

1

Once upon a time, in a far-off land, I was kidnapped by a gang of fearless yet terrified young men with so much impossible hope beating inside their bodies it burned their very skin and strengthened their will right through their bones.

They held me captive for thirteen days.

They wanted to break me.

It was not personal.

I was not broken.

This is what I tell myself.

It was hot, nearly a hundred degrees, the air so thick it felt like warm rain. I dressed my son, Christophe, in a pair of miniature red board shorts and a light blue T-shirt with a sailboat across the front. I covered his smooth brown arms and his beaming face with sunscreen. I kissed his nose and brushed his thick,

dirty-blond curls away from his face as he pressed his palms against my cheeks and shouted, “Mama! Mama! Mama!” My husband, Michael, the baby, and I said goodbye to my parents, told them we would be back in time for dinner.

Michael and I were taking Christophe to the ocean for the first time. We were going to hold him in the warm salt water as he wiggled his toes and kicked his chubby legs. We were going to throw him toward the sun and catch him safely in our arms.

My mother smiled from the balcony where she watered her plants, wearing a crisp linen outfit and high heels. She blew a kiss to her grandson. She reminded us to be safe.

We put our son into his car seat. We handed him his favorite stuffed animal, a little bulldog named Baba. He clenched his beloved toy tightly in his little fist, still smiling. He has his father’s temperament. He is usually happy. That is important to me. Before getting into the car, Michael double-checked that Christophe was strapped securely in his car seat. He put our beach bags into the trunk.

Michael held my door open. When he closed it, he pressed his face against the window, and blew air until his cheeks filled. I laughed and pressed my hand against his face through the glass. “I love you,” I mouthed. I don’t say those words often, but he knows. Michael ran around to his side of the car. After he slid behind the steering wheel and adjusted the rearview mirror so he could see the baby, he leaned into me and we kissed. He rested an arm on the armrest between us and I idly brushed the golden wisps of hair on his arms. I smiled and rested my head on his shoulder. We drove down the long steep hill of my parents’ driveway and waited quietly for the heavy steel gates, the gates keeping us safe, to open.

In the backseat, Christophe cooed softly, still smiling. As the gates closed behind us, three black Land Cruisers surrounded our car. The air filled with a high-pitched squealing and the smell of burning rubber. Michael's tanned knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering wheel and looked frantically for a way out. His body shook. The doors of all three trucks opened at the same time and men we did not know spilled out, all limbs and gunmetal. There was silence, the air thin, still hot. My breath caught painfully in my rib cage. There was shouting.

Two men stood behind our car, machine guns raised. Michael pressed his foot against the gas pedal to move forward but a tall man with a red bandana across the lower half of his face, a man holding a machine gun, pounded his fist on the hood of the car. He left a small dent in the shape of his closed hand. He glared at us, then raised his gun, pointed it directly at Michael's chest. I threw my arm across Michael's body. It was a silly, impotent gesture. Michael's eyes were bright, and arcs of tears trembled along his lower eyelids. He grabbed my hand between both of his, held me so fiercely it felt like all those slender bones would be crushed.

Two men slammed the butts of their rifles against the car windows. Their bodies glowed with anger. The glass cracked, fractures spreading. Michael and I pulled apart, waited tensely, and then the windshield broke, the sound loud and echoing. We covered our faces as shards of glass shattered around us, refracting sharp prisms of light. Michael and I reached for Christophe at the same time. The baby was still smiling but his lips quivered, his eyes wide. My hands could not quite reach him. My child was so close my fingers thrummed. If I touched my child,

we would all be fine; this terrible thing would not happen. A man reached into the window and unlocked my door. He started to pull me out of the car roughly, growling as the seat belt held me inside. After he slapped my face, he ordered me to unlock my seat belt. My hands shook as I depressed the button. I was lifted up and out of our car and thrown onto the street. The skin covering my face stung.

My body deflated. My body was just skin stretched too tightly over bone, nothing more, no air. The man sneered at me, called me *dyaspora* with the resentment those Haitians who cannot leave hold for those of us who can. His skin was slick. I couldn't hold on to him. I tried to scratch, but my fingers only collected a thick layer of sweat. I tried to grab on to the car door. He slammed his gun against my fingers. I yelled, "My baby. Don't hurt my baby." One of the men grabbed me by my hair, threw me to the ground, kicked me in my stomach. I gasped as I wrapped my arms around myself. A small crowd gathered. I begged them to help. They did not. They stood and watched me screaming and fighting with all the muscle in my heart. I saw their faces and the indifference in their eyes, the relief that it was not yet their time; the wolves had not yet come for them.

I was pulled to my feet and again I tried to break free, I tried to run, to reach for my son, to feel his skin against mine just one last time. I shouted at him through the broken window. I shouted, "Christophe!" banging my fist against his window so he would look at me. I said the things any mother would say to her child in that moment even though he was too young to understand any of it. My voice was stripped raw. He stared, reaching for me. He kicked his legs. I studied the dimples over

each of his knuckles. I broke free and pulled the rear door open, wrapped the seat belt around my hand as a strange pair of hands tried to pull me loose. The man on Michael's side hit him in the face with a closed fist again and again. Michael slumped forward, his forehead pressed against the horn. The horn wailed, the whine of it filling the air. A thick, dark stream of blood slowly slid from my husband's forehead, down between his eyes, along his nose and over his lips. In the backseat, Christophe started crying, his face burning a bright red.

The cold steel of a gun barrel dug into my skin. I froze. A voice said, "Go easy or we kill your family. We kill everything you've ever loved." I did not move. The gun dug deeper and deeper. I unclenched my fingers and stood. I stared at my family. I do not love easy. I raised my hands over my head. My thighs trembled uncontrollably. I could not move. A hand grabbed my neck, pushing me toward a waiting vehicle. I turned to look back, a sudden calm filling me. Michael slowly raised his head. I looked at him hard, wanted him to know this was not how our story would end. He shouted my name. The desperation in his voice made me nauseous. I mouthed *I love you* and he nodded. He shouted, "I love you." I heard him. I felt him. I watched as he tried to open his door but passed out again, his body slumping.

My captors put a burlap sack over my head and shoved me into the backseat. The delicate construction of bone in my cheeks throbbed angrily. My skin hurt. My captors told me, in broken English, to do as they said and I would be back with my family soon. I needed to hold the fragile hope that I could find my way back to my happily ever after. I didn't know any better. That was the before.

I sat very still as two men flanked me. Their muscular legs pressed against mine. Each man held one of my wrists, so tightly they would leave dark red circles. The air was filled with the stench of sweaty young bodies and my blood and the sunscreen I had rubbed into my child's skin. Before I passed out I heard cold laughter, my son crying and the desperate wail of the car horn.

11

I opened my eyes and couldn't see anything but bright spots of light and gray shadow. My head hurt. I gasped and began thrashing wildly as I remembered where I was, my baby crying, my husband. The burlap sack made it difficult to breathe. I needed a breath of clean air. A strong hand grabbed my shoulder, shoved me back into the seat. I was warned to sit still. I began to hum. I hummed so loudly my teeth vibrated. I rocked back and forth. A hand grabbed the back of my neck. I rocked harder. Someone muttered, "She's crazy."

I was on the edge of crazy. I hadn't fallen in yet.

I was scared, dizzy and nauseous, my mouth dry. As the car lurched I leaned forward and vomited, bile seeping through the burlap, the rest dripping down my shirt. I was repulsive, already. The man to my left started yelling, grabbed me by my

hair, slammed my head into the seat in front of me. My mouth soured as I tried to protect my face.

And then, inexplicably, I thought about my friends in Miami, where Michael and I live, and how they would talk when news of a kidnapping reached them. I am a curiosity to my American friends—a Haitian who is not from the slums or the countryside, a Haitian who has enjoyed a life of privilege. When I talk about my life in Haiti, they listen to my stories as if they are fairy tales, stories that could not possibly be true by nature of their goodness.

My husband and I love to entertain, dinner parties. We cook fancy meals from *Gourmet* and *Bon Appétit* and drink expensive wine and try to solve the world's problems. At least we did this, in the before, when we were less aware of the spectacle we were and when we thought we had anything even remotely relevant to say about the things that tear the world apart.

At one such party, where we entertained his friends and my friends, some of whom we liked and many of whom we hated, everyone drank lots of wine and danced to a fine selection of music. We ate excellent food and engaged in pretentious but interesting conversation. Talk turned to Haiti, as it often does. We sat on our lanai, illuminated by paper lanterns and candles, all of us drunk on the happiness of too much money and too much food and too much freedom. I was on Michael's lap, drawing small circles on the back of his neck with my fingernails, his arm around my waist. Everyone leaned forward, earnest in their desire to understand a place they would likely never visit. One of my friends mentioned a magazine article he read about how Haiti had surpassed Colombia as the kidnapping capital of



the world. Another told us about a recent feature in a national magazine on the kidnapping epidemic—that was the word he used, as if kidnapping were a disease, a contagion that could not be controlled. There were comments about Vodou and that one movie with Lisa Bonet that made Bill Cosby mad at her. Soon everyone was offering their own desperate piece of information about my country, my people, about the violence and the poverty and the hopelessness, conjuring a place that does not exist anywhere but the American imagination.

That night, I buried my face against Michael's neck, felt his pulse against my cheek. He held me closer. He understood. There are three Haitis—the country Americans know and the country Haitians know and the country I thought I knew.

In the back of the Land Cruiser the day I was kidnapped, I was in a new country altogether. I was not home or I was and did not know it yet. Someone turned up the radio. A song I recognized was playing. I began to sing along, wanted to be part of this one familiar thing. Someone told me to shut up. I sang louder. I sang so loud I couldn't hear anything around me. A fist connected with my jaw. I slumped to the side, my head ringing. I didn't stop singing though my words slowed, slurred.

I was supposed to be at the beach with my husband. I was supposed to wrap my legs around Michael's waist as he carried me into the ocean and away from the shore while our son napped. I would trace his jaw with my fingertips and my lips. I would taste the salt and sun and sea on his skin and he would hold me so tight it hurt to breathe. We would ignore everything around us and he would kiss me like he always kisses me—hard, with purpose, the soft of our lip flesh bruising, pulpy, his tongue in

my mouth, a hand twisting through my hair possessively. He always tries so hard to hold on to me because he does not realize I am with him always. We are a lock and key. We are nothing without each other. When the sun became too much, when our desire became too much for that moment, I would pull away and we would climb out of the water, our bodies heavy. We would lie on the hot white sand with our sleeping son between us. The salt from the sea would dry on our skin. We would drink something cold and bask in the perfection of our happily ever after.

But we weren't there. I wasn't there. I was alone in a country I did not know, one that did not belong to me or my father, one that belonged to men who obeyed no kind of law.

We drove for hours along winding, narrow roads. The men discussed financial matters, speculating as to the kind of ransom I would fetch. A hand grabbed at my breast, slowly swelling with milk, and I sat straight up, my spine locked. I whispered, "Do not touch me." There was a laugh. A voice said, "Not yet," but the hand squeezed harder. I tried to pull away from the violation but there was nowhere to go. I was in a cage, the first of many.

"You're never going to get away with this," I said, my voice already hoarsening.

There was laughter. "We already have."



We stopped on a noisy street. My kidnappers pulled the bur-lap sack off my head and I swallowed as much air as I could. I squinted as my eyes adjusted to my surroundings. The sun was still out but fading into pink along the horizon. It was beautiful how the color stretched across the sky in sweeping arcs. I stared into that pink, wanted to remember everything about it, until a hand grabbed my elbow. I winced, stumbled forward.

A few people in the street stared but no one moved to help me. I shouted, “This is not right,” knowing my words were useless. There’s no room for such distinctions in a country where too many people have to claw for what they need and still have nothing to hold.

My captors walked me through a dark room with three couches and a large, flat-screen television. A woman sat on one of the couches in a red tank top, denim skirt, and flip-flops, the

kind with a high chunky heel. My eyes widened as I watched her watching me. She didn't look surprised. She shook her head and resumed watching her program, some kind of talk show.

In another room, four men played cards. There were bottles of Prestige beer on the table and an overflowing ashtray. One of them licked his lips as we walked by. We passed through a child's bedroom. My breasts ached uncomfortably. I thought about Christophe, my sweet baby boy, whom I hadn't yet weaned, who hungered for his mother's breast and could not be satisfied.

Finally, we reached a room with a small bed along one wall and a large bucket against the other. There was a small window covered with bars looking out onto an alley, and below the window a faded poster for the Fanmi Lavalas political party, bearing the likeness of a man I didn't recognize. They threw me in this room and closed the door. They left me in a new cage. I immediately grabbed the doorknob, twisting it frantically. The door was locked. It was impossible not to panic. I started beating the door. I was going to beat that door down but the door was strong and my arms were less so.

When I was completely worn-out, I sank to the floor. The heat overwhelmed me. Already, my clothes clung to my body. I could smell myself. The edges of my face were damp with sweat.

Heat takes on a peculiar quality during the summer in Port-au-Prince. The air is thick and inescapable. It wraps itself around you and applies pressure relentlessly. The summer I was kidnapped, the heat was relentless. That heat pressed up, so close against my skin. That heat invaded my senses until I forgot nearly everything, until I forgot the meaning of hope.

I waited and tried not to imagine what could happen to me. I could not allow myself to think of such things or there would be no reason to believe I would be saved. Instead, I tried to remember why my parents would ever return to the country they once left, the country they once loved, the country I thought I loved.

There is this truth. I know very little of my parents' lives as children. They are not prone to confession. My mother and father are both from Port-au-Prince. They grew up poor. There were too many children and not enough of anything. They were often hungry. They walked to school barefoot and were teased for having dirty feet. My fathers' parents both died when he was young, in ways that disgusted him, in ways, he once told us, that showed him that the only way to survive this world is by being strong. His mother, he said, was a weak woman and his father was a weak man and it was their weakness that led to their deaths, the father from liver failure due to a fondness for rum and the mother from heart failure from loving the wrong man too much. My father has lived his whole life determined to be nothing like them, no matter what it cost the rest of us.

My mother's father died when she was six. Her first stepfather died when she was eleven. Her second stepfather died when she was fourteen and her third stepfather died when she was eighteen. Her mother has been living with the same man for more than twenty years, but refuses to marry him. Her concern is understandable. My grandmother and the man I know as my grandfather live in a small, two-bedroom apartment in the Bronx where she has lived since she first came to the United States. She worked as a housekeeper for a Jewish family in Manhattan and sent for her twelve children one by one. When the youngest finally set foot on American soil she started taking

classes at a local community college, determined to do more with the remainder of her life than clean the messes of the lives of others.

My parents came to the States separately, my father, Sebastien, when he was nineteen by way of Montreal then Queens and my mother, Fabienne, by way of the Bronx. They flew here on Pan Am. They saved the airsick bags embossed with the Pan Am logo and marveled, when they shared these parts of their history, at how similar their stories were.

Once upon a time, my parents were strangers in a strange land but they found each other. They found love, meeting at a wedding where my father, taken by her strange smile and the careless way she moved on the dance floor, asked my mother if he could drive her home. She was accompanied by her sister, Veronique, who would later become my godmother. The sisters sat in the backseat of my father's Chevelle, giggling the entire way because, as my mother would later tell me, Sebastien Duval was so very serious.

A week after that first meeting, my father told my maternal grandmother he was going to marry her daughter. He courted my mother, always visiting her at her mother's apartment, where she lived with several of her twelve siblings. My father wore a neatly pressed suit and tie. He was often nervous and it charmed my mother that she created such uncertainty in a man otherwise brimming with confidence.

They mostly sat on a plastic-covered couch and talked, quietly, while the younger of my mother's siblings ran around with too much energy in a too small apartment. Three of her brothers, older, glowered at my father anytime they walked through the room and sometimes made idle threats about the bones they

would break if my father stepped out of line. My parents had little privacy. Their romance blossomed between shared breaths and touching thighs and unwavering glances while life in that cramped apartment raged around them.

It is a wonder they were able to fall in love. Falling in love, my mother says, requires its own private space. She and my father had no choice but to carve that private space for themselves where there was none.

Though my father made his intentions plain early on, he waited six months to propose. On the day he asked my mother to be his wife, my father took her to see *The Towering Inferno*. She loved Steve McQueen, thought he was a very handsome American. My parents held hands throughout the movie, my father brushing his fingers across my mother's knuckles. This gesture made her heart race, my mother said, because it was the most intimate moment they had ever shared. As he walked my mother back to her apartment, my father began to talk of how someday, he was going to build towers, only his weren't going to burn. No. His towers were going to soar into the sky and nothing, he said, nothing would make him happier than having my mother by his side. Though most people don't realize it, my father is the wild and romantic partner in their relationship. My mother said nothing and they continued walking along empty New York streets.

Later they stood, quietly in the foyer of my mother's building as my mother considered my father's words. He waited, his forehead sweaty, his suit hanging loosely from his narrow frame, his body becoming smaller and smaller as his hope faltered. My mother enjoyed the quiet tension of the moment. She was not being cruel. She had spent so much of her life always surrounded

by too many people clamoring for someone's attention, clamoring for everything a person could need, never getting enough. All she truly longed for was quiet and space and she knew my father would provide those things for her. My father's hand shook as he slid a modest diamond on her finger. He held her wrist gently, his thumb resting against the slightly curved bone. He said, "I am an ambitious man," and my mother replied, "I believe you are."

A year later, they married, and a year after that, my father graduated from City College of New York with his degree in civil engineering, took a job at a large construction firm in Nebraska. He took my mother away from everything she knew but even though she didn't believe in fairy tales, he was her Prince Charming.

Where he went, she followed.