

THE LAST DEPARTMENT

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Puits Blain

The languorous drone in Foufoune's ear meant that her international call had gone through. She'd been on the phone with relatives for hours, explaining through scalding tears how she came home after work and found her elderly mother dead. Her message was met with perfunctory sympathy. Foufoune and her mother had lived together for years. She would miss her more than most. Wedged between everyone's words of condolence, however, was relief. And blame. Dona "Gwo Manman" Malbranche had been as happy as a prisoner in solitary confinement.

Every morning after Foufoune left for work, Gwo Manman would take her place before the television to chat with the strangers who lived inside.

"I wish I could sprout wings and fly back home," she often confided to Bob Barker, host of *The Price Is Right*. When the Showcase Showdown ended and the last prizes were distributed, Gwo Manman would turn off the television and sit for hours in silence. Until four o'clock. Her most trusted friend and confidante, Oprah, would nod knowingly each time Gwo Manman explained how Foufoune had kidnapped her from her home and was forcing her to live in the worst kind of exile.

When all her television friends were gone for the day, Gwo Manman would sit and stare at the wallpaper, imagining the distant place that used to be home and the freedom that

was hers to do whatever and go wherever she pleased. A map of Puits Blain's nameless alleyways was imprinted in her memory as clearly as the lines in the palms of her hands. Sitting in a chair thousands of miles from home, she went for long walks along Route des Frères, visiting with friends for hours. Being trapped inside an apartment day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year was torture. She missed the roosters announcing the dawn, the ominous lights flickering from Boutilier and Morne Calvaire.

"You're hardly a prisoner in exile," Foufoune would tell her mother when she complained. Sure, Gwo Manman got to dress up once in a while for a wedding or a funeral, but being taken out of the apartment only for special occasions made her feel like a clown, a madigra mal maske.

When Foufoune came home from work at night, she was always too tired to do anything but sleep. Too tired to ask Gwo Manman how she had spent the day. Gwo Manman would want to talk about her garden back home, her house, her friends who sold lwil maskreti behind the cemetery and fried food to the taxi drivers waiting to ferry passengers to the end of the road just beyond Hotel Flamboyant. In the States she had rain, sleet, illnesses she'd never even heard of—she didn't want to talk about those. She had changed, and hated the person into whom America had turned her. Once, while Foufoune was at work, Gwo Manman unlocked the door and escaped. She wandered into the unfamiliar streets, improperly dressed for the snow that reached her ankles. She turned a corner, then another, then another; soon she could not find her way back. Hours later, a good Samaritan found her shivering and dazed.

"What's your name?" and "Where do you live?" the good Samaritan had asked. But all that was more English than Gwo

Manman understood. He took her to a nearby hospital. Foufoune spent an entire day trying to locate her mother that time. She prevented a reoccurrence by having a sturdier lock installed. Gwo Manman tried but could not get out of the apartment without a key, forcing her to retreat further into the wallpaper and the television world. But even that had changed. Bob Barker was no longer a resident. Just when she had gotten used to him, a stranger came and took his place. Even Oprah was not the same. She spoke only in tongues now. She'd become distant and unfriendly, prompting Gwo Manman to try and smash the screen with a mop, spraining her frail wrists. When Foufoune came home and found her mother hitting the television screen, she covered it like a corpse, saying, "The TV people won't be able to bother you anymore."

Dona Malbranche died the day after she turned seventy—a gift from God, as far as the old woman was concerned. The frown on her face was a perfectly inverted grin. "Ki te mele m." She had drawn her lips tight on the "m" to intercept her final breath. "Ki te mele m," she used to tell Bob Barker and Oprah—her companions and life's witnesses. She no longer cared.

When Foufoune returned from another double shift and found Gwo Manman slumped over the chair, her instincts as a nurse rose up like a tsunami. She lunged toward her mother, determined to pry her loose from Death's stubborn grip, but her limbs had as much life left in them as dried gourds. Foufoune dialed emergency, saying, "Hurry, please hurry." The bottle of lwil maskreti clutched in her mother's hand had spilled on her good rug. "Please, please hurry!" Within minutes the apartment was flooded with strangers in uniforms. Everyone shook their heads sympathetically. Foufoune sniffled

and sobbed as she unclasped the gold necklace which Gwo Manman never would have parted with while she was alive. It had been a Mother's Day present from her other daughter, Miriam, who still lived in Puits Blain. Foufoune continued to sob as her mother's lifeless body was carted away; suddenly stung was she by the realization that if Gwo Manman had had a choice, she would have been savoring breadfruit grown on her own little patch of land in Puits Blain, instead of dying alone abroad.

Foufoune put off calling her sister for last, hoping someone would do her the favor of forwarding the news. No one did, of course; the call was hers to make. She adjusted her earpiece with trembling fingers. Her sister would answer momentarily, and sever the sliver that was her last nerve. Miriam had always sided with Gwo Manman: *The woman is old enough to know where she should live. She's not a child. If she doesn't want to live in the States, you must respect that.*

Foufoune had considered sending her mother back, but after just a few weeks in the States it was already too late. America did not agree with Gwo Manman. She had an allergic reaction to the very air. She changed as soon as she left the island. At first Foufoune thought her mother was just homesick and would overcome it soon, but Gwo Manman's condition steadily worsened. When after several months Gwo Manman grew even more despondent and sickly, Foufoune had her seen by the best physicians she knew. And out came the diagnosis she dreaded: onset dementia, Alzheimer's. She knew all too well how those diseases ravaged the mind.

"I never got sick back home," Gwo Manman argued, even after Foufoune was careful enough to make up the best lie rather than translate what the doctors had said. "I wasn't sick

until I started to live à l'étranger," Gwo Manman maintained. "You have the flu," Foufoune explained. "A very bad strain. You'll get better soon."

Miriam was singing along to an old Coupe Cloue tune while stirring a bubbling pot of cornmeal when the phone in her apron pocket rang. She set down the long-handled wooden spoon and turned off the radio. A light rain was falling, rinsing the dust off the flamboyant branches over her porch as well as the splotches of blood where she had cleaned goat meat the night before.

"Alo." Miriam had decided she would send the caller away, or else risk having too many lumps in her signature dish which today she would serve with black beans and salted herring. Customers would start arriving soon for their noonday fix. She would not disappoint them. The goat meat she painstakingly cleaned was now marinating in a special concoction. By nightfall, every bit would be gone. People would come from far away for a taste. Kenold and most of the other guys who sold those brightly painted canvases up the street from the lycée and Anne-Marie Javouhey elementary stopped by Miriam's for food on their way home. In all the years since she quit a back-breaking factory job to open the eatery, she had never let her customers down.

"Alo?" Miriam repeated, annoyed. Jean-Jean, the man she hired to clean the latrine behind her house, walked by with his shovel in one hand and a cell phone in the other. Miriam's house was equipped with indoor plumbing, but she kept the old relic behind the house for customers. Miriam's thoughts shifted to the days when hers was the only household in all of Puits Blain with a telephone. Nowadays, everyone had phones: maids, stall keepers at the marketplace, farmers, tap

tap drivers, even Jean-Jean—a man whose profession required him to work under the cover of night when no one would see or judge him.

“M-m-i-s-s Mi-ria-m,” he stuttered, his head bent low due to chronic humiliation, “I’m c-coming tonight to start that j-job for you.”

“Kapitèn Poupou!” a group of giggling children saluted Jean-Jean. Ashamed, he pretended not to hear.

Miriam nodded. Now was not the time to explain why the job would have to be postponed. She would speak to Jean-Jean later. Perhaps she should have him seal that hole and make the old latrine disappear like the thatched huts and tin-covered shacks that used to populate the area. Puits Blain was no longer an idyllic haven. The kenèp groves were gone. The cornfields had been replaced by top-heavy palaces with high walls surrounding them. Tightly clustered wannabe mansions and the ever-expanding bidonvilles did not spare a single sapling. On the upside, there was now a Culligan water depot just steps from her porch, making it much easier to run her business. The cyber café halfway down to Kay Peshòt—right in that spot where Papa Malbranche used to tether his blind horse—stayed packed with those seeking escape via the Internet. Hotel Flamboyant’s sparkling point of light stood on land where, it was said, a girl once turned herself into a mabouya to escape a beating. Miriam’s umbilical stump was buried under the flamboyant tree in her front yard. So was Foufoune’s, but that meant precious little to her sister. The dirt path where Gwo Manman used to ride her mule was now a bustling artery that accommodated the United Nations’ fleet of tanks hell-bent on keeping Haiti safe. Minustah soldiers manned every few feet, catching gang members before they could disappear into the convoluted alleyways. Gone were the days when

Puits Blain did not need guarding. Yes, Miriam resolved, it would be best to have Jean-Jean seal the latrine and demolish the decrepit wooden shack surrounding it once and for all. Anyone could hide in there. Why hadn’t she thought of this before? Her customers would have to manage without it. Miriam shook her head. Her old Puits Blain no longer existed, but unlike her sister, she would never abandon her ancestral land to live elsewhere.

“Alo,” Miriam said a third time, keeping one eye on her steaming pot of cornmeal. She realized by the loaded silence on the other end that it was Foufoune. Gwo Manman’s children knew each other so well that they needed to maintain at least one ocean between their respective homes. Same mother, same father, same ancestral blood in their veins, but those two had even less love for each other than a goat and a butcher. Foufoune liked to think she was accidentally switched at birth. Nothing else could explain why her blood turned to ice whenever she even thought about her sister. Hatred raged inside of them like a parasitic cancer. The disease spread over the years, taking control of their lives, until one could no longer bear the sight of the other.

“It breaks my heart that my only two children cannot get along,” Gwo Manman often lamented.

“I have no problem with my sister,” Foufoune would lie to appease her mother. But to her friends, Foufoune would say: “Miriam is jealous of me because I made it and she’s nothing.”

“Hello, Miriam?” Foufoune said timidly.

Miriam knew what her sister had called to say: their mother had died; no one needed to tell her that. Just as she was cleaning the goat the previous night, Gwo Manman had stood under the flamboyant tree and announced that she had had it with the snow, the sleet, the wind, and the crazy lan-

guage that always left her mind in a jumble. Foufoune's apartment was a jail cell she would escape, and soon.

Yes, Gwo Manman had whispered in the darkness, *I'm on my way home.*

"Who is this?" Miriam asked sharply. A doctor might have just signed her mother's death certificate, but Gwo Manman had been dead for years, as far as she was concerned. The day Foufoune put her on that plane and made her say goodbye to Puits Blain was the day Gwo Manman had passed away. Taking a fish out of water suffocates it; putting a bird in the most beautiful aquarium drowns it. Every time Gwo Manman looked out of the apartment window, all she saw was sky and shapeless air—sheer torture to a woman who preferred her bare feet on a packed-dirt floor to fancy tiles, or even Foufoune's pretty rug. As far as Miriam was concerned, Foufoune might as well have put a bullet in the old woman's heart.

"Miriam, is that you?"

Who else could it be?

"Gwo Manman ki te nou." Foufoune's throat tightened around the words. Our mother has left us.

"I've heard," Miriam lied. "I was about to call you when the phone rang." With her free hand she picked up the wooden spoon and resumed stirring her cornmeal. Elderly people like Dona Malbranche died every day in the diaspora, leaving relatives to bury the truth in distant graves. Some who did not believe in cremation became sudden converts; get rid of the evidence!

"Manman nou mouri," Foufoune's voice broke. Our mother is dead.

"When are you bringing her body?" Miriam asked, her eyes narrowing.

Foufoune scratched her head. She saw no reason to bring

the body back to the island. She could not be expected to travel all that distance every time she wanted to place a wreath on her mother's grave. She was a naturalized citizen, an expat; the tenth department was her new patrie. Why did her sister always go out of her way to be so damn difficult?

"Bring my mother back," Miriam snapped. She was addressing a brazen kidnapper, not her sister: "You can't keep her a prisoner anymore." Hadn't the ransom been paid in full? Hadn't Gwo Manman paid the ultimate price for her freedom? "You need to bring her back where she belongs."

Foufoune sniffled, hearing accusation after accusation between every two words. "If wanting to give my mother a better life was my crime, then I'll take the blame."

"But you didn't give her a better life," Miriam hissed. "You cheated her out of her life. You stole years from her. Years! She was living in exile. She was confined to the life you thought she should live. Gwo Manman did not want to be in the States." There! She had said what she'd meant to say for years. No more civility. No more pretenses. "Gwo Manman never stopped crying," she added. "She wanted to come home. Her life was here in Puits Blain. She was happy with me. Everything she was familiar with was right here. You locked her up in an apartment morning, noon, and night. She was free here, not trapped like a tortured detainee."

"Gwo Manman had a good, happy, comfortable life with me," Foufoune argued back. Only Miriam would be so callous as to talk to her that way at this horrible time. Puits Blain had become unsafe, hadn't Miriam heard? It was just like her to pretend things were not what they really were. Wasn't it only a matter of time before their mother would have been robbed, or worse? Any number of things could have happened to her. What did Miriam have to offer Gwo Manman anyhow? Sell-

ing rice and beans to a bunch of sweaty passersby was hardly a life of luxury.

"I talked to Gwo Manman often," Miriam said. "I called her after I knew you'd left for work. She hated the life you forced her to live. If you had sent her back to me, she'd be alive today."

"How you talk!" Foufoune snapped. "Why didn't you come get your dear mother if you were so concerned about her well-being?"

"And have you send the police after me at the airport? You had yourself declared her legal guardian. You just bring Gwo Manman's body back to me or I swear you will pay." Miriam slapped the phone shut.

Sympathy clouds hovered over Brooklyn, D.C., and Miami: places where relatives of the deceased lived. More rain fell over Puits Blain, but the heat spell would not be broken. Miriam put the phone back in her apron and focused her attention on the massive pots bubbling with aromatic food. Her house and place of business—a respectable concrete-block two-story—would soon fill with mourners. But first she would finish cooking. Death and mourning always made people famished.

Word scurried via scared *rèstavèk* children all the way to the stalls lining the cemetery's wall, where Gwo Manman's friends sold bottles of a cure-all the old woman swore by. The oil might not have extended her life by a minute, but just before she died Gwo Manman had looked for the last bottle of *lwil maskreti* she owned and clutched it as if it would go with her to the next place: the Last Department. The thick brown oil did nothing but spill on Foufoune's pretty rug. *Ki te mele m.* She didn't care.

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Grudgingly, Miriam shut down her business and opened the house to visitors who came to shake their heads and grunt. *Je wè, bouch pe.* What was there to say? Gwo Manman was made to leave her home and die in a place whose name was like rock salt inside her mouth. The Gwo Manman everyone knew never would have allowed herself to live or die anywhere but in Puits Blain.

Miriam dutifully wore a black dress and positioned herself near the doorway to welcome visitors/spectators and set the tone for the gathering—a dark theater in which she would be a reluctant star. All eyes would be on her tonight. *Po dyab, pitit.* Take heart, my dear! The uncooked goat meat she had prepared went to Jean-Jean, a tip for the job she hired him to do.

"*Mèsi, mèsi, Miss Miriam,*" he had said, quivering at his good fortune. Miriam had also thrown in the change he returned from the sacks of cement she sent him to buy. She would have him seal the latrine after the funeral. "*Mèsi! Mèsi!*" Jean-Jean sometimes lost his stutter when he saw money.

There were a few faces in the house Miriam did not recognize. Death dragged impunity in its wake, so no one was turned away. Gwo Manman would have been pleased. The more mourners the merrier!

Faces brightened when the subject inevitably turned to *Rhum Barbancourt*. Miriam had always suspected that their mother's delectation for rum was another reason why Foufoune had flown down to Puits Blain years prior, packed up a few of Gwo Manman's clothes, and taken her away.

"I don't want to live in America," Gwo Manman had protested. "I am too old for that. What will I do there? I'm afraid of the cold. I don't want the snow. I want to live in my country."

"Gwo Manman, please." Foufoune had swatted the air around her with dismissive hands. "Look around you! Puits Blain is all dust, don't you see? You'll be happier with me in America." Besides—this she had thought but dared not say—I work too hard to have my mother live like this. Foufoune sent enough money monthly to keep her mother living very well, but Gwo Manman insisted on sitting with the stall keepers behind the cemetery. She liked the taste of Barbancourt in her mouth. She liked that wild drum music. Rumor was that she had a boyfriend. No, boyfriends—at her age! She liked to be shirtless under the noonday sun; said it had healing powers: *That's why I never get sick!* she'd say.

Gwo Manman cursed the day she'd allowed Foufoune to take her away. But admitted she had been curious about the foreign place too. She had dreamed of being able to say that she went there once. Only once. And came back. But Foufoune had tricked her. There was never a return ticket.

Foufoune arrived several days later with Dona Malbranche's body in a gorgeous coffin.

"You look well," Miriam remarked upon seeing her sister for the first time since she came and took Gwo Manman away years ago. Not a single crease in Foufoune's flawless features. Hair, as usual, in a classic chignon. Foufoune had always been the beautiful sister, "the one who's going to amount to something," everyone, even Gwo Manman, would say.

"And you haven't changed," Foufoune said, eyeing the tufts of unruly gray around Miriam's temples, the head tie she must have borrowed from a charcoal vendor, the rust of subpar living in her sunken eyes. Koshon Mawon! The words tickled Foufoune's lips, but she did not speak them. There were stains on Miriam's skirt: blood, no doubt—probably from cutting off

fish heads to make soup. Koshon Mawon! Long ago when they attended Anne Marie Javouhey elementary school, Foufoune and her girlfriends had made up a song which they liked to sing whenever they saw Miriam approaching:

Miriam Malbranche is dumber than a twig

Her mother, her sister:

No one wants her

Not even a wild pig . . .

Miriam threw her arms around her sister, saying: "We have only each other now."

Foufoune, in turn, kissed her on both cheeks.

That night while Foufoune rested, Miriam paced under the flamboyant tree. Gwo Manman did not die peacefully—that much she knew. She suffered. Li soufri. Miriam held her belly. She wanted to scream, but swallowed the pain.

A few other relatives flew to the island to say their good-byes. They booked rooms at Hotel Flamboyant, where the pool sparkled and massive generators guaranteed the power would stay on. They brought laptops in order to meet deadlines; they still had to make a living. Nouyòk pa lan jwèt a moun, surely Miriam understood. Business reports and dissertations did not stop for death.

No one planned to stay Down There too long after the services. They all led busy lives. They would spare a day or two, and then mount their winged friend to return to their respective chapters in their respective storybooks. During the services, however, they would be most dedicated, most single-minded, most unwavering in their show of grief. They would not be reproached. By the time they were through, all of Puits Blain would know just how much they loved the old woman they hardly knew.

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The stained glass inside Église Saint Pierre rattled with their screams. Eyes darted between the pews to see who was crying and how many teardrops were actually shed. Some of the practiced mourners would have outdone themselves had the body been displayed. They felt cheated.

The procession to the cemetery boasted an impressive number of those who had succumbed to sezisman. Long-lost cousins swooned, dropping down in front of moving cars. There were wreaths galore (more flowers than Gwo Manman had seen in life). The affair cost many, many thousands; everyone was duly impressed. The casket, copper of course, came with a sixty-year moisture and water seal warranty—just in case. (*You know Haiti and hurricanes*, the dealer had said). Gwo Manman's burial clothes—an elegant mother-of-the-bride two-piece—were precious. Pity no one got to see how prettily she was dressed. And who among them would have discerned how much she loathed the outfit?

These clothes make me look like a clown, Dona would have said, if she could have seen herself. *I look like a madigra mal maske*.

At Miriam's house after the interment, there was no place to punch a pin. Everyone ate their fill. Barbancourt 5 Star flowed like Saut d'Eau's waterfall. A young man complained there was not enough ice. His drink was not cold enough. "In this heat, the mourners need ice. Where is the ice?" he wanted to know.

"Why are you here?" Miriam asked the disgruntled mourner. "Did you know that the woman whose funeral you attended never once owned a refrigerator? But does that matter? You want ice. We're out of ice. Don't move. I'll see to it that you get your ice."

Foufoune asked Miriam what was wrong.

"We're out of ice," Miriam said, shaking with disgust. "This boy is crying for ice. We're out of ice."

"Where is the ice?" Foufoune asked, desperate to do something—anything—right. The parched earth under her feet had shifted when she watched her mother's coffin being worked like an oversized pacifier into the tomb's mouth. Tears had spurted out of her eyes when she heard Miriam scream: "Not again, Manman! Don't leave me again, Manman!" Foufoune's heart had softened. She realized then that she did, in fact, love her sister. And Miriam loved her.

Burning tears stood in Foufoune's eyes. It took burying their mother to see that she could never have despised her own flesh and blood. And Miriam had been so generous. So selfless. Miriam had been the one who handled every detail of the funeral. Trying to plan it from thousands of miles away was a logistical nightmare. Perhaps Miriam was right about everything else. Perhaps she should have sent their mother back to Haiti to live. Perhaps Gwo Manman would still be alive today.

"I'll take care of getting more ice," Foufoune said. She would crawl on her knees all the way up to Caribbean Market and carry bags of ice on her head, if that was what Miriam wanted. One day she would tell Miriam that she regretted taking Gwo Manman to the live with her in the States. One day she might even ask for forgiveness. Her sister had been right all along: Gwo Manman belonged in Puits Blain. She knew that now. How could she have been so selfish? So blind? Her mind raced with regret, but what came out of her mouth was: "Where can I go to get more ice?"

"I'll take care of it," Miriam said. She summoned Jean-Jean, who barely looked like himself in his fine funeral clothes. His work clothes were in a satchel by the outhouse, which he

would start sealing "after the last mourner leaves," as Miriam had instructed him when he arrived much earlier than he was told. Pending jobs made him uneasy. The sooner he sealed the hole, the less of a chance Miriam would have to change her mind; and the sooner he would get the rest of his money.

"Leave your shovel behind the house," Miriam had instructed him before the funeral. That thing was like an extension of his hand. He carried it everywhere, always hoping someone would hire him. "You can start tonight," Miriam had added, to his delight. She had read the impatience in his eyes, though she was the one who could no longer wait once word had reached her ear about some sneaky schoolgirl who had dropped her newborn into a nearby latrine. A suspicious houseboy had followed the trail of blood from the outhouse to the girl's thighs, and she'd confessed. Jean-Jean almost slipped into the hole and died himself, when frantic neighbors sent him down there with a bucket on a rope to try and scoop out the remains.

"I remember your mother well," Jean-Jean said. The thought of getting paid in just a few hours had cured his stutter for now. "She was a good person." Gwo Manman always had a kind word for him. He would do anything, anything at all, for the Malbranche family.

"We need ice," Miriam told him.

"I'll get it," replied Jean-Jean. For once, no one seemed to care where his hands had been.

Miriam embraced her sister, saying, "Pran kouraj. You did what you thought was best." She lifted up her hand and her voice: "A toast to Gwo Manman!"

Someone gave Miriam a fresh bottle of rum. She put it to her mouth and drank. She passed the bottle to Foufoune. *Do this in remembrance of me.*

"To Gwo Manman," Foufoune said. The liquid burned her throat on its way down. She was not a drinker. Her petite frame had never been able to meet rum on its own terms. A single sip would send her head spinning. But for Gwo Manman . . . just this once . . .

When Jean-Jean returned with the ice, the disgruntled mourner thanked him and drank and toasted for several hours before he stumbled out of the house. Foufoune, too, continued to toast her departed mother until her stomach churned and her thoughts began to swirl. Everyone was now stumbling with five-star grief. Foufoune teetered toward the bathroom. It was occupied, but she could not wait.

"Of course," Miriam said when Foufoune, trembling like a little girl, asked her sister to escort her to that wooden stall behind her house. It had been years since she last used it, but if memory served her correctly, it would be pitch-black inside and densely populated with flying roaches. She would have waited, if she could have, but the rum had instigated a riot inside her stomach and everything she'd ever eaten in her life was seconds away from a violent uprising.

Miriam listened as Foufoune retched into the thirty-foot drop.

"Water." Foufoune could barely say the word. She would splash her face with water; surely that would make her feel better.

"Yes," Miriam responded. "I'll get you some."

Miriam returned to the house for a pitcher. Jean-Jean was leaning against the wall, an anxious look in his eyes. The last of the stumbling mourners kissed her goodbye and said, "Be strong."

Miriam filled the pitcher and headed back to the outhouse. Foufoune slurred something Miriam did not understand

as she bent over the latrine, vomiting—too intoxicated to care about the stench or the roaches. Her chignon was still intact, Miriam noted.

The back of Foufoune's neck was bare, except for the heart-shaped links of a gold chain which Miriam had given to Gwo Manman one Mother's Day—purchased with money she should have used to extract a molar that was so infected it ended up costing her half of her bottom teeth. Miriam wondered if Foufoune had taken the necklace off their mother's neck after she died, or if Gwo Manman had willingly given it away.

Without taking her eyes off the gold hearts, Miriam gripped the pitcher in a tight fist and drenched Foufoune in a vengeful baptism.

Stunned, Foufoune turned to ask why. In that second, Miriam reached outside the door and wrapped her fingers around the wooden handle of Jean-Jean's shovel. She shifted her weight and steadied herself on her callused heels, leaning back just so. As deftly as stirring lumps out of her cornmeal, Miriam delivered a blow so precise that Foufoune's chignon came undone. She fell sideways over the latrine's mouth. Miriam hit her again and again.

"This is for Gwo Manman."

Blood streamed out of Foufoune's mouth. Her eyelids pulled back in blinding shock. Miriam snatched off the heart-shaped necklace, and with a strength she didn't know she possessed, worked Foufoune's ever-so-svelte little frame into the hole. Foufoune's body went through with minimal force, landing with a sound as faint as a serving of rice and beans onto a Styrofoam takeout container.

Miriam held the necklace in a clenched fist, peering into the darkness. She tried but could not see her sister below.

Thick mud clogged Foufoune's mouth, her nostrils, her ears. Her head was heavy with mud—was it mud? She could not move her legs. *Dear God, help me*, she tried to say, but the words could not make it past the gunk in her throat. She attempted to lift her hands toward the strange dappled light filtering out of the darkness, but the movement caused her to sink even deeper.

Miriam covered the hole with a sheet of plywood. Soon Jean-Jean would pour concrete, turning the latrine into a memory. She sighed heavily as she returned to the house. Jean-Jean was standing like a shadow on the porch, waiting for her to give him the word. The sooner he started, the sooner he would be done. The sooner he would be paid.

"Everyone is gone," he said.

"Then get to work," Miriam told him. It had been a long day. She was tired, but took comfort in knowing that her mother and sister had both returned home to her in Puits Blain. This time to stay.