She seemed calm. Since Saturday she had cowered in a corner of the kitchen. She didn’t look at anyone, no one looked at her. Even when they had selected her, fingering her

though not even at these moments did the expression of her empty head change. In flight, at rest, giving birth, or pecking corn – it was the head of a hen, the same that was

Moments she filled her lungs with the impure air of the kitchen and, if females had been able to sing, she would not have sung, but she would have been much more contented.

Occasionally, and always more rarely, the hen resembled the one that had once stood plain against the air on the edge of the roof, ready to make an announcement. At such

moments she filled her lungs with the impure air of the kitchen and, if females had been able to sing, she would not have sung, but she would have been much more contented. Though not even at these moments did the expression of her empty head change. In flight, at rest, giving birth, or pecking corn – it was the head of a hen, the same that was.
The Smallest Woman in the World

by Clarice Lispector
Translated by Elizabeth Bishop
(Originally published in the 1960 book of short stories, Family Ties)

In the depths of Equatorial Africa the French explorer, Marcel Pretre, hunter and man of the world, came across a tribe of surprisingly small pygmies. Therefore he was even more surprised when he was informed that a still smaller people existed, beyond forests and distances. So he plunged farther on.

In the Eastern Congo, near Lake Kivu, he really did discover the smallest pygmies in the world. And—if a box within a box within a box—obedient, perhaps, to the necessity nature sometimes feels of outdoing herself—among the smallest pygmies in the world there was the smallest of the smallest pygmies in the world.

Among mosquitoes and lukewarm trees, among leaves of the most rich and lazy green, Marcel Pretre found himself facing a woman seventeen and three-quarter inches high, full-grown, black, silent—“Black as a monkey,” he informed the press—who lived in a treetop with her little spouse. In the tepid miasma of the jungle, that swells the fruits so ear absorbed. Obstinately, she adorned her gap-toothed son with fine clothes; obstinately, she wanted him very clean, as if his cleanliness could emphasize a soothing superficiality, that child had already lost two front teeth, evolution evolving itself, teeth falling out to give place to those that could bite better. “I’m going to buy him a new suit,” she decided, looking at him. But she didn’t buy the suit for the child; she bought it for the child, as if cleanliness could humiliate him.

So there she stood, the smallest woman in the world. For an instant, in the buzzing heat, it seemed as if the Frenchman had unexpectedly reached his final destination. Probably only because he was not insane, his soul neither wavered nor broke its bounds. Feeling an immediate necessity for order and for giving names to what exists, he called her Little Flower. And in order to be able to classify her among the recognizable realities, he immediately began to collect facts about her.

Her race will soon be exterminated. Few examples are left of this species, which, if it were not for the sly dangers of Africa, might have multiplied. Besides disease, the deadly effluvium of the water, insufficient food, and ranging beasts, the great threat to the Likoulas are the savage Bahundes, a threat that surrounds them in the silent air, like the dawn of battle. The Bahundes hunt them with nets, like monkeys. And eat them. Like that: they catch them in nets and eat them. The tiny race, retreating, always retreating, has finish hiding away in the heart of Africa, where the lucky explorer discovered it. For strategic defense, they live in the highest trees. The women descend to grind and cook corn and to gather greens; the men, to hunt. When a child is born, it is left free almost immediately. It is true that, what with the beasts, the child frequently cannot enjoy this freedom for very long. But then it is true that it cannot be lamented that for such a short life there had been any long, hard work. And even the language that the child learns is short and simple, merely the essentials. The Likoulas use few names; they name things by gestures and animal noises. As for things of the spirit, they have a drum. While they dance to the sound of the drum, a little male stands guard against the Bahundes, who come from no one knows where.

That was the way, then, that the explorer discovered, standing at his very feet, the smallest existing human thing. His heart beat, because no emerald in the world is so rare. The teachings of the wise men of India are not so rare. The richest man in the world has never set eyes on such a strange grace. Right there was a woman that the greed of the most exquisite dream could never have imagined. It was then that the explorer said timidly, and with a delicacy of feeling of which his wife would never have thought him capable: “You are Little Flower.”

At that moment, Little Flower scratched herself where no one scratches. The explorer—as if he were receiving the highest prize for chastity to which an idealistic man dares aspire—the explorer, experienced as he was, looked the other way.

A photograph of Little Flower was published in the colored supplement of the Sunday Papers, life-size. She was wrapped in cloth, her belly already very big. The flat nose, the blazing face, the splay feet. She looked like a dog.

On that Sunday, in an apartment, a woman seeing the picture of Little Flower in the paper didn’t want to look a second time because “It gives me the creeps.”

In another apartment, a lady felt such perversity of tenderness for the smallest of the African women that—an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure—Little Flower could never be left alone to the tenderness of that lady. Who knows to what murkiness of love tenderness can lead? The woman was upset all day, almost as if she was missing something. Besides, it was spring and there was the spring and the serenity in the air.

In another house, a little girl of five, seeing the picture and hearing the comments, was extremely surprised. In a houseful of adults, this little girl had been the smallest human being up until now. And, if this was the source of all caresses, it was also the source of the first fear of the tyranny of love. The existence of Little Flower made the little girl feel—a deep uneasiness that only years and years later, and for very different reasons, would turn into thought—made her feel, in her first wisdom, that “sorrow is endless.”

In another house, in the consecration of spring, a girl about to be married felt an ecstasy of pity: “Mama, look at her little picture, poor little thing! Just look how sad she is!”

In another house, a clever little boy had a clever idea. “Mummy, if I could put this little woman from Africa in little Paul’s bed when he’s asleep? When he woke up wouldn’t he be frightened? Wouldn’t he howl? When he saw her sitting on his bed? And then we’d play with her! She would be our toy!”

His mother was setting her hair in front of the bathroom mirror at the moment, and she remembered what a cook had told her about life in an orphanage. The orphans had no dolls, and, with terrible maturity already throbbing in their hearts, the little girls had hidden the death of one of the children from the nun. They kept the body in a cupboard and even the nun went out and played with the dead child, giving her bathings and things to eat, punishing her only to be able to kiss and console her. In the bathroom, the mother remembered this, and let fall her thoughtful hands, full of curlers. She considered the cruel necessity of loving. And she considered the malignity of our desire for happiness. She considered how ferociously we need to play. How many times we will kill for love. Then she looked at her clever child as if she were looking at a dangerous stranger. And she had remembered this, and let fall her thoughtful hands, full of curlers. She considered the cruel necessity of loving. And she considered the malignity of our desire for happiness.

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obstinateley perfecting the polite side of beauty. Obstinateley drawing away from, and drawing him away from, something that ought to be “black as a monkey.” Then, looking in the bathroom mirror, the mother gave a deliberately refined and social smile, placing a distance of insuperable millenniums between the abstract lines of her features and the crude face of Little Flower. But, with years of practice, she knew that this was going to be a Sunday on which she would have to hide from herself anxiety, dreams, and lost millenniums.

In another house, they gave themselves up to the enthralling task of measuring the seventeen and three-quarter inches of Little Flower against the wall. And, really, it was a delightful surprise: she was even smaller than the sharpest imagination could have pictured. In the heart of each member of the family was born, nostalgic, the desire to have that tiny and indomitable thing for itself, that thing spared having been eaten, that permanent source of charity. The avid family soul wanted to devote itself. To tell the truth, who has wanted to own a human being just for himself? Which, it is true, wouldn’t always be convenient; there are times when one doesn’t want to have feelings.

“I bet if she lived here it would end in a fight,” said the father, sitting in the armchair and definitely turning the page of the newspaper. “In this house everything ends in a fight.”

“Oh, you, José—always a pessimist,” said the mother.

“But, Mama, have you thought of the size her baby’s going to be?” said the oldest little girl, aged thirteen, eagerly.

The father stirred uneasily behind his paper.

“It should be the smallest black baby in the world,” the mother answered, melting with pleasure. “Imagine her serving our table, with her big little belly!”

“That’s enough!” growled father.

“But you have to admit,” said the mother, unexpectedly offended, “that it is something very rare. You’re the insensitive one.”

And the rare thing itself?

In the meanwhile, in Africa, the rare thing herself, in her heart—and who knows if the heart wasn’t black, too, since once nature has erred she can no longer be trusted—the rare thing herself had something even rarer in her heart, like the secret of her own secret: a minimal child. Methodically, the explorer studied that little belly of the smallest mature human being. It was at this moment that the explorer, for the first time since he had known her, instead of feeling curiosity, or exaltation, or victory, or the scientific spirit, felt sick.

The smallest woman in the world was laughing.

She was laughing, warm, warm—Little Flower was enjoying life. The rare thing herself was experiencing the ineffable sensation of not having been eaten yet. Not having been eaten yet was something that at any other time would have given her the agile impulse to jump from branch to branch. But, in this moment of tranquility, amid the thick leaves of the Eastern Congo, she was not putting this impulse into action—it was entirely concentrated in the smallness of the rare thing itself. So she was laughing. It was a laugh such as only one who does not speak laughs. It was a laugh that the explorer, constrained, couldn’t classify. And she kept on enjoying her own soft laugh, she who wasn’t being devoured. Not to be devoured is the most perfect feeling. Not to be devoured is the secret goal of a whole life. While she was not being eaten, her bestial laughter was as delicate as joy is delicate. The explorer was baffled.

In the second place, if the rare thing herself was laughing, it was because, within her smallness, a great darkness had begun to move.

The rare thing herself felt in her breast a warmth that might be called love. She loved that sallow explorer. If she could have talked and had told him that she loved him, he would have been puffed up with vanity. Vanity that would have collapsed when she added that she also loved the explorer’s ring very much, and the explorer’s boots. And when that collapse had taken place, Little Flower would not have understood why. Because her love for the explorer—one might even say “profound love,” since, having no other resources, she was reduced to a profundity—her profound love for the explorer would not have been at all diminished by the fact that she also loved his boots. There is an old misunderstanding about the word love, and, if many children are born from this misunderstanding, many others have lost the unique chance of being born, only because of the susceptibility that demands that it be me! me! that is loved, and not my money. But in the humidity of the forest, these cruel refinements do not exist, and love is not to be eaten, love is to find a boot pretty, love is to like the strange color of a man who isn’t black, is to laugh for love of a shiny ring. Little Flower blinked with love, and laughed warmly, small, gravid, warm.

The explorer tried to smile back, without knowing exactly to what abyss his smile responded, and then he was embarrassed as only a very big man can be embarrassed. He pretended to adjust his explorer’s hat better; he colored, prudishly. He turned a lovely color, a greenish-pink, like a lime at sunrise. He was undoubtedly sour.

Perhaps adjusting the symbolic helmet helped the explorer to get control of himself, severely recapture the discipline of his work, and go on with his note-taking. He had learned how to understand some of the tribe’s few articulate words, and to interpret their signs. By now, he could ask questions.

Little Flower answered “Yes.” That it was very nice to have a tree of her own to live in. Because—she didn’t say this but her eyes became so dark that they said it—because it is good to own, good to own, good to own. The explorer winked several times.

Marcel Prette had some difficult moments with himself. But at least he kept busy taking notes. Those who didn’t take notes had to manage as best they could.

“Wil,” suddenly declared one old lady, folding up the newspaper decisively, “Well, as I always say: God knows what He’s doing.”

One Response to Two Stories by Clarice Lispector Translated by Elizabeth Bishop

Follow
HE HAD BEGUN TO READ THE NOVEL a few days before. He had put it aside because of some urgent business, opened it again on his way back to the estate by train; he allowed himself a slowly growing interest in the plot, in the drawing of characters. That afternoon, after writing a letter to his agent and discussing with the manager of his estate a matter of joint ownership, he returned to the book in the tranquility of his study which looked out upon the park with its oaks. Sprawled in his favorite armchair, with his back to the door, which would otherwise have bothered him as an irritating possibility for intrusions, he let his left hand caress once and again the green velvet upholstery and set to reading the final chapters. Without effort his memory retained the names and images of the protagonists; the illusion took hold of him almost at once. He tasted the almost perverse pleasure of disengaging himself line by line from all that surrounded him, and feeling at the same time that his head was relaxing comfortably against the green velvet of the armchair with its high back, that the cigarettes were still within reach of his hand, that beyond the great windows the afternoon air danced under the oak trees in the park. Word by word, immersed in the sordid dilemma of the hero and heroine, letting himself go toward where the images came together and took on color and movement, he was witness to the final encounter in the mountain cabin. The woman arrived first, apprehensive; now the lover came in, his face cut by the backlash of a branch. Admirably she stanched the blood with her kisses, but he rebuffed her caresses, he had
not come to repeat the ceremonies of a secret passion, protected by a world of dry leaves and furtive paths through the forest. The dagger warmed itself against his chest, and underneath pounded liberty, ready to spring. A lustful, yearning dialogue raced down the pages like a rivulet of snakes, and one felt it had all been decided from eternity. Even those caresses which writhed about the lover's body, as though wishing to keep him there, to dissuade him from it, sketched abominably the figure of that other body it was necessary to destroy. Nothing had been forgotten: alibis, unforeseen hazards, possible mistakes. From this hour on, each instant had its use minutely assigned. The cold-blooded, double re-examination of the details was barely interrupted for a hand to caress a cheek. It was beginning to get dark.

Without looking at each other now, rigidly fixed upon the task which awaited them, they separated at the cabin door. She was to follow the trail that led north. On the path leading in the opposite direction, he turned for a moment to watch her running with her hair let loose. He ran in turn, crouching among the trees and hedges until he could distinguish in the yellowish fog of dusk the avenue of trees leading up to the house. The dogs were not supposed to bark, and they did not bark. The estate manager would not be there at this hour, and he was not. He went up the three porch steps and entered. Through the blood galloping in his ears came the woman's words: first a blue parlor, then a gallery, then a carpeted stairway. At the top, two doors. No one in the first bedroom, no one in the second. The door of the salon, and then the knife in his hand, the light from the great windows, the high back of an armchair covered in green velvet, the head of the man in the chair reading a novel.

_Translation: David Page_
M y father is gone. I am slouched in a cast-aluminum chair across from two men, one the manager of the hotel where we’re staying and the other a policeman. They are waiting for me to explain what has become of him, my father.

The manager—Mr. Flavio Salinas, the plaque on his office door reads—has the most striking pair of chartreuse eyes I have ever seen on a man with an island-Spanish lift to his voice. The officer is a baby-faced, short white Floridian with a pot belly.

"Where are you and your daddy from, Ms. Bienaimé?" he asks.

I answer "Haiti," even though I was born and raised in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and have never visited my parents’ birthplace. I do this because it is one more thing I have longed to have in common with my parents.

The officer plows forward. "You down here in Lakeland from Haiti?"

"We live in New York. We were on our way to Tampa."

I find Manager Salinas’s office gaudy. The walls are covered with orange-and-green wallpaper, briefly interrupted by a giant gold-leaf-bordered print of a Victorian cottage that somehow resembles the building we’re in. Patting his light-green tie, he whispers reassuringly, "Officer Bo and I will do the best we can to help you find your father."

We start out with a brief description: "Sixty-four, five feet eight inches, two hundred and twenty pounds, moon-faced, with thinning salt-and-pepper hair. Velvet-brown eyes—"

"Velvet-brown?" says Officer Bo.

"Deep brown—same color as his complexion."

My father has had partial frontal dentures for ten years, since he fell off his and my mother’s bed when his prison nightmares began. I mention that, too. Just the dentures, not the nightmares. I also bring up the claw-shaped marks that run from his left ear down along his cheek to the corner of his mouth—the only visible reminder of the year he spent at Fort Dimanche, the Port-au-Prince prison ironically named after the Lord’s Day.

"Does your daddy have any kind of mental illness, senility?" asks Officer Bo.

"No."

"Do you have any pictures of your daddy?"

I feel like less of a daughter because I’m not carrying a photograph in my wallet. I had hoped to take some pictures of him on our trip. At one of the rest stops I bought a disposable camera and pointed it at my father. No, no, he had protested, covering his face with both hands like a little boy protecting his cheeks from a slap. He did not want
any more pictures taken of him for the rest of his life. He was feeling too ugly.

“That’s too bad,” says Officer Bo. “Does he speak English, your daddy? He can ask for directions, et cetera?”

“Yes.”

“Is there anything that might make your father run away from you—particularly here in Lakeland?” Manager Salinas interjects. “Did you two have a fight?”

I had never tried to tell my father’s story in words before now, but my first sculpture of him was the reason for our trip; a two-foot-high mahogany figure of my father, naked, crouching on the floor, his back arched like the curve of a crescent moon, his downcast eyes fixed on his short stubby fingers and the wide palms of his hands. It was hardly revolutionary, minimalist at best, but it was my favorite of all my attempted representations of him. It was the way I had imagined him in prison.

The last time I had seen my father?

The previous night, before falling asleep. When we pulled into the pebbled driveway, densely lined with palm and banana trees, it was almost midnight. All the restaurants in the area were closed. There was nothing to do but shower and go to bed.

“It is like a paradise here,” my father said when he saw the room. It had the same orange-and-green wallpaper as Salinas’s office, and the plush green carpet matched the walls. “Look, Annie,” he said, “it is like grass under our feet.” He was always searching for a glimpse of paradise, my father.

He picked the bed closest to the bathroom, removed the top of his gray jogging suit, and unpacked his toiletries. Soon after, I heard him humming, as he always did, in the shower.

After he got into bed, I took a bath, pulled my hair back in a ponytail, and checked on the sculpture—just felt it a little bit through the bubble padding and cartoon wrapping to make sure it wasn’t broken. Then I slipped under the covers, closed my eyes, and tried to sleep.

I pictured the client to whom I was delivering the sculpture: Gabrielle Fonteneau, a young woman about my age, an actress on a nationally syndicated television series. My friend Jonas, the principal at the East Flatbush elementary school where I teach drawing to fifth graders, had shown her a picture of my “Father” sculpture, and, the way Jonas told it, Gabrielle Fonteneau had fallen in love with it and wished to offer it as a gift to her father on his birthday.

Since this was my first big sale, I wanted to make sure that the piece got there safely. Besides, I needed a weekend away, and both my mother and I figured that my father, who watched a lot of television, both in his barbershop and at home, would enjoy meeting Gabrielle, too. But when I woke up the next morning my father was gone.

I showered, put on my driving jeans and a T-shirt, and waited. I watched a half hour of midmorning local news, smoked three mentholated cigarettes even though we were in a nonsmoking room, and waited some more. By noon, four hours had gone by. And it was only then that I noticed that the car was still there but the sculpture was gone.

I decided to start looking for my father in the east garden, the west garden, the dining room, the exercise room, and in the few guest rooms cracked open while the maid changed the sheets, in the little convenience store at the Amoco gas station nearby; even in the Salvation Army thrift shop that from a distance seemed to blend into the interstate. All that waiting and looking actually took six hours, and I felt guilty for having held back so long before going to the front desk to ask, “Have you seen my father?”

I feel Officer Bo’s fingers gently stroking my wrist. Up close he smells like fried eggs and gasoline, like breakfast at the Amoco. “I’ll put the word out with the other boys,” he says. “Salinas here will be in his office. Why don’t you go back to your room in case he shows up there?”

I return to the room and lie in the unmade bed, jumping up when I hear the click from the electronic key in the door. It’s only the housekeeper. I turn down the late-afternoon cleaning and call my mother at the beauty salon where she perms, presses, and braids hair, next door to my father’s barbershop. But she isn’t there. So I call my parents’ house and leave the hotel number on their machine. “Please call me as soon as you can, Manman. It’s about Pap.”

Once, when I was twelve, I overheard my mother telling a young woman who was about to get married how she and my father had first met on the sidewalk in front of Fort Dimanche the evening that my father was released from jail. (At a dance, my father had fought with a soldier out of uniform who had him arrested and thrown in prison for a year.) That night, my mother was returning home from a sewing class when he stumbled out of the prison gates and collapsed into her arms. His face still bleeding from his last beating. They married and left for New York a year later. “We were like two seeds planted in a rock,” my mother had told the young woman, “but somehow when our daughter, Annie, came we took root.”

My mother soon calls me back, her voice staccato with worry.

“Where is Pap?”

“I lost him.”

“How you lost him?”

“He got up before I did and disappeared.”

“How long he been gone?”

“Eight hours,” I say, almost not believing myself that it’s been that long.

My mother is clicking her tongue and humming. I can see her sitting at the kitchen table, her eyes closed, her fingers sliding up and down her flesh-colored stockings legs.

“You call police?”

“Yes.”

“What they say?”

“Towait, that’ll come back.”

My mother is thumping her fingers against the phone’s mouthpiece, which is giving me a slight ache in my right ear.

“Tell me where you are,” she says.

“Two more hours and he’s not there, call me, I come.”

I dial Gabrielle Fonteneau’s cellular phone number. When she answers, her voice sounds just as it does on television, but more silken and seductive without the sitcom laugh track.

“To think,” my father once said while watching her show, “Haitian-born actresses on American television.”

“And one of them wants to buy my stuff,” I’d added.

When she speaks, Gabrielle Fonteneau sounds as if she’s in a place with
cicadas, waterfalls, palm trees, and citronella candles to keep the mosqui-
toes away. I realize that I, too, am in such a place, but I can’t appreciate it.

“So nice of you to come all this way to deliver the sculpture,” she says. “Jonas tell you why I like it so much? My papa was a journalist in Port-au-Prince. In 1975, he wrote a story criticizing the dictatorship, and he was arrested and put in jail.”

“Fort Dimanche?”

“No, another one,” she says. “Cas-
serie. Papa kept track of days there by scraping lines with his fingernails on
the walls of his cell. One of the guards didn’t like this, so he pulled out all his
fingernails with pliers.”

I think of the photo spread I saw in the Haitian Times of Gabrielle Fonteneau and her parents in their living room in Tampa. Her father was de-
scribed as a lawyer, his daughter’s man-
ger; her mother a court stenographer.

There was no hint in that photograph of what had once happened to the father. Perhaps people don’t see anything in my father’s face, either, in spite of his scars.

“We celebrate his birthday on the
day he was released from prison,” she says. “It’s the hands I love so much in
your sculpture. They’re so strong.”

I am drifting away from Gabrielle Fonteneau when I hear her say, “So
when will you get here? You have
structions from Jonas, right? Maybe we
can make you lunch. My mother makes
great lamb.”

“I’ll be there at twelve tomorrow,” I
say. “My father is with me. We are mak-
ing a little weekend vacation of this.”

My father loves museums. When he
isn’t working in his barbershop, he’s often at the Brooklyn Museum. The ancient Egyptian rooms are his favorite.

“The Egyptians, they was like us,” he likes to say. The Egyptians wor-
shipped their gods in many forms and were often ruled by foreigners. The
pharaohs were like the dictators he had
flud. But what he admires most about
the Egyptians is the way they mourned.

“Yes, they grieve,” he’ll say. He mar-
vels at the mumification that went on
for weeks, resulting in bodies that sur-
vived thousands of years.

My whole adult life, I have struggled to find the proper manner of sculpting
my father, a man who learned about art
by standing with me most of the Sat-
urday mornings of my childhood, mes-
merized by the golden masos, the shawabtis, and Osiris, ruler of the underworld.

When my father finally appears
in the hotel-room doorway, I am awed by him. Smiling, he looks like a much younger man, further
bronzed after a long day
at the beach.

“Annie, let your father talk to you.” He walks over
to my bed, bends down to
unlace his sneakers. “On ti keze, a little chat.”

“Where were you? Where is the sculpture, Papi?” I feel my eyes
twitching, a nervous re-
action I inherited from
my mother.

“That’s why we need to chat,” he says. “I have
objections with your
statue.”

He pulls off his sneaker-
s and rubs his feet with
both hands.

“I don’t want you to sell
that statue,” he says. Then
he picks up the phone and
calls my mother.

“I know she called you,” he says to her in Creole. “Her head is so
hot. She panics so easily.
I was just out walking, thinking.”

I hear my mother lovingly scolding him and telling him not to
leave me again. When
he hangs up the phone, he picks up his snea-
ers and puts them back on.

"Where is the sculpture?"

My eyes are twitching so hard now that I can barely see.

"Let us go," he says. "I will take you to it."

As my father maneuvers the car out of the parking lot, I tell myself he might be ill, mentally ill, even though I have never detected anything wrong beyond his prison nightmares. I am trying to piece it together, this sudden yet familiar picture of a parent's vulnerability. When I was ten years old and my father had the chicken pox, I overheard him say to a friend on the phone, "The doctor tells me that at my age chicken pox can kill a man." This was the first time I realized that my father could die. I looked up the word "kill" in every dictionary and encyclopedia at school, trying to comprehend what it meant, that my father could be eradicated from my life.

My father stops the car on the side of the highway near a man-made lake, one of those artificial creations of the modern tropical city, with curved stone benches surrounding stagnant water. There is little light to see by except a half-moon. He heads toward one of the benches, and I sit down next to him, letting my hands dangle between my legs.

"Is this where the sculpture is?" I ask.

"In the water," he says.

"O.K.," I say. "But please know this about yourself. You are an especially harsh critic."

My father tries to smile a smile.

"Why?" I ask.

He scratches his chin. Anger is a wasted emotion, I've always thought. My parents get angry at unfair politics in New York or Port-au-Prince, but they never get angry at my grades—--at all the B's I got in everything but art classes—or at my not eating vegetables or occasionally vomiting my daily spoonful of cod-liver oil. Ordinary anger, I thought, was a weakness. But now I am angry. I want to hit my father, beat the craziness out of his head.

"Annie," he says. "When I first saw your statue, I wanted to be buried with it, to take it with me into the other world."

"Like the ancient Egyptians," I say.

He smiles, grateful, I think, that I still recall his passions.

"Annie," he asks, "do you remember when I read to you from "The Book of the Dead"?

"Are you dying?" I say to my father. "Because I can only forgive you for this if you are. You can't take this back."

He is silent for a moment too long. I think I hear crickets, though I cannot imagine where they might be.

There is the highway, the cars racing by, the half-moon, the lake dug up from the depths of the ground, the allure of royal palms beyond. And there is me and my father.

"You remember the judgment of the dead," my father says, "when the heart of a person is put on a scale. If it is heavy, then this person cannot enter the other world."

It is a testament to my upbringing that I am not yelling at him.

"I don't deserve a statue," he says, even while looking like one: the Madonna of Humility, for example, contemplating her losses in the dust.

"Annie, your father was the hunter," he says. "He was not the prey."

"What are you saying?" I ask.

"We have a proverb," he says. ""One day for the hunter, one day for the prey. Your father was the hunter. He was not the prey." Each word is hard-won as it leaves my father's mouth, balanced like those hearts on the Egyptian scale.

"Annie, when I saw your mother the first time, I was not just out of prison. I was a guard in the prison. One of the prisoners I was questioning had scratched me with a piece of tin. I went out to the street in a rage, blood all over my face. I was about to go back and do something bad, very bad. But instead comes your mother. I smash into her, and she asks me what I am doing there. I told her I was just let go"
Silently, we get out of the car and follow a concrete path to the front door. Before we can knock, an older woman walks out. Like Gabrielle, she has stunning midnight-black eyes and skin the color of sorrel, with spiralling curls brushing the sides of her face. When Gabrielle’s father joins her, I realize where Gabrielle Fonteneau gets her height. He is more than six feet tall.

Mr. Fonteneau extends his hands, first to my father and then to me. They’re large, twice the size of my father’s. The fingernails have grown back, thick, densely dark, as though the past had nestled itself there in black ink.

We move slowly through the living room, which has a cathedral ceiling and walls covered with Haitian paintings—Obin, Hyppolite, Tiga, Duval-Carrié. Out on the back terrace, which towers over a nursery of orchids and red dracaenas, a table is set for lunch.

Mr. Fonteneau asks my father where his family is from in Haiti, and my father lies. In the past, I thought he always said a different province because he had lived in all those places, but I realize now that he says this to keep anyone from tracing him, even though twenty-six years and eighty more pounds shield him from the threat of immediate recognition.

When Gabrielle Fonteneau makes her entrance, in an off-the-shoulder ruyb dress, my father and I stand up. “Gabrielle,” she says, when she shakes hands with my father, who blurs out spontaneously, “You are one of the flowers of Haiti.”

Gabrielle Fonteneau tilts her head coyly.

“We eat now,” Mrs. Fonteneau announces, leading me and my father to a bathroom to wash up before the meal. Standing before a pink seashell-shaped sink, my father and I dip our hands under the faucet. “Annie,” my father says, “we always thought you and me, and the children could raise their parents higher. Look at what this girl has done for her parents.”

During the meal of conch, plantains, and mushroom rice, Mr. Fonteneau tries to draw my father into conversation. He asks when my father was last in Haiti.
Twenty-six years," my father replies. "No going back for you?" asks Mrs. Fonteneau.

"I have not had the opportunity," my father says.

"We go back every year to a beautiful place overlooking the ocean in the mountains in Jacmel," says Mrs. Fonteneau.

"Have you ever been to Jacmel?" Gabrielle Fonteneau asks me.

I shake my head no.

"We are fortunate," Mrs. Fonteneau says, "that we have another place to go where we can say our rain is sweeter, our dust is lighter, our beach is prettier."

"So now we are tasting rain and weighing dust," Mr. Fonteneau says, and laughs.

"There is nothing like drinking the sweet juice from a green coconut you fetched yourself from your own tree, or sinking your hand in sand from the beach in your own country," Mrs. Fonteneau says.

"When did you ever climb a coconut tree?" Mr. Fonteneau says, teasing his wife.

I am imagining what my father’s nightmares might be. Maybe he dreams of dipping his hands in the sand on a beach in his own country and finds that what he comes up with is a fist full of blood.

After lunch, my father asks if he can have a closer look at the Fonteneaus’ back-yard garden. While he’s taking the tour, I confess to Gabrielle Fonteneau that I don’t have the sculpture.

"My father threw it away," I say.

Gabrielle Fonteneau frowns.

"I don’t know," she says. "Was there even a sculpture at all? I trust Jonas, but maybe you fooled him, too. Is this some scam, to get into our home?"

"There was a sculpture," I say. "Jonas will tell you that. My father just didn’t like it, so he threw it away."

She raises her perfectly arched eyebrows, perhaps out of concern for my father’s sanity or my own.

"I’m really disappointed," she says. "I wanted it for a reason. My father goes home when he looks at a piece of art. He goes home deep inside himself. For a long time, he used to hide his fingers from people. It’s like he was making a fist all the time. I wanted to give him this thing so that he knows we understand what happened to him."

"I am truly sorry," I say.

Over her shoulders, I see her parents guiding my father through rows of lemongrass. I want to promise her that I will make her another sculpture, one especially modelled on her father. But I don’t know when I will be able to work on anything again. I have lost my subject, the father I loved as well as pitted.

In the garden, I watch my father snap a white orchid from its stem and hold it out toward Mrs. Fonteneau, who accepts it with a nod of thanks.

"I don’t understand," Gabrielle Fonteneau says. "You did all this for nothing."

I wave to my father to signal that we should perhaps leave now, and he comes toward me, the Fonteneaus trailing slowly behind him.

With each step he rubs the scars on the side of his face.

Perhaps the last person my father harmed had dreamed this moment into my father’s future—his daughter seeing those marks, like chunks of warm plaster still clinging to a cast, and questioning him about them, giving him a chance to either lie or tell the truth. After all, we have the proverb, as my father would say: "Those who give the blows may try to forget, but those who carry the scars must remember."