had to repeat yourself to her was when she did not hear what you had said clearly enough.

“Love doh go away. It stay. But sometime, it better to live not happy alone, dan wif anotha.”

Those words were meant to get Greg thinking, and it did. He rephrased it for better understanding; *“Love doesn’t go away. It stays forever. But sometimes it’s better to be unhappy alone, than to be unhappy with another.”*

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“Wow,” Greg whispered.

Interestingly, the words made no mention of Bernice, but the entire sentence appeared to be speaking of her.

What did May mean? Had he left Bernice because he was unhappy? Was happiness love? Or was love supposed to be unhappy? He was confused.

At that point, Greg excused himself to the bathroom; at least that's what he told May. He had really intended to go into his room to ponder the words spoken, or maybe just to cry some more. To let out the tears that were being held back, those tears that are there even when there is a smile on his face.

Greg was missing Larna, inconsolably. He loved her so much.

Chapter Six

Is it Love?

...a triangle gone square



For twenty-five year old Greg, age was no deterrent to his mother, Sherine, who had been chastising him from birth, all in an effort to erase the sorrow of being mysteriously abandoned by his father – her soul mate – before he was born.

Still hurting from their failed relationship, Bernice tries harder to convince Greg to give her a second chance, but he keeps on rejecting her each time with more assertiveness than the times before.

Unbeknownst to Bernice, love could not have been any purer for Larna who, after almost losing Greg to his ex, pledges to love him unconditionally even if it meant walking away from her family.

As each live their lives in isolation and secrecy, an unforeseen event reshapes their reality and brings them to the crossroads of life that changes them forever. And when it seemed like things could not get any worse, Greg's grandmother, Brenda, reveals an age-old secret at the dawn of death.