

The Universe  
Inside  
Miss Evelyn's Purse

By Thomas Paper

Published in 2018 by Saint Red Press  
P.O. Box 228, Boulder, CO 80306

Limited 1<sup>st</sup> edition hardback,  
200 copies printed (2018)

ISBN 978-0-692-08867-8

Copyright © 2018 by Thomas Paper  
All rights reserved.

**COPY Nº**      /**200**

For my Aunt Chantae,  
the inspiration for Miss Evelyn,  
and for my editor and dear friend, P Segal.



*“I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”*

- James Baldwin



Pandora sits at the top of the stairs, straining to hear the conversation in the room below.

Her father often sits talking with Miss Evelyn after returning home and Pandora has gone to bed, but this is different. The day is Sunday and Miss Evelyn hadn't needed to stay with her.

She arrived well past Pandora's bedtime, and though she should be sleeping, Pandora has to know what the unusual visit is about.

"This feels like progress. There are marches planned in Montgomery, Atlanta, and Jackson." Her father's voice sounds strained. "They're meant to be peaceful, but there's been trouble already."

Pandora's leg has gone numb, and she shifts her weight to the other foot. The floorboard creaks and she freezes, listening to see if they've heard.

"Have you told Pandora?" Miss Evelyn's accent seems heavier than usual.

"I don't know how much I should tell her. It's a lot to understand at her age."

"You're her father and I'll not interfere, but don't go thinking that by not telling her about the hard stuff, you're saving her from it. You're missing a chance to guide her—to give her the tools to understand the world she lives in."

A long time passes before either speaks again and Pandora wonders if her father is angry at what Miss Evelyn has said.

One of Pandora's cats, Oliver, comes bounding up the stairs, rubbing against her and mewing incessantly. She tries to push him away, certain they will wonder why the cat is making all the noise and investigate. Luckily, neither of them does.

Finally, she hears her father say, "You're probably right, and with me working all the time—well, thank you. I don't know what Pandora or I would do without you."

“Say nothing of it,” Miss Evelyn says. “I know what you do, you do for Pandora, and one day I think she’ll understand. When are you leaving?”

“Early in the morning, by train.”

“You should sleep then.”

A shadow moves as someone stands, and as quietly as she can, Pandora slips back into bed.



The purse is small and unassuming, as it sits on the stoop beside Miss Evelyn. She reaches in and pulls out another hair tie.

“Keep still!”

Pandora’s excited. Tomorrow is the 4th of July and the neighborhood will be celebrating.

“Every time you move the braid I’m working on comes loose,” Miss Evelyn says.

Her fingers work lightning fast, weaving Pandora’s hair into tight plaits. Pandora likes Miss Evelyn, so she tries hard to sit still.

“How late can I stay up?”

“Not more than an hour past your bedtime.”

“It’s a holiday!”

Another braid is pulled free of Miss Evelyn’s grip.

“And a goat’s frown won’t keep it from being taken to market,” says Miss Evelyn.

Pandora doesn’t argue—there would be no point. Miss Evelyn’s lessons are most often taught with a West African proverb.

Miss Evelyn is from Tobago. The proverbs brought to the island have passed down through the generations, going as far back as anyone can remember.

They sit on the stoop of Pandora’s home as the city wakes and starts to stir.

“Morning, Miss Evelyn—Pandora.”

The postman hands up the mail. There’s no letter from her father today and no mail delivery tomorrow.

“You lookin’ fine Miss Evelyn.”

“Go on with you,” Miss Evelyn says, tartly. “It’s a wonder any mail gets delivered.”

But, Pandora knows Miss Evelyn is flattered. The postman knows it too.

“You cold, Miss Evelyn, but I see you,” he says, grinning as he walks away.

Pandora lives in a row house. All the row houses on the block are connected, like one long building. Whoever built them, painted each house a different color.

Instead of giving an address, people who live on the block just say the color and how many houses from the cross street theirs is. Pandora's is the only red house, which makes it easy to give directions, if anyone were to visit.

"Almost done," says Miss Evelyn, as she reaches inside her purse for one last hair tie.

There is something curious about the purse. It seems to Pandora that anytime Miss Evelyn needs something, no matter what it is, it's always inside.

"Done." Miss Evelyn says, snapping the tie over the last braid.

They sit together at the table eating their breakfast, while Pandora reads *The Encyclopedia of the Natural World*, Volume Three.

There are twenty volumes in the set, but Pandora only has two: Volume Three, which covers all known insects, and Volume Nine, covering birds. Her father ordered them from a catalog, after Pandora chose which ones looked the most interesting.

Pandora always reads at breakfast. She thinks that if she has to be sitting down, she might as well have something to do. Miss Evelyn likes to talk, which is why Pandora never gets farther than a few pages.

"I'm going to the market this morning," says Miss Evelyn, breaking the silence. "We need more flour and milk—what's it that I'm always forgetting?"

"Vanilla extract," says Pandora, not looking up from the book.

"Right. I'm baking an angel cake."

Pandora has lost her concentration. She closes the book, finishes her food and asks to be excused to go outside.

Pandora finds Bumpy on his knees, trying to carefully dig up the tiniest plant she has ever seen. If their block in Harlem lacks for anything, it's vegetation. There are patches of grass, mostly dried up and colorless, and a few trees that grow more slowly than any tree should.

Occasionally, the wind blows in a seed from somewhere else. If it's lucky, the seed will find a crack in the sidewalk, or a bit of dirt at the side of a building. With a little water and sunlight—and if no one steps on it—the seed will sprout, and Bumpy will find it.

Bumpy has an eye for the color green. Once, he spotted a sliver of a leaf, down an alley, while he and Pandora were shooting marbles. He'd run off in the middle of the game, disappearing for hours after he dug it up. Bumpy is crazy for plants.

Pandora watches as he tries not to break the delicate stem of the plant, while he digs to free the roots.

"It can't be," he says, more to himself than her.

"Can't be what?" she asks.

"Huh? Oh, Jacobs Ladder. I've only seen it in books, but I think this could be it."

The possibility of such a rarity being found here excites him.

"What do you do with all the plants you find?" she asks. He lives four doors down, and even though she has been inside his house many times, she's not seen a single plant.

"It's a secret," says Bumpy, still concentrating on uprooting the plant.

"Oh, Bumpy's secret garden!" she says, teasing. He looks annoyed with her.

Then, with a gentle tug, he frees the plant and stands up, holding it protectively as if the wind might shatter it.

"Hopscotch? I have chalk," she asks, pulling a lump of chalk from her pocket and showing it to him.

"Maybe later."

"Fine. Have fun in your secret garden."

She runs off, leaving him wondering what he has said that upset her. Girls are a puzzle to Bumpy. He shrugs his shoulders and starts down the sidewalk, carrying the plant out in front of him.

Pandora sits down on the sidewalk in front of her house and takes the lump of chalk out of her pocket. The concrete is hot, but the spot she has picked is partly shaded by a parked truck. She starts to draw.

She tries drawing a bird, but halfway through, she decides it looks more like a butterfly and finishes it as one. She draws a flower, the stem sketched to look as though it is growing from the crack in the sidewalk. She sets the chalk down to poke at a beetle that is scuttling along, in an attempt to get away from her.

A shadow falls over the sidewalk, and a scuffed shoe steps on the piece of chalk, grinding it into the concrete. Pandora looks up into Holly's sneering face. Hovering behind Holly is her brother, Leroy.

"Hey Leroy, look at the pretty picture Pandora's drawn," Holly says. "It's a shame she ain't got any chalk left, she could draw herself some friends."

"I have friends," Pandora says, angrily.

She stands up and brushes herself off, leaving streaks of white chalk on her blue shorts.

"Oh please, tell us who," says Holly. "And don't say your weird nanny."

Pandora can feel her face flush.

"She don't want us talking about her nanny," says Leroy, snickering.

"Ain't you too old to have a nanny?" Holly says, stepping up close to Pandora and grabbing one of her braids.

"Your nanny does such a good job with your hair. Too bad she can't do nothing about your color."

"What about it? You just as dark as me."

"Ain't nobody dark as you. You blue-black."

“Leave me alone!” Pandora shouts, and before she can stop herself, her fist is swinging, but Holly brushes her punch aside, laughing.

Leroy steps forward and grabs hold of Pandora’s arms, and Holly starts to undo one of her braids.

The flat, bristly end of a broom suddenly connects with Leroy’s backside. Startled, he lets go of Pandora’s arms and turns to see who would have the nerve to interfere in their fun.

“Start running and if I see you on this block again, I’ll take the hard end of the broom to the both of you!”

The stern expression on Pops’s face leaves no room for hesitation. He’s thin and wiry, but Holly and Leroy—like all the kids on the block—are afraid of Pops and they take off at a run.

Pops is the last street-sweeper in Harlem still sweeping the street with a broom. The city began using trucks with motorized brooms attached over a decade ago, but Pops refused. Instead, keeping on like he always has, walking up and down the street while pushing his broom, the bristles worn low and a heavy bin in tow.

The city administrator in charge of letting him go misplaced the paperwork, and Pops’s paychecks continue to be sent each week.

There are stories about how Pops was sent to Rikers for bank robbery—or was it murder? Most of the kids cross to the other side of the street when they pass him. Some throw stones from the alley at him, before running away, laughing.

He’s never bothered, only angry when someone tosses a glass bottle from out of a car window or leaves a trash bag spilling out against the curb.

To Pandora, it’s as though he knows more than anyone, but chooses to keep what he knows to himself.

“Thanks,” she says. No one ever calls him Pops to his face.

“Go on, then. Better have Miss Evelyn fix that hair,” he says, dismissing her with a wave of his hand. And then he seems to forget she is there, and goes back to sweeping.

As Pandora runs home, she wonders how much trouble she is in, but decides she doesn't care. She takes the steps of the stoop two at a time, bursting through the front door, not stopping until she reaches the kitchen, startling Miss Evelyn.

The radio is tuned to Calypso Hour and the volume is turned up.

“You can't go running through the house,” Miss Evelyn says, without turning around. “How many times I tell you that?”

She resumes stirring, once again lost to the music, her hips moving in rhythm with the steel pan. Some time goes by before she notices that Pandora is still standing there. She turns to look at her, taking in the scene as if for the first time.

“What in the name—” Miss Evelyn starts, then stops when she sees that a scolding isn't what's needed right now. Pandora, covered in chalk dust, with one braid undone, standing with her eyes down and trembling with anger.

“Come here child,” says Miss Evelyn, and Pandora crosses the kitchen, not daring to look at her.

Miss Evelyn hands her the spoon. “Finish stirring the batter and tell me what happened.”

“Holly and Leroy happened,” Pandora says, making circles in the bowl with the spoon. “How can anyone be so mean?”

“Some people don't like seeing others happy,” Miss Evelyn says, rummaging through a cabinet for the cake pan. “Reminds them they aren't all that happy themselves. Ah, here it is.”

She takes the spoon from Pandora and hands her the pan, humming along with the radio while she pours in the batter.

“Miss Evelyn, am I too dark to be pretty?”

Miss Evelyn slams the spoon down on the counter, making Pandora jump. With one hand on her hip, she takes Pandora’s chin in the other and leans in so close, their faces are inches apart.

“Child, don’t ever let me hear you talk nonsense again.”

She picks up the spoon and continues emptying the batter into the pan, though with more force than Pandora thinks is necessary.

“Makes no difference what shade you are.”

Pandora asks, “How come all the ladies at the shop want to be light skinned then?”

“Cause they damn fools is why. Stop paying attention to what people think. It’s what’s in here that counts.” She taps her finger on Pandora’s forehead, as if trying to drive the point home.

“No use in trying to be what they say you should,” Miss Evelyn says, going to the oven and turning the dial.

“You’ll never stop trying and they will go on being the nasty people they are, and you’ll have lost what makes you, you.”

When the cake is in the oven and the kitchen is clean, she turns to Pandora and says, “There will always be people who will try and keep you down. How much power they have over you is up to you.”

After putting on clean clothes, Pandora decides she doesn’t feel like going back outside. Instead, she flips through the ninth volume of the nature encyclopedia, while she lays on the sitting room floor. Miss Evelyn is seated in the big armchair with her eyes closed, fanning herself and listening to the news on the radio.

Miss Evelyn is just beginning to snore when the timer goes off in the kitchen, waking her up and

startling Pandora. While Miss Evelyn is in the kitchen, Pandora spots the purse on the coffee table.

*What is it about that purse?*

She gets up and goes over to thumb through the records on the shelf: Jackie Wilson, The Drifters, Sam Cooke, Etta James, Ray Charles. . .

There was one time when the needle on the tone arm broke, and Miss Evelyn made a show of rummaging around in the purse, before she pulled out a new one, still in its box.

*Who keeps a turntable needle in their purse?*

Pandora settles on the Impressions album. She reads the track-list and notices a misprint: recorded in 1965—*next year*. Taking the record out of its sleeve, she sets the shiny vinyl disc on the player and lowers the needle.

*People get ready, there's a train a comin'  
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board*

Pandora has played it a hundred times by now and still isn't tired of hearing it.

*All you need is faith, to hear the diesels hummin'  
Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord*

She watches the record spin, wondering how long it will be before her father returns. She starts to pace across the sitting room, pausing at the window to look out.

After sitting down on the couch, she spots Miss Evelyn's purse on the coffee table and has the sudden urge to take a peek inside.

*I shouldn't.*

It's an ordinary, leather handbag, but somehow it doesn't belong. She leans forward on the edge of the couch, spinning the purse around to look at it from every angle. She picks it up, feeling its weight.



Miss Evelyn emerges from the kitchen and Pandora looks up guiltily.

Lying in her bed, Pandora listens to the sounds from outside her window. The pigeons roosting somewhere above are cooing softly, and there is the steady hum of cars on the motorway. A couple is arguing next door.

The city never sleeps.

She hears the faint whistle of a train to the east, on its way to the Harlem River Yards. Like her father, her grandfather had worked at the yards, after he came to Harlem from Bywater, New Orleans.

He died the year before her mother, but from Ma Bell's stories, she feels close to him. He had been like her, full of longing for answers to the things he did not know. That longing had driven him from his home, from everything that was familiar, to journey North to an unknown city.

He was partly Creole and spoke with a heavy accent. Unaware of his culture, the workers in the train yard called him Frenchie and accused him of acting above his place. If it bothered him, he never said.

Pandora had asked Ma Bell if he ever regretted leaving New Orleans, but she didn't know.

"If he did, it was before he met your grandmother."

Her grandmother and Ma Bell were twins. Ma Bell is small and bent, with white hair and cruel lines etched into her shrunken face. From a picture, Pandora discovered that her grandmother had been beautiful.

"In her, your grandfather found everything he'd ever wanted, and she in him."

*Did he, though? Did the longing to discover the unknown that he had felt his whole life, just disappear?*

"His death was hard on her. I don't think I saw her smile again after."

Pandora thinks it odd, how people always need another to be happy. No one ever says that they've grown up and found that they were perfectly fine on

their own. In stories, no one's life is complete until they meet someone else—but, if she thinks of the people she knows, none of them are as perfect together as that.

Many of the kids on her block have stepparents, or only one mother or father at home. Still people try, as if happiness depends on their success. It's like a ridiculous dance, put on by a school that needs to meet its budget. The dancers pair up out of fear that they'll be the only ones dancing alone.

Is it that everyone is right? Will she someday realize she is incomplete until she finds someone to spend an eternity with? She wants there to be more to life than what the people around her have settled for.

*Money*, she thinks, *that is what it takes to go places*. The few who found lives beyond Harlem, all had that in common—they had money.

Money can buy adventure. With it, you can buy airfare, hotel rooms, better clothes—people are judged to be better than they are, simply by having more of it. Money can get you into places that people without money weren't allowed. It doesn't matter where you are from, only that you have money.

Pandora thinks about the people from Harlem who've made it, either by talent or skill or smarts. She wonders if she will ever be talented enough, or skilled enough, or if she is smart enough, to live a life she can be happy with.

She watches as the wind lifts the curtains away from the window, then draws them back—the world outside is breathing.

Pandora follows Bumpy down the alley, careful not to let him see her. The alley dead-ends at the brick wall of a building and he stops, turning to see if he's been followed. Pandora slips behind a dumpster.

"Hello?" Bumpy's heard something. "Who's there?"

Pandora stays crouched behind the dumpster until she hears the scraping of metal against brick. She risks a peek and sees that Bumpy is pulling on a rope attached to an old and rusted fire escape, hanging dangerously to the side of the crumbling brick building.

She dips back behind the dumpster and waits as Bumpy climbs up. When she has judged that he's made it to the top, she looks out again in time to see him disappear over the top of the building.

Emerging from behind the dumpster, Pandora heads for the fire escape, determined to find out what Bumpy is up to. She finds the rope and pulls. The fire escape rattles against the building, but the stairs don't budge.

She moves back and pulls hard from a different angle. She feels the scrape of metal in her teeth, as the stairs come down.

Above her, Bumpy's head appears over the side of the building.

"Go away!"

"No. I'm coming up."

"There ain't nothing up here."

She ignores him and begins climbing the stairs. The fire escape is rickety and wobbles threateningly with every step. Towards the top, she looks down and suddenly realizes that the building is much taller than it had looked from the ground.

"I think I saw her go this way," they hear a voice below say.

Bumpy grabs Pandora's arm and they duck down below the parapet wall.

"This is why I don't tell anyone," Bumpy whispers, angrily.

"Oh Pandy-pants, where are you?" Holly's voice echoes around the alley.

"Pandy-pants?" Bumpy raises an eyebrow.

"Yeah, that's a new one."

"She's probably hiding in this dumpster, the little rat," Leroy says.

"You're an idiot, Leroy."

There is a loud clanging of a half brick against metal. The footsteps draw closer. The footfalls stop beneath the fire escape.

Through a gap in the parapet wall, Pandora has a partial view of the scene below. She can see the tops of their heads, as they stand looking around the alley.

There is a moment of panic when Holly looks up.

"I'll bet she went up there."

"How?"

"Look, there's a rope."

Leroy grabs hold of the rope and pulls. The fire escape makes a terrific clatter and he quickly let's go, jumping back.

"I'm not going up that. It'll come down before we make it three steps."

"I knew you were a wuss," Holly says, her tone biting.

"I ain't a wuss."

"Then pull it down and let's go up."

"No."

"You want Uncle Terry finding out you've been taking money out of his wallet?"

Through the gap, Pandora sees Leroy's hand go up to his cheek before saying, "Fine, but you goin' up first."

Pandora looks to Bumpy. His eyes flash with anger, then fear as he darts a glance from her to his garden.

They are halfway up the escape. In a show of bravery, Bumpy stands and shouts down, "Go away. There's nothing up here."

From below, a surprised Holly looks up. "You ain't nobody, Bumpy Brown."

Holly makes it to the top of the escape, Leroy seconds after. They climb over the parapet and onto the roof.

"There she is," says Leroy.

"Hey, what this?" he says, spotting the garden and walking over to it, Holly following.

Bumpy looks pleadingly at Pandora, but she can only stand there and hope they go away.

"Don't touch those—look, just leave," Bumpy says, moving to stand between them and his garden.

"Look at all the pretty plants, Leroy," Holly says, ignoring Bumpy and stepping forward to have a closer look.

"Must've taken a long time to get all these up here."

"You're kind of girly, ain't you Bumpy?" Leroy says, picking up a bellflower, blooming with small purple flowers in a tin can.

"Which one's your favorite? Is it this one?"

Leroy holds up the tin can high, then lets it drop, crushing the plant under his heel.

Holly laughs, and picks up a daisy in a clay pot, saying,

"How about this one?" before throwing it against the roof and kicking at the shards of clay and dirt.

"Please don't, just leave." Bumpy's tone is pleading. "I'll give you whatever you want, just don't wreck the plants."

"You poor as dirt, Bumpy," Holly says, sneering. "Ain't anything you got that we would want."

"Holly, watch this," Leroy says, picking up another pot and walking to the edge of the roof. He drops it over parapet wall. All four stand frozen in the seconds before the crash sounds below.

“You didn’t think to look if anyone was down there?”  
Bumpy says, furious.

“Nothing but another roof.”

Bumpy is shaking now and Pandora knows this is her fault. She has led them here and Bumpy will never forgive her. She has to do something before they destroy everything.

When Holly begins tearing leaves off a nasturtium, anger explodes in Pandora. She lunges at Holly, her fists balled. With all the force she can muster, she punches Holly, sending her sprawling onto the roof.

Leroy looks on, surprised. It’s the first time someone has stepped up to his sister, and he is unsure what to do. Before he is able to move, a tuna can full of dirt sails through the air, thudding against his arm.

Surprised, both Leroy and Pandora look over to see Bumpy, furious, with another can in his hand poised to throw.

“Just go!”

Holly stands to her feet, “You two feeling yourselves, huh?”

“Come on Holly,” Leroy’s says, backing away. “Forget them.”

“No.”

“Let’s just go,” Leroy says, halfway across the roof.

Leroy has become scared of Bumpy. Bumpy’s quiet nature has always made him seem small and timid, but looking at him now—drawn up to his full height and seething with rage—Bumpy looks terrifying.

Holly steps towards Pandora, pushing her hard and causing her to stagger back. Then, after realizing Leroy is no longer there to help, she heads for the fire escape.

As she climbs over the parapet wall and onto the escape, she calls back, “I’m going to make your life miserable—the both of you.”

Pandora listens until she is sure they are gone from the alley, before turning to Bumpy. He seems to have receded back into himself, once again the quiet boy.

“I’m so sorry, Bumpy,” Pandora says, her tone pleading.

He says nothing, turning instead to his garden, and begins picking up pieces of broken pottery and crushed tin cans. Unsure of what to say to him, she starts to help him, recovering what they can of the wrecked garden.

They work in silence until Bumpy says, “There’s another reason I came up here.”

He starts towards the farthest end of the roof and gestures for her to follow. From where they stand, at the edge of the roof, they can see out over much of the city.

“You see that empty space beyond the buildings?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s where Central Park is.”

“I’ve been there,” says Pandora, proudly.

“We go by it on the way downtown. I keep telling momma I want to go, but she’s always busy.”

“I’ll ask Miss Evelyn to take us,” Pandora says.

He casts an appreciative glance at her, but says nothing. They stand looking out over the city, as the sky darkens, and one by one, the lights come on, until Bumpy says excitedly, “Look, they’re starting!”

Above the empty space that is Central Park, a speck of light has shot upwards. It disappears for a second before an explosion of color shatters the sky.

“Fireworks!”

They watch as the display becomes grander, bursting in quicker succession. Then a hundred rockets fired at once, filling the sky with an explosion of light and color.

“They were so pretty,” Pandora says, after it is over.

“Come on,” Bumpy says. “Miss Evelyn will be wondering where you are.”

They climb carefully down the fire escape, go from out of the alley into the crowded street, and stop in alarm.

### III

The crowd has become angry, tense. The air is charged, like the moment when the rocket winks out, before exploding into its final form—its brilliant display, the true purpose of the Tang Dynasty inventors.

The policemen that had been strolling casually up and down the street, now stand rigidly in ranks, their helmets on and clear shields out front.

The neighborhood boys no longer light firecrackers. No one is laughing, there are no cheers now. People are shouting, as they press the line of policemen, who stand still as tin soldiers.

Pandora feels Bumpy tug on her arm and she follows as he weaves through the crowd on the sidewalk towards her home. Through the roar of the crowd, she can make out words, sometimes a few strung together to form a half sentence, shouted as if the voice won't be drowned among the others.

It's not the roar of the crowd that scares her. They are the people she has grown up surrounded by, the people from her neighborhood. It is the solid line of uniformed men, with their helmets on and billy clubs menacingly held in front of them. They are like machines, waiting for the command that will send them forward, and once in motion, what will they do?

Will they continue to stand, simply keeping the crowd at bay? Pandora doesn't think so. And what then? When it is over, how many of these people will be laid up and bloodied in the hospital—will they even be taken to the hospital? Maybe the better question is, how many will land in Rikers?

Every time she turns to watch, Bumpy jerks her forward against the push of the crowd, against the river of people.

At last, they are in front of her house. As she climbs the stoop, she turns to find that Bumpy has stayed on the sidewalk, waiting for her to go inside.



“Come on!”

“No, I have to find momma. Go inside, Pandora.”

“Be careful, Bumpy,” she says, but the words are lost in the din.

“Go! There’s Miss Evelyn now.”

She watches as he is swept into the mass of people and lost among them. Then the firm hand of Miss Evelyn is turning her around and pulling her gently, but resolutely up the steps.

“Come inside, Pandora.”

She isn’t shouting, but Miss Evelyn’s tone makes Pandora understand how serious she is. Without hesitating, Pandora follows.

Once inside, Pandora starts for the window, but Miss Evelyn says sharply, “Stay away from there.”

“Why are they—” she leaves the question half asked. What is it that is happening outside? To her, it looks like war, but what are the stakes? She knows from what she has overheard that it comes down to color.

The balance of fairness is judged by color, and the scales are tipped—have always been tipped—heavily in favor of white.

It has always been at the edges of her life, something happening far from her block in Harlem. Now, with the slow realization that it has always been there, the burden of it hits her. How long has she felt it? Heavy, looming, inescapable—the weight of color.

“The people are demanding a fairer system,” says Miss Evelyn, her voice softened.

“What will happen?”

“If you pick up one end of a stick, you also pick up the other.”

“What does that mean?” Pandora asks, confused.

“What are the policemen going to do?”

Pandora is scared. She isn’t sure what is going to happen, and she can’t understand what is going on out in the street.

“I’ll try and explain everything, but right now I need to go to the Thorntons’ to use their phone. Your father will be worried and I need to call him.”

Miss Evelyn opens the door, but turns back to Pandora.

“While I’m gone, go up to your room and stay there until I get back. Do not leave this house, Pandora—and stay away from the windows.”

“When will you get back?”

“I won’t be long.”

“What if something happens to you?”

“Don’t you worry yourself about me, child. Now, upstairs—quickly.”

Pandora waits until Miss Evelyn has shut the door, then turns and runs up the stairs. From under the covers, she listens to the shouts from the street. A siren starts to wail a long way off.

A loud crash from downstairs—the sound of a window breaking. Pandora wants to jump out of bed and run for the door, but she stays still.

Where is Miss Evelyn? She’s been gone a long time now. Pandora is afraid that something has happened to her, and she thinks she can smell smoke.

Yes, she can definitely smell it now, but is it coming from inside or out?

The smell of smoke becomes heavier—thickening the air. It finds her under the covers and stings her eyes. She throws the covers off, but the air in her room is worse.

Her bedroom door is flung open and there stands Miss Evelyn.

“Hurry!” she shouts.

Pandora leaps from the bed and rushes to her, grabs her outstretched hand and they run towards the stairs. From the landing, they can see that the fire has spread throughout the first floor, trapping them.

“Up!” Miss Evelyn shouts, above the roar of the fire, and they run across the second floor to where the door to the attic is.

The stairway to the attic is narrow and Pandora goes up, with Miss Evelyn close behind. The attic is hot and the air dense. Miss Evelyn goes to the window, throwing it open, before leaning out and looking down at the street below.

“The fire truck will never make it in time.”

Setting her purse down on the attic floor, Miss Evelyn fumbles at the clasp before it clicks open.

“Get in.”

“What?”

“Get into the purse.”

“But—”

“There’s no time Pandora, you have to get in.”

Pandora had never believed her when she said it contained the universe. She thought it had been one of those things people say, to avoid telling the truth—like going to see a man about a horse.

## IV

“Brother Moe? Telephone call for you.”

Moses Bell looked up from the newspaper and nodded. He had thinned over the past year, but still carried the solid build and lean muscle from years at the Harlem River Yards.

As with his work at the yard, the work that he and the others were doing here in the South gave him a sense of fulfillment, but unlike the yard, this work always felt incomplete.

The movement was making progress. Attention in itself was progress, but when he worked with his hands, he could punch his card at the end of his shift and know what it was he had accomplished.

This was different. There was the same feeling of exhaustion at the end of each day, but there was no sense of completion, only what was gained by inches—though the day before last had been something. On that day they had gained a mile. It was a short celebration, before cooler heads bent to discuss what backlash would come and began planning the continuation of the achievement.

The Civil Rights Act had been monumental, but Moe knew it was only a block in the foundation of change. He was reminded of the words Miss Evelyn said to him, before he had left. “There can be no peace without understanding.”

She was right, no doubt, but his time here had proved another of her proverbs true: There is no medicine to cure hatred.

After folding the newspaper and setting it down on the table, he stood and walked across the kitchen to where Mrs. Young was holding the phone out to him.

Mrs. Young kept a neat house, and the odd assortment of donated furnishings were arranged in a such a way that their many guests felt immediately at home.

Reverend and Mrs. Young had given everything for the cause, their lives dedicated to it. They were relentless in their work. No matter what was called for, they could be counted on to be at the head of the line.

Moe had been in awe of their clarity of thought. Whenever a group gathered at the church and the broader vision of the movement was discussed, most spoke of what could be accomplished within the month or year. But Reverend and Mrs. Young would reflect on what they could accomplish that would set up the next generation and those after. They desired equality less for themselves, and more for humanity itself.

As any New Yorker would, when pushed too far, Moe had come looking for a fight. In time, he came to see—if not enthusiastically, at first, then at least begrudgingly—that in a war where the other side has the guns, a fistfight wouldn't last long.

“The first fight is against our own ego,” Reverend Young had said. “None of us can hope to change the hearts and minds of others, while we suffer the same ailment.”

Moe had laughed, thinking the reverend sounded like some wizened eastern monk, but his laugh died when he looked up at the calm, serious face looking back at him.

He had felt ashamed with himself, muttering his apology and staring at the floor, but the Reverend had put his hand on Moe's shoulder and said softly,

“Everyone of us feels as strongly as you do, but be careful that it isn't the individual you hate, but the ignorance that is his suffering.”

Moe had lain awake long into the night, thinking over the Reverend's words.

The pews had been pushed against the walls of the small church and rows of people slept on the hard wooden floor. They had come from across the nation to stand, and their presence gave him hope that change

was possible. At no other time in history had so many stepped forward to say, enough.

“Thank you,” said Moe, taking the phone from Mrs. Young.

“Moe speaking.”

There was a pause before he heard the voice on the other end.

“It’s Miss Evelyn, you’ll want to come home as soon as you can.”

Any calmness he felt was gone at once and he brought the other hand up to the phone, pressing the mouthpiece closer.

“What happened? Is Pandora all right?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Reverend look up from his chair in the sitting room and Mrs. Young walked into the kitchen, looking at him with worry etched into her face.

“For now yes, but I don’t know for how long.”

Her word confused him. From the tone of her voice, something terrible had already happened, but she had just said that Pandora was all right—hadn’t she?

“What happened—what is wrong?”

“Moses, I haven’t the time, but you do what you can to come home.”

There was a click and the line went dead. He knew it, even as he said, “Hello? Miss Evelyn, hello?”

He stood frozen in fear and shock, after hanging up the phone, trying to puzzle out the meaning of Miss Evelyn’s words. When he looked up, the reverend, his wife, and half a dozen others were standing in the kitchen, looking at him expectantly.

“Everything all right?” the Reverend asked, his voice calm but grave.

“I don’t know,” Moe answered. “I think something happened—is going to happen to—my daughter.”

The words had come out as confusing as he had heard them, but when he said, my daughter, he thought he saw understanding on their faces.

“Brother Moe, you never said.”

At once, he felt ashamed. It had been so clear to him, and he had told himself that it was his duty to her—for her future—that he had to leave, but had that been his pride?

He had come to understand, partly, the truer reasons why he had come to Alabama. Pandora had come to the age where she might no longer think him the hero. The gold had faded for her, as she had begun to look out onto the world and not for the first time since his wife’s passing, his incompetence as a father weighed heavy on him. The difference was now Pandora would recognize it and he couldn’t bear to the thought.

He had worked hard, no one could fault him for that, but providing for her meant he had to be away from her and he knew she would grow to resent him for his absence.

*If I can do something that matters, he had thought, something that she may not understand now, but with time come to respect—I can die happy knowing that. And what could be nobler than doing his part to give her a life where she would never be held back from what she wanted?*

He had felt every bit the boy the yard foreman called him, felt he could only do so much and make it so far before he was told to be thankful for what they allowed—*not so far boy and mind your betters*. His father had gone North from New Orleans to escape that life and instead, found that the same boundaries held, though not inked in the law books and always implied.

Then he met Amelia and with all the passion of a cat in a whirlwind, they had married and moved into a cramped apartment on 110th. From then on, he could return home to the pinch of paradise they called theirs and the world outside would be forgotten.

It had been too perfect and it had been taken from him too soon. He loved his daughter, but with that emotion came worry and fear, and he again recognized the world for what it was: cold and uncaring, and full of people trying to pull themselves along by whatever means necessary.

He could take it on his own, but knowing he couldn't shield Pandora from it made him bitter. He fell into a machine like rhythm—up before dawn, down to the yards: *yes'sa yes'sa, break my back for sixteen hours and thank'ya!* Then back home to collapse into bed and sleep for a few hours, before doing it all over again.

This was no way to raise a child he knew, but what choice did he have?

“Let me set you up with my wife's sister, good looking gal and doesn't cook too bad neither—” But no, he couldn't—just another reason for Pandora to resent him.

Ma Bell had been there for Pandora's first few years, but she had been ancient when she came to them from New Orleans and cursed the bitter cold of the New York winter with every breath. One day she had enough of Harlem and with cardboard luggage in hand, boarded a train south, never to return.

Miss Evelyn had been a godsend. He wasn't sure exactly how she had come into their lives, but they had been the better for it. She was as strict and commanding with him as with her, and more than once he found himself sheepishly apologizing over some forgotten chore, or mess he had left.

“I'm not the maid, Moses.”

But she was also kind, and knew when Pandora needed an answering heart and a soft shoulder.

Why had she sounded so afraid over the phone if nothing had happened?

“Not yet,” had been left unsaid, but clearly stated. Why was she too rushed to explain something that warranted him a journey home?



He realized they were still looking at him, waiting for him to say something. “Yes, I haven’t said before, but I have a daughter back in Harlem. She’s with her—” he paused, wondering what they would think of him on finding out he had hightailed out of New York while leaving his only daughter behind, “—aunt. Her mother, my wife, died when Pandora was a baby.” Another pang of guilt as he suddenly realized he had slipped in Amelia’s death to soften their judgment of him.

The Reverend’s wife moved close and rested a gentle hand on his arm, but chose to say nothing.

“What will you do?” asked the Reverend.

“I have to go back, I’m afraid.”

“Yes, of course you do. How can we help?”

*Did these peoples’ grace have no end?*

“I had thought to go by train—” he started, but the Reverend cut him off.

“Nonsense. That will take too long. Follow me.”

Moe followed as the Reverend walked from the kitchen and out the back door of the rectory, crossing the lawn to an old, but well maintained, shed.

At the door of the shed they paused, while the Reverend fumbled for the key among the many on his ring. Once opened, the Reverend pulled away a tarp to reveal a motorcycle.

“1961 Indian. A donation I haven’t yet gotten around to selling,” said the Reverend, grinning.

The two men walked around to either side of it, both looking admiringly at the tanks shine, the well-treaded rubber and powerful engine.

“Put a little work into it in my spare time,” said the Reverend.

Moe looked up to see his face was beaming with pride.

“I can’t take this,” he started, but the Reverend raised his hand to cut him off.

“There was a reason I held on to it, now I know what it is and I would be wrong to hold onto it any longer.”

“I can’t begin to thank you enough—”again the reverend cut him short.

“What we do, we do for our children and our children’s children,” he came around the motorcycle and put an arm over Moe’s shoulders. “Whether by marching for their future or raising them to be people of depth and honor—it’s a blessed work. Keep that always in mind, brother Moe.”

It was with a heavy heart that Moe left them and his feeling of inadequacy only deepened, as he realized the short lesson on how to drive a motorcycle from Reverend Young had not prepared him as well as he had thought.

“There is the universe without and the one within.”

“I’m guessing this isn’t the first one.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Why is there so much of nothing?”

“That is the space of possibility.”

“It’s very bright.”

“Ah, the light. Slow it down, condense it, wrap it around itself—what will you get?”

Pandora doesn’t know.

The woman is beautiful. Her skin is ebony but shimmers copper in the light. She seems to blur when she moves, as if there are more than one of her standing in exactly the same spot, each moving a fraction of a second slower than the first.

The light dances all around them. The woman turns away, and following her gaze, Pandora sees, suspended in the air, an island floating in its own sky.

The island is no larger than a nightstand. Taking up most of the island is a circular, stone building, with a domed roof. Windows look out in every direction over the rocky landscape on which the building stands.

Pandora moves closer to stand beside the woman, who is watching the island intently. Pandora peers through one of the building’s many windows and is surprised to see a little girl inside, looking out. If the girl can see them, Pandora cannot tell.

Pandora walks in a full circle around the island.

“There’s no way out,” she says, again standing beside the woman. “She’s trapped inside.”

“She is,” the woman says. “But, she doesn’t know it.”

The girl moves away from the window and crosses the room to look out of another.

“How awful,” Pandora says, thinking of how boring and lonely it must be for the girl.

The woman turns to face Pandora. She doesn't know why, because the island is all she has known, but she feels a great longing inside her.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" Pandora asks.

"There is, but you will have to decide."

"What will I have to decide?"

"On her island, she is safe. She has never known sadness or fear, or heartbreak. If you choose to free her from the walls that hold her, she will experience all that it is to live, both good and bad."

Pandora watches as the girl circles the room, her arm outstretched, her fingers running along the edges of the windows.

"I think if it were me in there, I would rather take my chances than be stuck inside forever."

"Is that your choice, then?"

"It is," Pandora says, turning from the island to face the woman. "I don't think that she is better off, not knowing that she's trapped."

The woman stands quietly, looking down at Pandora, the corners of her mouth hinting at a smile.

Her eyes are dark, flecked with gold and seem to hold within them infinite understanding. Pandora is sure that from them, nothing can be hidden—the eyes take the full measure of her. The effect is almost frightening.

In a fluid motion, using her thumb and forefinger, the woman pinches a strand of light from out of the air.

She drops the shining thread into in the open palm of her other hand. The thread turns liquid, pooling in the folds of her palm. The woman stretches her hand over the island and pours out the droplet of light.

Pandora turns away from the window she has been looking out of and walks the length of her room to look out of another. From out of every window, she can see the rocks below as they run downward and are lost beneath the clouds.

She likes her room, with its many windows and thick rug covering the stone floor. Above the bed, in the center of the room where the domed ceiling reaches its highest point, a pool of water hangs—suspended in the air.

When she is tired, she lays on the bed, staring up at her reflection before drifting to sleep. She dreams of things she has never seen. The dreams have no shape to them, but shift about, growing brighter and then darker—leaving behind feelings she cannot name.

After she wakes up from her dreams and gets out of bed, she goes to the window. Outside in the bright light, the soft clouds drifted about, as they always do. It is warm and she feels safe. The dreams fade and with them, the feelings they have stirred within her.

She feels energy well up inside her and runs as fast as she can in circles around the room. Exhausted, she collapses onto her bed. She catches her reflection staring back at her, out of breath and glistening with sweat.

She screws up her face and the face looking back is so comical, she bursts out laughing. She makes faces at her reflection until she falls back to sleep.

She dreams that there is a second her sharing the room, not the one reflecting back from the pool of water, but one standing on the floor with her, one that can run and play, and look out of the windows, while she stands beside her.

When she awakens, she is disappointed to find that she is alone in her room. No other version of herself is there, save for the reflection of her above. She does not feel like going to the window to look out, and instead, sits on the edge of her bed, imagining a room where there are two of her in it.

The feelings that are just out of reach, in the back of her mind, are now frustratingly close to breaking free. Eventually, she gets up from the bed and circles the room.

A gleam of light from above has caught her eye and she stops. On the surface of the water above her bed, a droplet is forming. It grows larger, pulling away from the rest, threatening to break free and drip down onto the bed.

She watches in wonder as a glow from within the droplet seems to become brighter. The light from inside it sends shadows dancing around the room. When the drop is half the size of her fist, it becomes detached, falling to the bed where it lands with a splash.

She crosses the floor, rushing to where it has landed, and sees there a pile of yellow feathers. It moves. The pile of feathers sorts itself out and there, on the bed, there is a bird. She reaches hesitantly out to it, wanting to touch it, to pick it up in her hands and hold it against her.

As her fingers hover above it, the bird spreads its wings, launching itself upwards to flit about the room. Her eyes follow its flight across the ceiling, delighted as it swoops and soars overhead. She chases it, running in loops around the room.

The bird tires and unable to find a more suitable perch, alights on the edge her bed. Pandora halts a distance from it, careful not to startle it again.

As she watches it, the bird stares back at her, its yellow breast heaving in tiny gasps as it catches its breath. She slowly raises her hand. The bird tilts its head a fraction, shifting its beady eye from her face to her hand.

“It’s all right,” she says, softly. “I won’t hurt you.”

She inches her hand closer, palm up. The bird looks to her outstretched hand and then back to her face. When she is near enough that she can feel its heat, the bird hops up and perches on her finger.

Pandora stands still, memorized by it. The feeling of its tiny claws as they grip her finger, its body is almost weightless. She sits down on the bed, bringing the bird

closer, inspecting its every detail. The bird stretches out a wing and preens a loose feather with its beak.

She raises her other hand to it. The bird nips at her finger, but relents and even seems pleased when she strokes the feathers on its head.

The bird opens its beak and from it pour sounds unlike any Pandora has heard before—bright golden tones, every note an emotion, a chorus of notes containing the meaning of life.

The song stops. The bird becomes restless, uneasy. It takes flight again, flitting from window to window, tapping its beak against the glass and chirping madly.

Pandora watches as it flies around the room, unsure of what has provoked it. The bird lands on the floor, hopping across and pecking at the stone floor. It chirps excitedly over one stone in particular and begins furiously hammering away with its beak.

Curious, Pandora gets up from the bed to have a look. The stone is like any of the others that make up the floor, but looking closer, she notices a thin crack running down the center of it.

The bird is making a heroic effort to widen the crack, stopping only to alight on Pandora's shoulder, then returning to its work after it has caught its breath.

Other than the bed, the room is empty. Pandora goes over to it and reaching down with both hands, tugs at one of the bedposts. It doesn't budge. Twice she tries and on her third attempt, she hears the wood splinter, and the post breaks free.

Returning to the bird, she motions for it to move out of the way. Chirping excitedly, the bird takes to the air to fly about, watching her intently.

Pandora raises the bedpost high above her and brings it crashing down against the stone.

The crack barely widens. The bedpost is raised again in the air, again brought crashing down on the stone—the crack doubles in size—and again and again, until cracks spider across the floor. Again, and the stone walls

begin to shake and the glass in the windows shatters. Again, and the domed roof begins to cave in, the hovering pool of water falling like rain. Once more and the island crumbles around her.

She is falling through the clouds and the little bird chirps happily, as it flies in circles around her. She feels a chorus of emotions: surprise, courage, wonder, hope, sadness, fear—she is free, but she is falling.



After sixteen years on the force, Officer James Bernard Crowe had become a hard man. He started his career as a deputy sheriff, but the county's jurisdiction had been taken over by the state and he had since never advanced past patrolman, though that suited him just fine.

It was as if his ability to feel had slowly eroded away without him realizing it, until there was a gaping absence where his humanity had been. Most made rank after ten years, but he was too dull to play at politics—too honest about his distaste for people. He had the work ethic of an ironworker, but none of the soul.

In place of a soul was a hundred mile strip of highway and a 1960 Ford Fairlane patrol car that may well be his, for all the miles he had driven in it.

He sometimes looked out of the windshield of the patrol car and felt a rush of panic, the feeling that he was trapped behind the glass. He longed to feel a horse beneath him again, as he did in his youth, imagining himself a lawman in the west. He wanted the forty-five at his hip, instead of the nine—*this peashooter*—he carried now.

Progress. He didn't like the word and even less its connotation. He was angered by the whispers of change coming from backcountry plots of tenant land and preached from the pulpits of colored churches. That progress was against the natural order and he would be goddamned before a thing as such would happen on his watch.

It was his birthright, his naming. Only thick rope and the rule of law kept them from trying to equal their betters, and he had sworn to uphold that law.

He no longer cared when the grin spread across the fresh of some newly minted officer, as the clever twist on 'James Crowe' dawned on him.

*Yes, you maggot, I've heard the joke.*

He had come to embrace his name, anchoring his destiny to it. He would uphold the law they were so hell bent on destroying—by God, so he would.

He spun the wedding ring around his finger, the silver now dull from years of wear and watched the cars drive passed. In the same year he donned the deputy badge, he had married Meredith, after a short courtship.

She had been dull and dutiful, and it had come as a surprise when she left him. He hadn't thought she had it in her, but she found some hidden bile. When he came home from work one day, she was gone.

He drank heavily in those days, and though he was never rough with her, his passive contempt was as painful to her as any slap. The transition to a solitary life came easily enough to James, a relief even. The obligations of marriage—though his attempts at them were always begrudging and halfhearted—were a nuisance and he felt he was better off without them.

After a month, he discovered a loneliness he hadn't expected in her absence. In a moment of weakness, he drove to her parent's house and demanded to see her.

Meredith's father paused in the doorway, before stepping out onto the porch and shutting the door behind him.

"Listen, Jim, I think it's best if you let her be. I'll not say what you may expect in the future, but for now—well, I think this is best for everyone."

The pang of regret was quickly replaced by contempt for her. How dare she? Did she think he wasn't good enough for her?

On his way home he turned his car towards the Roadhouse and there he stayed until closing.

They were drinking the last of the warm beer from out of the trunk of Ted's car when they spotted the man walking. He kept on the far side of the road and was pointedly not looking in their direction. The man was

dark and Jim only noticed a sense of movement out of his peripheral view.

“What you doing out here, boy?”

The man on the road glanced over, quickly looking away again, but not before noticing that the largest member of the group was starting towards him.

“Don’t ignore me—” Jim shouted, and it was then that the man started to run.

On any other occasion, Jim wouldn’t have paid any mind, but tonight his rage was boiling just under the surface and he now found its outlet. The blood pulsed in his veins and the anger rose, and he started at a run towards the man. Even at his size, Jim was fast and the man, small and barefoot, was soon overtaken.

As Jim came up behind him, he reached out and grabbed hold of the man’s coarse hair, jerking him backward. The man cried out in fear and pain and fell. Jim dragged him by his hair back to the Roadhouse parking lot.

“Jesus Jim,” said Ted. “Ain’t never seen you run so fast.”

In the flickering light of the parking lot, they now saw the man for what he was, a boy, tall but clearly not far into his teens. His eyes darted about, petrified as he looked up at the men standing over him.

“Why’d you run, boy?”

“I ain’t done nothin,” the boy said, his voice quaking with fear.

Jim’s fist was like iron, as it connected with the boy’s face, sending him sprawling onto the hard packed gravel. He reached down, grabbed hold of a fistful of the boy’s shirt and jerked him to his knees.

Jim had felt his fury lesson when he realized how young the boy was, but it returned with intensity when the boy spoke. The pain that shot up his arm, as his fist connected, felt good.

It was the pleading tone, the fear in the boy's voice, that sent him over. Not angered by it, but feeling the rush of power and wanting more.

His marriage, the stagnation of his career on the force—it all felt out of his control. He felt in control now, looking down at the swelling eye and pleading face. And Jim relished it.

Carl, Jeffery, and Ted looked on, laughing raucously. To them, this was a joke, a bit of amusement to end their night.

“Let me have a go, Jim,” said Carl, stepping forward.

The punch was awkward and Carl was too drunk to put any real force into it, but it was enough and the boys' forehead split open. The boy was crying now.

That feeling of power, of control, was starting to ebb and Jim wanted it back. He pulled the boy to his feet and put everything he had into the punch, sinking it deep in the boy's abdomen. The boy dropped to the ground, doubled over in pain, unable to breathe.

The other men were laughing, but Jim stood silent, his fist balled. His breathing was coming fast, but it was excitement, not exhaustion.

The boy curled himself into a tight ball on the ground, hoping—praying, that the men would tire of their game.

“Go on, git.” said Jim, finally.

The sense of power hadn't returned. The boy uncurled a little, looking up to see if this was a cruel trick. As he started to rise, Jim kicked out a foot and sent the boy rolling onto his back.

“What you waiting for? I said go.”

There was terror and confusion on the boy's face, unsure of what this man wanted from him.

Jim spat and turned towards the others. “Well I guess I should head home.” he said, flatly.

The boy watched as the men headed for their cars and waited, as one by one, they drove away. Not until the bartender had come out and locked the door, and

the lights of his car had disappeared down the road, did the boy dare to get up.

Jim was thinking of that feeling of control now, as he spun the wedding band. *Why the hell do I still wear this?* he thought, before slipping the ring off his finger, dropping it in into the open ashtray. He felt nothing.

Reaching across the seat he picked up the pack of cigarettes, extracted one and placing it between his lips, reached down and pushed in the cars' lighter.

He had not felt that sense of power since the night at the Roadhouse. It hadn't been the last time he had roughed someone up—he was a cop, after all—but never again was there the immense pleasure in it.

There was a metallic pinging sound, as the lighter popped up. He drew it out, watched as the glowing coil of metal began to dim, then lit the cigarette. He puffed at it, took a long pull, held it in and blew out a cloud of blue smoke.

He could tell the motorcycle was speeding as soon as it came into view and by the time he'd taken the first drag on the cigarette, it had passed—not bothering to slow down when the rider spotted the patrol car.

In succession, Jim realized: A motorcycle, driving at a reckless speed. The rider was colored and when had he ever seen a colored on a motorcycle? He still had the lighter raised, though now cooled, and he dropped it into the open ashtray before throwing the car in gear.

The tires spun, kicking up gravel as he pulled out onto the road and began to accelerate. The rider was a good quarter mile ahead of him now.

The needle of speedometer rose: thirty, forty, fifty, sixty—he was gaining.

The rider looked over his shoulder and seemed to have judged the situation, before stooping down over the handlebars and giving the engine all it had.

*A chase, then. You've just pleaded guilty, boy.*

From a cross-street, a flatbed Ford pulled out. The driver had waited for the motorcycle to pass, not noticing the patrol car. The old Ford was making an effort to gain speed and Jim laid on the horn, but was forced to pump the breaks.

The old man at the wheel leaned out of the window, looking behind to see who was making the fuss. Jim flipped the toggle for the siren and the man's head disappeared back inside the Ford. He pulled to the side of the road, giving the patrol car room to pass.

Jim floored it, passing the Ford and heading into a curve at speed. The car leaned precariously through the curve, but the tires bit in and Jim accelerated out of it.

The motorcycle and its rider were gone.

He slowed his patrol car and brought it to a stop at the side of the road. Mile marker 197—this was the end of his patrol, the last mile. The only sign of anger on his face was a tightening of his lip, but inside he burned with it.

The old Ford passed, the driver shaking his head.

Jim sat for a moment, then picked up the handset and radioed dispatch. There was a lot of fuzz, then a voice said,

“Go ahead.”

“Dispatch, this is Patrolman Crowe, I'm going off duty a little early today.”

“All right officer, have a good weekend.”

The new girl, he thought. Old Mabel would have questioned why he wasn't coming back to the station first.

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, watching the cars speed by—their brake lights flashing when they noticed the patrol car. Patrolmen sometimes took their cars home for the night, when they had an early shift the next day, and this is what the new girl had probably thought. He would have some questions from the sergeant, when he returned on Monday, but right now he didn't care.

He leaned over to the glove-box and snapped it open. He riffled through the content until he found what he was looking for and pulled it out. He smoothed out the corner where it had folded over and opened the worn copy of *The Negro Motorist Green-Book*, taken from the newlyweds that had thought to see the country for their honeymoon.

He felt the rapid shift in his pulse, the arterial flutter and reached for the bottle of nitrates on the seat, cursing his weak heart.

The place was deserted—*well, it had been an old copy of the Green-Book.*

He pulled the handle, swung the door wide and stepped out. Not even the wind stirred. He reached back into the car to retrieve his flashlight, switched it on, and began walking toward the building, casting the beam wide as he went.

The door was slightly ajar, no fresh footsteps leading to it, and not bothering to have a look in, he walked around to the side of the building. Here too, was nothing to raise his suspicions. This place had been vacant a long time.

It wasn't until his way back, that he noticed the tire tracks. He realized then, that he had been looking for the wide tracks of a car instead of the narrow line of two motorcycle tires.

The tracks were new.

Moe had decided to keep the running lights turned off, thankful he had when he saw the headlights come into view behind him.

The motel had been abandoned, and for some time by the look of the place, making him feel uneasy and apprehensive, so he climbed back on the motorcycle and drove off.

He'd made a half mile and was cresting a small hill when he happened to glance back, catching sight of two

points of light far down the way he had come. Until then, he had been driving at a slow pace, fearing driving too fast without the headlight on, but when he saw the lights he lost the fear of the dark and gave the bike all it had.

The car never caught up, and he began to think it had stopped at the motel. Could it be the cop?

He wasn't sure how it could be. The motel was far off from the highway and likely unheard of to whites.

The journey to Jackson had been made by train. Confined and cramped as it was, he'd been able to avoid much of the danger that people of color faced while traveling through the south.

The reverend had given him a list of places he would be welcomed and also, places he would do best to avoid. The motel was the first planned stop and to find it as he had boded ill. He wasn't sure how much farther he would be able to go on the reserve tank, and according to the Reverends' list, the nearest stop was not for another fifty miles.

And there was the problem of the car that had pulled into the motel lot. There was the possibility that it was just another traveler looking for lodging, but the uneasy feeling stayed with him.

It became a matter of routine to turn in the seat and look behind him. At first, he shrugged it off as just another car, but the headlights followed too determinedly to be a coincidence.

He drove well above the speed limit and passed half a dozen or so other motorists, but no one had overtaken him yet. It was too far behind to judge the exact placement of the lights, but there wasn't a noticeable change, as there would have been if the vehicle had switched from a car to a truck or a car to a motorcycle.

Moe was nearing the top of a hill when the motorcycle began to sputter and lose speed.



“Come on, just make it to the top!” He pleaded with the motorcycle, but after a pitiful chug, the engine died short of the goal.

Moe felt the motorcycle begin to roll back and he lost precious distance, before remembering himself and applying the brakes. Climbing off, he began the arduous task of pushing the dead motorcycle up the remainder of the hill.

It was then that he heard the engine.

The sound crept up on him, at first lost to the sound of the wind through the trees and chirping crickets, but when he did hear it, the sound it made was unmistakable.

He pulled in the brake lever and turned to look. At the far end of the valley, and approaching fast, a pair of headlights that seemed to Moe too deliberate in their approach, too familiar in their set, not to be following him.

He was pushing hard, even before the brake was released. The ditches alongside the road were shallow, and the landscape too sparse, to hide himself and the motorcycle. His only hope was to make it to the top of the hill where he would have a view of what lay beyond.

The car was halfway across the valley when he reached the top. He was on the seat and pushing off as soon as he had made it. The motorcycle gained speed down the hill, all the while Moe looked wildly around for a place to hide. He spotted a grove of trees some distance ahead, but it looked too far beyond where the road leveled out to be able to make it by coasting.

All he could do was hope and lean forward in the seat, willing the bike to go faster.

Fifty yards to the trees and the bike began to slow—twenty yards and he could hear the engine of the approaching car working harder as it accelerated up the hill. Ten yards away and Moe was pushing along. Finally, while the bike was still in motion, he jumped off and ran alongside pushing it.

As the lights of the car came into view over the top of the hill, Moe turned the wheel towards the trees and pushed with all his effort. As the tires hit the uneven and densely covered ground, the bike began to sink down.

The car was barreling down the hill, it would be seconds before Moe and the motorcycle would be caught in the beam of its headlights.

He made it past the first tree, and a twig lodged in the spokes of the wheel and the bike jerked to a stop.

Carried on by the momentum of his run, Moe swung around in front of the bike, hand still gripping the handle bar, and began to pull the bike sidelong into the woods—dropping to the ground when he had judged that he could go no farther.

The car was upon him, slowing as it passed.

He waited. Watched for the red glow of brake lights, but thankfully, the car drove on.

After waiting for a long time, he stood up, pulling the motorcycle further in, until he was satisfied he couldn't be seen from the road. His heart continued to beat wildly as he collapsed to a sitting position on the ground.

He needed gas, and he was miles from any place where he could get it.

He let out a yelp as something cold and wet nudged at his arm. Jumping to his feet, the back of his shirt tore as it caught on the barbwire fence he had not noticed in the darkness.

The cow, alarmed by his sudden movement, mooed accusingly and started away from him. Moe began to laugh with relief, and at the absurdity of the reason for his panic.

He carefully ducked under the barbwire fence, and walked deeper into the woods, away from the road. The trees thinned and he emerged into an open pasture that stretched across the valley.

In the middle of the valley, a quarter of a mile away, he spotted the farm. He hoped his luck would hold, and started off in the direction of the farm.

As he drew up close to the first out building, Moe wondered how long it was before a rooster would crow.

He was sure that at any minute the sky would begin to lighten, and farmers started their day well before the sunrise.

The farmhouse itself was large, and there were two bigger barns and a few others for feed and storage. A late model pickup was in the driveway. Everything about the farm made Moe feel sure there would be no help offered willingly.

The bigger barns would hold the livestock, and inside the first of the smaller building, he found nothing but feed. To get to the second, a large shed, he would have to cross the yard in front of the house.

The moon was full and the sky clear, and there was nothing he could do to keep himself hidden as he made for the shed. He paused in front of it and listened, but the house stayed quiet, so he opened the door and slipped inside.

It was a tool shed of sorts, and he had to pick his way carefully among the piles of parts and tools in the darkness. At the far end, he found what he was looking for, two cans, and by their weight, full.

He wasn't able to see a label in the dark, so he bent down and opened each in turn. The first had the heavy smell of diesel, so he capped it and nosed the second—it was gas. He lifted the can, which was heavier than he would have liked, and made his way back to the door.

He leaned his head out, and to his horror saw that a light was on in the house. He knew it would of no good to wait, the farm would be coming awake and getting ready to work. The longer he waited, the more likely someone would be coming outside.

The fuel sloshed awkwardly at his side, as he started across the yard. As he neared the first of the big barns, the door of the house opened, and the dogs were let out.

In a dash, he made the final few steps to the barn, froze with his back to the wall and looked out to see if he had been seen.

The farmer was emerging, following behind as the two dogs raced each other to the shed that Moe had only just come from. In front of the shed, the dogs nosed the ground, investigating an unknown scent.

At any moment the farmer would discover the missing can, or the dogs would follow the scent to him. Moe had no choice but to move. He held close to the buildings and had made it just beyond the second barn when he heard one of the dogs let out a howl, the other close behind.

He heard a shrill whistle from inside the shed, and the farmer's voice calling out, "Quiet down, the both of you."

Holding on to the gas can, Moe started to run. The ground was uneven and the can he carried to the side awkward, but without turning to see if he was followed, Moe ran without stopping.

He hadn't made twenty yards when his foot found something slick, and he went sprawling, flinging the can to the ground ahead of him. The gas began to leak through the vent at the top, and he heard the barking dogs approaching.

I'm done, he thought. My luck ran out.

There was another loud whistle, this time from outside the shed, and the dogs stopped their barking.

Moe waited.

He could hear their panting not far off, and one of the dogs let out a whine, not wanting to be called off his chase. The farmer whistled again, and reluctantly the dogs turned away.

Moe thanked the God he wasn't sure he believed in, waited until he heard the farmer's voice chastising the

returned dogs, and crept—canister in hand—back towards the way he had come.

He was sure he hadn't breathed the entire way back to the road. He continued to glance in the direction of the farm, as he poured what gas was left in the tank, but no dogs had followed.

He flipped the tank out of the reserve, pulled out the kick-start, and fired the engine. The engine turned over but failed to start.

The panic returned. All that, only to fail now. He gave another kick—nothing. The sound carried far, he knew, and wondered if the farmer had discovered the missing gas, and hearing the attempt to start the motorcycle, how long before he came to investigate?

Another kick, still nothing. It was then he discovered while pulling the bike along the ground the start switch had been turned off. Relief washed over him when, after another kick, the engine started and continued to run. He climbed on and set off as the sunrise bloomed over the valley.

It wasn't for another ten miles, while passing through an intersection that might have been a town, that he saw the patrol car. It was parked in front of a diner, with Alabama plates.

Moe knew it at once.

## VII

The ground where she fell had yielded slightly. Even so, the force of the impact had hurt and the wind was knocked out of her. A storm raged around her. She huddled down and tried to protect herself from the biting sand as best she could.

After what seemed like hours, the storm lessened, then died away completely. It left behind an eerie stillness. She stood up, attempted to rid herself of the sand that covered her, and looked around at the place where Miss Evelyns' purse had dumped her.

For as far she could see there was sand. High peaking dunes that rolled over into low valleys; the sand rippling like waves. Bright, twinkling stars filled the night sky, and the moon was larger than she had ever seen it.

With no way of knowing which way she should go, she picked a direction at random and began walking. She soon found that walking across sand was much harder than walking on solid ground. There were places where the sand was soft and her footfalls sunk down, sometimes almost to the knee. Fearing that she would sink beneath the sand completely, she walked cautiously and only to gave her full weight when she was sure of her footing.

Sudden gusts of wind would sweep across the desert, stirring up the sand and hurling it at her. She stumbled blindly on, covering her face with her arms until the tempests passed.

For hours she trudged through the desert, not knowing if she were walking in circles. Exhausted, she collapsed onto the sand and closed her eyes. Maybe if she just waited, Miss Evelyn would find her.

Dark thoughts came into her head, unbidden. What if Miss Evelyn had come for her but finding no sign of her, walked away in the opposite direction? What if they were now both stuck here, miles apart?

Pandora knew she could go on forever asking herself what-if questions and it wouldn't help. She opened her eyes and gazed up at the night sky. The moon had been high overhead when she had begun her trek. It now hung low in the sky and she thought of how horrible a desert would be in the burning heat of the day.

She started listing everything she could be sure of: she was, without a doubt, lost in a large desert. It was nighttime, though it looked as though it would be morning soon. If she continued walking, there was a chance that she might stumble on a city or a town. Even a rock or a twig would mean that the sand wasn't all there was.

Thinking back, she realized that while the moon had made its slow journey across the sky, she had been walking the other way. That must mean that she had been traveling in a somewhat straight line.

She stood, and began again to walk, keeping the moon at her back. The moon decided not to help and sank beneath the horizon.

Under the now moonless sky, the desert became much darker, illuminated only by stars. Without any means of navigation, she was in danger of endlessly wandering the desert. She had expected the sun to come up somewhere ahead of her, but the sky showed no hint of a sunrise.

On she walked, with only the stars overhead for light. She tried not to be afraid of what might be lurking in the dark places below the sand dunes. The fear crept up anyway, and without realizing it, she quickened her pace. She forgot the sinking sand until she found herself up to the shins, struggling to free herself from it. From then on, through the fear, she fought the urge to run.

"There is nothing out here but sand and the wind." She repeated to herself.

She fixed her eyes on the ground in front of her, refusing to let herself look at the places cast in shadows. She was suddenly aware of how quiet the desert had

become; there had not been so much as a faint breeze for some time now.

She glanced up at the rise far off ahead of her, half expecting a roman legion on horseback to descend down it.

“Why don’t you fight?” she said out loud. “Is there no one who’ll grant Anthony an honorable way to die?”

Even now the quote seemed as ridiculously theatrical as it had when she’d seen the movie with her father.

Ridiculous, a lilywhite Cleopatra. And the rest of the actors—why not cast proper Egyptian actors, instead of the dark makeup? The few people of color in the movie were marched out, stood a moment for the sake of authenticity and marched off camera again.

She had fallen asleep more than once, as the dialog had droned on and on, in their Hollywood version of—what accent was it they were going for?

“What was it really like in Egypt?” she had asked her father, on their way home.

He had thought in silence for a long time before admitting that he did not know. The following Monday, back at school, she had asked her teacher and Mr. Franklin had given her a book titled, *Ancient Egypt: A Brief History*.

She thought at first that the wind had stirred the sand. There had been a movement, glimpsed out of the corner of her eye, not far to her left. No, it was nothing—but this time to her right, she saw movement. She stopped walking and examined the ground around her. Nothing moved.

She started again to walk, keeping a keen eye on the ground. The sand was moving; there was no doubt now. It was as if something was scuttling along just below the surface to either side of her. She walked faster, and the moving sand kept up. Pandora started to run; without losing pace with her, the sand began to rise.



No matter how fast she ran, whatever it was never slowed. There was a stitch in her side, and she was finding it hard to breathe. Her foot caught the top of a slight rise, sending her sprawling headlong onto the ground.

Two enormous shapes leapt from the sand. Their forms were indistinct; as if the desert had attempted to mold itself into creatures but had been unsure what it was going for.

She scrambled to her feet, ready to bolt, but the creatures did not move. There were no eyes that she could see, though she had a distinct feeling that they were watching her.

Without warning, in the same way dogs shake off water, they shook themselves—flinging sand in every direction. There now stood, to either side of her, in vivid detail, a pair of tigers made of sand.

Pandora braced herself, ready for them to pounce. Instead, the tigers took on an air of bored indifference. She thought of her cats. Annoyed that they weren't receiving enough attention, but too proud to be pleased when they got it.

She stood motionless, afraid to make the slightest movement. They didn't seem intent on attacking her, though they might be waiting for her to run. She had read that cats needed to chase their prey, or they would lose interest.

One of the tigers had rolled onto its side and the other rested its head on its paws, keeping its eyes fixed on Pandora. She decided to risk it and took a cautious step forward. The tiger to her left raised its head from its paws, watching her inquisitively. She ventured another step and the tiger that had rolled onto its side shifted to look at her. She walked a short distance, then stopped. Both tigers had risen and now seemed to be waiting for her to continue.

She turned to the tiger on her left, who seemed the most interested in her and said in what she hoped was a

commanding voice, "I'm going to start walking, and I would appreciate it very much if you didn't attack me."

The tiger seated itself in answer, continuing to look bored, while the other paced the ground restlessly.

"Right," she said and began walking. She attempted to look confident, even if she didn't feel that way. The tigers fell into step to either side of her, ambling along as if taking a stroll through the park.

She began to feel more at ease. Whatever danger might be lurking in the shadows didn't seem as frightening with a pair of massive tigers strutting along beside her.

The sky ahead began to lighten, where it met the edge of the desert, which still looked as much the same as it ever had. Curiously, the sky wasn't turning the bright pinks and reds that she expected to see at sunrise. A soft, silvery glow was spreading across the horizon, and instead of the stars fading with the dawn, they seemed to shine even brighter.

As the moon rose in the sky ahead of her, the wind returned with all its fury at her back, pushing her onward. The tigers kept their stride beside her, their heads lowered. They seemed tenser now; watchful of the shifting sands.

The sand underfoot had become less dense; the ground not as firm and it seemed to be moving in the same direction as she was. More than once her feet sunk below the surface and the tigers would stop as she struggled to free herself. The wind picked up speed and she could no longer see more than a few feet ahead of her. The tigers drew closer. If she drifted to the right or left, the tigers would hold their line, keeping her on course.

The tiger on her left came to a halt and turned to look behind. Pandora stopped walking, attempting to see what had drawn its interest. The other turned towards her and lowered its massive head against her back, gently pushing her forward.

She walked on. Glancing back, she saw that the tiger was now crouched, alert and ready to pounce. Seeing whatever it had been waiting for, it leaped out into the storm and disappeared from view.

The tiger still with her quickened its pace, turning its head often to glance behind them. Soon, she was running to keep up.

The ground around her became a river of sand, hurtling her forward as she ran; her legs swept from under her. Falling, she reached out for the tiger but it was gone. She cast about for something to hold on to, to stop herself from being swept away. Behind her, she saw the tiger.

It had stopped some distance back and was now watching her as she slid farther away from it, its head tilted as if listening to something a long way off. With a final look towards her, it turned and bounded away.

There was nothing to grab onto, she was sliding downwards and with increasing speed. Furious, blinding sand, driven by a mad wind, pelted against her from every direction.

She felt a hand grab hold of her; she screamed in terror, fighting and kicking in an attempt to get away. With a forceful yank, she was pulled free and set down on solid ground.

Around her, stone walls stretched up and away from her, forming an inverted pyramid. Carried along by the flowing sand, she had slid down and now stood on a flat, stone square at the base, as wide in both directions as her street in Harlem.

Where the stone square met the edge of the inclining walls, the sand cascading down was piling up. High above, the storm raged in all its fury, but below, here, was calm.

An old man was standing not far from her, leaning on a broom. His lined face softened into a smile as she looked at him.

“Where am I?” she asked.

“At the end of the universe,” he replied.

The old man turned from her. He began sweeping the sand towards the middle of the square. At its center, the stone had fallen away, leaving a wide hole that disappeared downwards.

“Why are you sweeping the sand?” she asked.

“That is what I’m meant to do,” he said, as if that were obvious.

“What’s so special about the sand?”

“The sand is what’s left of everything. It returns here—to the end of the universe.”

As the old man swept, Pandora followed behind him. Upon reaching the hole, he gave a final flick of the broom, sending the pile of sand down.

Pandora peered over the edge and saw, shining in the darkness, billions of bright stars.

“The sand goes through here and then back out into the universe,” he said before she could ask. “It will become new stars and planets.”

“Are you creating the universe?”

“It was never created, only ever recreated,” said the old man. “When a planet or star gets old, once again turning to dust, it finds its way here and I send it back.”

“So you’re recreating the universe?”

“In a way, yes. I must choose the sand carefully, or there would be no balance in the universe.”

“I need to go back home,” she said, adding, “which is on Earth,” in case he needed directions.

“You would have to become sand again if you were to go through here.”

“How long will that take?”

“Usually, a lifetime and then some.”

“What would happen if I went through now?”

“You would be very cold and possibly go on floating around the universe for a long time.”

“Have you tried?”

“No, I’ve only ever been here.”

“Always?”

“Yes, always.”

They stood silently until the old man picked up his broom and walked back to the edge of the square. As he began sweeping another pile of sand, she had a sudden thought and turned to follow.

“If you’ve never been anywhere but here, how do you know so much?”

“I should think I would have to learn something—spending eternity sweeping out the universe.”

That made sense.

She watched the sand pile up at the edges of the square around them, waiting for him to sweep it back into the universe.

“It must be lonely, here all by yourself.”

“Never thought of it really, I keep busy.”

“What about the tigers?”

“Tigers, what tigers?”

“Up there,” she said, pointing a finger in the direction of the desert above.

“Never seen a tiger here,” he said. He sent another pile of sand out into the universe and started back.

“You know, I went through Miss Evelyn’s purse and I ended up here. If I go through there,” she said, looking towards the hole, “I might end up back home, or at least somewhere else. I think it’s my only way out of here.”

“Indeed,” said the old man. He was leaning on the broom again, smiling. “I can help you if you want.”

“But you said that I would have to become sand to go through.”

With the handle end of the broom, the old man tapped Pandora’s foot. Satisfied that he had done something significant, he resumed leaning against it.

Nothing happened.

“Any second now,” he said.

Pandora started to think that her toes were falling asleep. A tingling sensation was spreading through them. She looked down and was startled to see her toes

fall off. The tingling spread upwards, inch by inch—her foot, then ankle—she was turning to sand.

“You’ll sweep me through then?”

He nodded his head.

“I’ll see you next time around,” said Pandora, as the last of her crumbled away. All that was left of her was a small pile of sand.

A worried look came into the old man’s face. Pandora hadn’t noticed, but he had. Something had come from out in the storm, where it had been waiting and watching, and it had followed her through.

He had not seen it, but he had felt it and it had sent a chill through him.

“Perhaps that is the last we will see of her. Maybe not all things return” he said as if others were listening.

Turning away, he resumed sweeping the sand out into the universe.

## VIII

The Reverend had said the Laveau House was a ways from the highway, but the further down the road Moe went, the more concerned he became that he was lost.

There had been no sign of the patrolman and the stops made in the Carolinas were without trouble. Still, it had become a habit to cast an occasional glance at the road behind him.

As the road began to curve back towards the Roanoke River, the Laveau House came into view.

The plantation house turned hotel was set back from the road, at the top of a knoll. As Moe turned the motorcycle into the driveway, he wondered if the Reverends' information had been accurate. The hotel looked abandoned, the grounds all but returned to nature and the building itself in disrepair.

Moe cut the engine and climbed off the bike. When he looked up towards the house, he was startled to find a woman standing on the porch looking down at him. Attempting to recover his composure, he called out to her.

“Is this the Laveau House?”

The woman nodded.

“Are there any rooms available?”

He thought he saw the hint of a smile as she replied,

“They're all available,” as if the state of the hotel made that obvious.

The woman was tall. Even after climbing the steps and standing at level with her, she was still the taller of the two. It wasn't until Moe was close to her that he realized she wasn't as young as he had thought, though her rigid poise gave her the bearing of a much younger woman.

Her simple, white dress was spotless, though frayed in places and the red fabric of her head-wrap had long

faded to a soft pink. The woman's appearance, along with the Antebellum architecture of the house, seemed out a different time.

"I'm Miss Laveau."

"The Miss Laveau?"

There was the hint of a smile again. "Ella, not Marie."

Whatever her name, the woman in front of him bore an unnerving resemblance to his childhood imagining of the Voodoo Queen. He met her eyes and felt a shiver pass through him, unbidden. Ella Laveau had a severe beauty.

"Pull your motorcycle around back of the house. You'll find a shed there—looks like rain tonight."

After Moe had rolled the motorcycle inside, he shut the door of the shed and turned towards the house, to see Miss Laveau holding the back door open. He crossed the lawn and mounted the steps. Once over the threshold, she turned and gestured for him to proceed.

"Down the hall is the washroom. There will be lemonade in the drawing room when you're finished."

The decoration was sparse, but the house was clean and contrastingly intact from its outside appearance. He washed as much of the road dirt from his face and hands as he could, dried off, and went in search of the drawing room.

He found her seated in a high, wing-backed chair, and seeing him enter the room, she gestured for him to take a seat on the settee across from her. Once he had sat, she leaned forward and poured out two glasses of lemonade from the pitcher on the table between them—handing him one of the glasses and raising her own.

"Welcome to the Laveau Hotel."

The lemonade was cold and tart but left behind a pleasant sweetness.

"Very good lemonade, Miss Laveau."



“It’s the mint leaves that does it. Where have you come from?”

“Jackson, on my way home to New York.” The painting above the mantel caught his eye.

“Down there to march?”

He turned his head to look at her.

“Yes, actually.”

She sat rigidly still, legs crossed—her arm over the arm of the chair and the glass of lemonade held in hand. He noticed the puddle the condensation was making on the floor.

“How goes the struggle, then?”

“There has been progress, you’ve heard the Civil Rights Act was passed?”

“I have.”

Again his eye was drawn to the painting. It was unusual, even for an era that seemed to push what the definition of accepted art was. The style was Afro-Caribbean, with what appeared to be a tribal mask in the background, surrounded by patterns of vivid color. To one side, a dark skinned figure was partially in view. In the foreground and center, was the figure of a woman in motion, her one visible eye looking behind her. Half of her face and body had been colored using the same rich brown as the figure to the side, but the other half was the peach tone of a Caucasian.

“It’s called, La Baker,” said Miss Laveau, lifting him out of his fixation. “The artist is, Lois Mailou Jones.”

“I haven’t heard of her.”

“No? She’s quite famous already. This piece—well, you wouldn’t have heard of it yet.”

“Is she mixed?”

“Because of the duality of the woman in the painting? No, Lois Mailou Jones is not mixed, to my knowledge.”

“Pandora would love to know of her.”

He had mentioned his daughter absentmindedly while thinking that he hadn’t done much for Pandora in

the way of culture. His expression must have shown his guilt, because when he turned back to her, one of Miss Laveau's already arched eyebrows had moved up a fraction.

"The reason I'm returning to New York is that I'm afraid something has happened."

The faint smile tightened slightly, as she waited for him to continue. What was it about the woman? Everything about her—the long, elegant neck and taught shoulders, the sharp angles of her face, the high cheek bones and the eyes—she was intimidating.

"I'm afraid she believes I abandoned her and hates me for it." There it was, his confession.

"You're not proud of what you've done in Jackson?"

"For myself, I feel no pride."

He waited for her condemnation, her censure—anything. Why did he feel compelled to say these things to her? She said nothing.

"I wanted to be a part of something greater, for her future. How can I explain to her why it is that things are the way they are?"

"Perhaps those are the answers you went searching for."

"Don't get me wrong, The reverend, his wife—all of them—are good people. I'm just not satisfied with their reason for the human condition. You can call it being tested by God, but what does that make us? The opposite of the chosen people? The children of Job?"

This was absurd. It hadn't been an hour and he was venting his frustrations to this woman, everything from his failings as a father to his criticism of God. What is wrong with me?

"It's presumptuous to blame God for the failings of man."

"I'm sorry. I think I've been on that motorcycle too long and not had enough sleep."

"Are you tired? I can show you your room."

"Oddly, I don't feel tired."

They sat in silence, all the while Moe looked at the painting and had the distinct feeling that Miss Laveau wasn't taking her eyes off him.

A thought came to him, "How can God be unfathomably powerful and be understood by our poor, narrow minds?"

"My plans are not your plans, nor are your ways my ways."

"What?"

"It's a verse in the bible."

"Oh, fitting."

"You've lost your faith in God then?"

"If I still believe in God, I no longer believe in his church." He looked to see the accusation of blasphemy in her eyes but found none.

"Throughout history," she said, in answer, "Those oppressed wanted to know why their lives were lived in misery. The oppressors told them that this was their trial and that they would be rewarded in the next life for their sorrow. The oppressed accepted their lot and were even grateful for it."

Moe sat thinking on her words and let the silence hang between them.

"The conflict I have is not a lack of faith in our fight for freedom, but that it is fought behind the wall of religion and religion is the crux of what kept us enslaved for so long."

He stood and walked over to the window, drawing the curtain and looking out over the landscape. The sun had set and one by one the stars were twinkling into existence. A faraway train whistle blew, and the first drops of rain began to fall.

"Futility. The word that describes the sense I get when I look at the world around me is futility. Everything I do seems to be a lesson in futility."

"And who are you to know what are the fruits of your labor? Does every bee in the hive know the greater good of its singular service? How many of the men who

changed history saw the result their work in their lifetime? How many women have changed history, with their names never put to paper?"

All I can do is the best that I am able, with the opportunities I am given. Moe wasn't sure where he had heard the words before, but they came to him now. On the road, the headlights of a car were getting closer. Moe knew those headlights and panic washed over him.

"There has been a patrolman following me and he's here."

He let the curtain fall and turned back to Miss Laveau. She had crossed to the fireplace was pulling the rug back.

"Over here." With surprising strength, she pushed aside the hearthstone, revealing a narrow passageway leading down.

"The tunnel ends at the shed. There is a path, at the treeline, that leads away from here, and once you're a mile down it, you can start-up the motorcycle. It will take you to a road that runs parallel to this one, going back to the highway."

"Lucky this tunnel is here."

"Time is a wheel, Moses. This Hotel was a stop on the underground."

It wasn't until he was back on the highway that he realized he had never told Miss Laveau his name.

A boy is looking down at her. Her head is spinning and she finds it difficult to make him out against the bright sky.

She tries to focus. *How did I get here? Why can't I remember?*

Her thoughts slip away before she has a chance to grasp them—only vague shapes, bright than dark.

“Hello.”

She sits up on the dirt. Here everything is dirt, a barren valley between rolling hills. Beyond the hills, mountains stretch upward to scrape against a cloudless sky. And everywhere, dirt, rich, dark earth cut in stark contrast to rock and stone.

The boy offers her a hand up, and taking it, she stands.

Seeing him fully for the first time, she is surprised at his appearance. His skin is white, though not as white people are white, but lacking color. His tightly kinked hair is much like her own, though the hair on his head, brows, and even his eyelashes is a pale gold.

And he is naked. Other than a satchel of sorts that hangs around his shoulders, he is as the day he was born.

He seems as much surprised by her, as she of him, and they stand staring at one another until both begin to feel awkward.

With sudden clarity, she understands that for the first time, he is aware that he is naked. Her clothes are the first he has seen.

“There’s not much here,” she says, brushing away the dirt on her shorts and realizing too late the double entendre.

“I’m working on that.”

This admission embarrasses him, and he becomes suddenly intrigued with the ground around his bare

feet. She wonders what he is talking about, but chooses not to upset him by asking. He is clearly sensitive.

After some time, the boy seems to realize that she's waiting for him to explain.

"I'm planting seeds," he says, giving the satchel a pat.

"How long have you been at it?" she asks.

"A long time now, I guess."

She isn't sure if the boy knows how seeds work, but if what he says is true, then, by now, something should have come up.

"You never run out?"

"No, never."

A thought crosses her mind, a vague recollection, the feeling of *déjà vu*, the ghost of a memory.

"Can I look inside your bag?"

"If you want."

Inside are seeds of every shape and size. She wonders why she is disappointed. What was it she had hoped to find?

"Would you like to help?" he asks, hesitantly.

"Sure," she says, before adding, "Is it just you here?"

"Yeah," says the boy, a hint of sadness in his voice.

There is a sharp pang of loss, as she thinks of her home—of Bumpy and Miss Evelyn, and her father.

How long has she been gone? Something stands between her consciousness and the memory of when she was last home, like a blind spot.

"I'm Pandora."

He waits for her to continue.

"Do you have a name?" she asks.

He ponders the question, before saying, "I don't think I do. I've never needed one."

She lists off names for boys in her head, thinking he doesn't look like a John, a Charlie or a Michael. "How about Robin?"

"What's a robin?"

"A type of bird."

He looks confused.

“It’s the first bird home in spring, so you know when winter’s almost over.”

The furrow in his brow deepens.

“A bird—a thing with feathers and wings. They can fly,” she says, and mimes flying.

His look of confusion is replaced by a broad grin at her comically flapping arms, and she stops at once.

This is getting them nowhere.

“If you don’t like it—”

“Oh, but I do!”

“Then you’re Robin,” she says. “How do I plant seeds, Robin?”

“You have to shake them out, without letting all the seeds go at once. If you do it right, a handful should last you three or four shakes.”

He opens the seed-bag and demonstrates. “Now you try.”

Pandora reaches inside the bag and takes a handful, emptying her hand in two shakes.

“It’s all right. It takes awhile to get it the hang of it.”

They begin to walk side by side, in no particular direction, shaking seeds out over the dirt.

Robin feels his fingers scrape along the bottom of the seed bag, and opening it wide, he peers in.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, seeing he has stopped.

He looks worried—scared even. “It’s empty.”

“What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know. It’s never been empty.”

She thinks she should say something to reassure him. Is it her fault? Hadn’t the bag always remained full before she had arrived?

She finds it difficult to meet his eye. “Maybe—” she starts, “Well, is there a chance that you’re done?”

He doesn’t feel that he is done but says nothing.

It has to be her fault, what else could be the reason? He had never wavered, never doubted that it was his

duty, never cared to know if there would a reward for his labor. His life's work ground to a halt by her abrupt appearance.

She takes his hand hers, not knowing the words to say that will make him understand how sorry she is.

Are those tears in his eyes? But he quickly looks away, and neither speaks for some time.

"What do I do now?" he asks, finally.

She doesn't know—she doesn't even know what it is that she should do.

"You see that mountain?"

She looks to where he is pointing. "Yes, I see it."

"Do you think you can climb up it?"

Even from this distance, the mountain looks high. "I think so."

"I want to show you something up there."

His hand is still in hers as they began to walk.

As they near its base, the mountain looms over them. She is beginning to regret telling him that she could climb it but keeps quiet.

They have climbed for hours, neither speaking, as the effort to climb is enough to take all the energy they have. Pandora is breathing heavily, wishing for all the world that she could lie down. But the boy doesn't stop.

Then the boy disappears behind a jutting boulder ahead of her on the path and she quickens her pace to catch up. As she rounds the boulder, his hand reaches out and stops her.

She has been keeping her eyes on the path and as she now looks up and the view is dizzying. In front of them, the mountain drops away, giving them a view for miles. If she doesn't look down at the ground beneath her, it looks as though she is flying miles above the ground.



The height is terrifying but the panic eases a little and Pandora is taken by the glory of it. Never has she been so high up.

The sun is low on the horizon, turning the valley below into a patchwork of color—the rich brown of dirt, the orange and red of clay and the gray of stone, pushing up from beneath the ground.

Far across the valley, between the mountain peaks, a mist hovers, becoming denser as the dusk comes on. It glows a soft pink, in the light of the setting sun.

“Looks like clouds.”

“What?” Robin asks. They’re the first he’s seen.

“Over there,” she says, pointing. “Doesn’t that look like clouds?”

“What are they?”

“Has it never rained here?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well that explains a lot,” she says as if fitting the last piece of the puzzle together.

The sunset is hidden behind the clouds, which now cover the entire line of mountains in the distance.

“It’s going to rain, I think,” says Pandora.

The feeling of an oncoming storm hangs heavy in the air. She has always loved that feeling, but now there is no house to run into when the rain begins to fall.

She turns to look at him. His face twists with sudden panic when lightning spreads fingers across the valley, followed seconds later by the deafening crack of thunder.

Screaming, he covers his head with his hands, as if the sky will fall on him.

“It’s all right,” Pandora says. She has to shout above the wind. “Listen to me, Robin. We’ll be fine.”

She has to choose her words carefully so that he will understand. “We need to go somewhere with no sky overhead.”

After a moment, he nods and points to a spot higher up the mountain.

“It’s going to start raining and we don’t want to be out in the open when it does,” she says, trying not to scare him, but failing.

Robin grabs her hand, and they start up the crag.

The ledge has narrowed to half the width of a sidewalk, as the first drop of rain falls. It’s a heavy drop, and it comes down to land on Robin’s forehead. For a boy who has never seen of rain, he takes it well—diving for the ground, his hands covering his head, as if stones are being thrown at him. Pandora stops, crouching down beside him.

“Get up, it won’t hurt you. We have to keep going.”

He is frightened, and as another drop splashes on his hand, he jerks it back as if he’s been stung.

“There is a lot more about to come down. Let’s go.”

With the threat of more rain, Robin climbs faster. More drops fall and the stone underfoot becomes slick.

Twice Pandora slips, sending pebbles falling far below. She nearly loses her balance and Robin reaches a hand out to steady her.

“We’re close,” he yells, as the rain begins to fall in earnest.

Her clothes are soaked and her legs are beginning to feel numb. She is thinking she cannot go on much further when she hears him shout, “In here,” and points to a spot where the rock wall seems to split apart.

The entrance is narrow, but once through they find the cave to be spacious enough. Behind them, rain falls in torrents, and lightning flashes so often it seems daylight.

Pandora has seen rain many times, but never this much. Robin huddles down against the back wall, his knees pulled up tightly against his chest. He is shaking. For the first time, he feels cold.

She goes to him, sits close and puts her arms around him.

“We’re safe,” she says, trying to comfort him.

She feels his body pressing against hers and thinks, what a bad time to be naked.

The only time she has seen the male body in its entirety is in a book on anatomy and she doesn’t think she will ever be able to get used to the sight. He seems to have lost the initial awkwardness, and perhaps that is why his nakedness doesn’t seem dirty, only natural.

*Still*, she thinks, *He could do with a pair of shorts.* His shaking lessens.

They have a view of the outside through the entrance and sit looking out, listening to the sounds of the storm. When Robin finally speaks it startles her.

“All of my seeds will be gone.” He is crying. “It was all for nothing.”

“No, the seeds need the rain. It’s what they’ve been waiting for.”

“How do you know?”

“They taught us that in class.” She realizes there isn’t much this boy will understand about her world.

“Where I come from, people plant seeds too, and when they’re done they wait for rain. After it rains, whatever they planted grows into what it’s meant to be.”

At this, Robin seems to cheer up.

“It’s loud, the rain.”

“Oh, that’s the thunder. It thunders after the lightning—those flashes in the sky.”

“Why does that happen?” he asks.

“I’m not sure, but I know it happens when it’s about to rain, or even while it’s raining sometimes.”

They fall back into silence and soon they are asleep.

She is back home in her bed. There is a chill in the air and the rain beats a march against her window.

Miss Evelyn is there, tucking the covers in around her. The tapping against the window becomes louder, no longer the patter of raindrops, but a steady, clink, clink,

clink—like the tips of thin metal fingers against the glass.

Pandora tries to sit up. She wants to know what it is at the window.

“Sleep, child.”

Miss Evelyn sounds frightened. Pandora has never known her to be afraid of anything.

“What is it?”

“Too soon. Sleep now, the window later.”

“Don’t leave me, please?”

“Not gonna leave you, child.”

Miss Evelyn sits on the edge of the bed. She looks everywhere but the window—she won’t look at it. She is rocking back and forth and humming a song to Pandora—to herself. She starts to sing the words,

*My heart is down, my head is turning around  
I had to leave a little girl in Kingston town.*

As if without meaning to, as if drawn to it against her will, Miss Evelyn glances towards the window. She stops singing, stops rocking.

“What’s wrong, Miss Evelyn?”

“Nothing child, go to sleep.”

She lays her hand against Pandora’s cheek. Her hand is cold.

*Clink, Clink, Clink*—the thin metallic fingers against the glass.

Inside the cave, Pandora sleeps fitfully. Her shaking wakes up Robin. He puts his arms around her, trying to keep her warm.

Outside in the storm, something dark is stalking. It has followed her into this world from the end of the universe.

Pandora wakes with a start. Robin is asleep against her and she pokes a finger between his ribs

“Robin, wake up.”

He mumbles, shifts to lean against the cave wall and continues sleeping.

She stands, stretches and goes sideways through the entrance. She is stiff from sleeping on hard stone and bruised from the many falls she took during their climb.

The stone under her is soaked and she can hear the sound of rushing water, but the sun is bright and shining. The clouds are like cotton wool.

She looks out over the valley below—her eyes growing wide with amazement.” Robin, quick—come look!”

She hears him scrambling inside the cave. He emerges confused and worried.

“What is it, what’s the matter?”

“Look!” she says.

Hanging over the valley is a rainbow, the arch complete from one end to the other.

“What is it?” Robin asks, his voice is full of wonder.

“It’s a rainbow, they come out after it rains, but I’ve never seen one so perfect. And look!”

But he is already looking. His eyes are combing the landscape, tracing the line of hills—the valley has turned green, a shimmering line running at angles through it.

They start down the mountain at once, but the ground is still wet, and their descent is made slowly. From between crevices, water cascades down. Where it splashes across the path, rainbows form in miniature, as the sun’s rays find the prism of waterfall.

“Come quick!” Robin shouts excitedly at something he has found and when she catches up to him, she sees it. At the side of the path, where a handful of earth has settled in a depression in the rock, small green leaves have sprung up.

As they watch, the plant doubles in size. She hardly believes it possible—plants could take weeks to grow, but this one is growing in seconds.

They continue on, Robin stopping here and there to look at some new plant he has found. When they reach the base of the mountain, the valley opens to view and he is suddenly awestruck.

The valley is covered thickly by rapidly growing vegetation. Broad leaves, wide patches of clover, all manner of grasses—some reaching as high as their knees.

“My seeds!”

He tries to avoid stepping on them, but there is no ground where something does not grow. He steps from stone to stone, attempting to avoid the ground altogether.

Pandora follows him until he stops and she is beside him. She thinks that no boy has ever looked happier.

“Come on!” she says, laughing.

Taking his hand in hers, she begins to run through fields of red clover, dandelions, Queen Ann’s Lace, and poppies, over rolling hills thick with lilies, bluebells, wild roses, and buttercups—flowers of every color, their fragrance more magnificent than any perfumery in Paris.

The fields seem to vibrate with the hum of bees. From out of nowhere they have arrived, buzzing like mad and trailing pollen as they dart from flower to flower.

Robin tries to catch one.

“I wouldn’t if I were you.”

He pauses, his hand outstretched.

“Why’s that?” he asks.

“They’ll sting you if you scare them, and it hurts.”

Disappointed, he leaves off trying to catch them.

The sound of moving water becomes louder, as they make their way lower into the valley, and as they crest a small hill, they see the river.

From above on the mountain, the river had been a thin line, but here, it is as wide across as a motorway.

“All the raindrops have found each other,” Robin says, fascinated.

At the river’s edge, they stop. She hears him gasp, before exclaiming, “There’s a boy in the water.”

“What? Let me see,” she says, crouching next to him and peering down to see their reflection on the smooth surface. He looks up to her face, then down in amazement. She realizes that Robin is seeing himself for the first time and smiles, waiting for the realization to dawn on him.

He raises his hand to his face, traces the outline of his nose, cheek, and jaw, then lowers his hand to the reflection and touches the mirrored image on the water.

At the touch of his finger, the image shimmers and he pulls his hand away.

“It’s my face,” he says, in a whisper. “That is what I look like.”

He turns to her suddenly, his expression anxious.

“Do I have a good face?”

She bursts out laughing. He looks pained, but she can’t help it. His immediate vanity at seeing himself for the first time is uproariously funny to her. Finally, she stops laughing, feeling guilty for having hurt his feelings. “I like your face, Robin,” she says, soberly.

He feels both happy and embarrassed.

“But, is this what I’m supposed to look like?”

“Yes, you are exactly as you should be.”

He takes her hand in his, tracing the line where light and dark skin blend together, then covers her hand with his, braiding their fingers together.

She watches silently, seeing only curiosity in his face.

“Does everyone look like you,” he asks. “Your color?”

He says the word without prejudice and she is struck by the simplicity of color as he sees it.

For him, it’s the color of flowers—the shades of red between azalea, dahlia, and poppy. He says “color” without history—the present tense of color.

It's the added verb-tense that shows the intent of color. The accusing, *colored*, whispered to the security guard, while narrowed eyes dart suspiciously towards her as she fingers a row of bracelets.

The unspoken, *colored*, when the store manager says, "You're so eloquent, child," as she is lead out of the store, that thinly disguised and well-meaning version of color, as in, "If I closed my eyes, I wouldn't even see you're *colored*."

*Past-tense, as though what's wrong with you can't be fixed because you were created that way.*

The thought turns her stomach, and she isn't sure if it's hate, anger, or humiliation.

She leaves off telling him these parts of her world. Somehow that world is a reflection of her—a part of who she is.

*Isn't what he thinks of me unbreakably linked to where it is I come from?*

She is afraid that she may, by virtue of her own hurt and anger, bring into his world some of the darkness that fills hers. "No, not everyone is my color," she says.

"Do some look like me?" he asks.

She looks down at their entwined hands. *A negro boy without pigment—a white black boy*, she thinks and feels suddenly protective of him.

Her world would destroy him. It would steal from him his innocence, his wonder.

"Let's walk along the river," she says.

He notices that she has avoided his question, and thinks that she has done so to save his feelings—that she is saving him from the shame of whatever it is that is wrong with him. His emotions show clearly on his face and she thinks, *it's too late, I've already brought my world here.*

"We're stuck between three rivers," Robin says, from above.



The river they have been following has split, with most of the water running straight ahead of them and the rest curving off to the left. They walk along the bank of the smaller river to where it fed into one even larger than the first, but seeing no way to cross, they backtracked.

“This place seems familiar,” says Pandora. “I think I’ve been here before.”

“You can’t have,” Robin says, wondering if he has ever been to this spot himself.

“Not like it is now, but there is something about the way these rivers meet.”

They are standing on the rocky bank, with short trees and tall grass spread out behind them.

“Well?” Robin says, waiting for her to decide which way she wants to go.

“I’m thinking.”

She wonders what a city would look like in place of what is here now. If across the river there stood rows of housing blocks if the river bank had a motorway running along it, across the river a bridge—no, two.

“I know where we are, this is the Harlem River—this is home!”

“The place where you’re from?”

“Well, not like this, without its people or buildings, but yes. On the other side there, is where I’m from. This river here would be the Bronx Kill, which flows into the East River and that would make where we’re standing the Bronx—how is this possible?”

The growth of the vegetation has slowed and still the trees in Harlem appear young, even if they are tall.

Pandora wonders at it all. No streets or houses, no buildings or corner stores, no cars and no buses. Instead, there are trees and ferns, moss, flowers—Harlem is a garden.

She wonders in which part of the city she is standing. If she closes her eyes can she see it spring up

around her? Would this be 125th? Could she be standing in front of the Apollo? She opens her eyes and wishes the Harlem she knows could look at least a little like this one.

They follow alongside a small creek until the forest opens into a clearing. The creek feeds into a small pool at the center of the clearing and there they stop.

In the pool, small things with fat little bodies and thin tails are swimming.

“Tadpoles!” Pandora says she has seen them before in her classroom’s aquarium.

“Look, they’ve already grown legs.”

They try to catch them and when they do, they are fascinated by how soft and wriggly the tadpoles are. They let them go and lay down at the edge of the pool to watch.

The sun has begun to cast long shadows on the ground and Pandora thinks it would be a good idea to find somewhere to sleep before it gets dark.

When they are gone, one of the shadows breaks away from beneath a large rock and slips into the pool. The water turns dark, like ink has been poured in and the moss, like a green carpet around the edge, withers and becomes dry and brown.

They find a place to spend the night, high up on a hill and hidden from view, where the grass covering the ground is as thick and soft as a finely woven Persian rug.

“You must’ve been very lonely, all by yourself.”

They lie side by side looking up, as bright stars move slowly across the night sky.

“I didn’t know I was until you came.”

“I’m happy I am here,” she says. Adding cheekily, “I don’t know what you would do without me.”

He makes no reply, but Pandora knows without seeing his face that he is smiling.

“Something is wrong,” Robin says, looking about for signs of danger.

Pandora feels it too. Everything has become quiet. Stepping into the clearing, Robin freezes, on his face a look of horror. Pandora had been looking down, not noticing that he has stopped and almost bumps into him.

“What is it?” she asks, seeing the look on his face. She turns to where he is pointing and the sight makes her gasp in shock.

The pool, which had been clear as glass the day before, is now an inky muck. It oozes and bubbles, and the creek feeding it has dried up—now only a slow drip of tar.

All along the dry creek bed, the stones are stained dark. Around the pool, the vegetation is dead and the trees, like bleached bones, stick up from the ground.

“What happened here?” Robin asks, his voice shaking.

“I don’t know,” she says, almost whispering. She is frightened.

Pandora sees a tadpole—almost a frog now—trying desperately to free itself from the muck and climb out. She kneels beside it and tries as best she can to help it, without letting the slime touch her. Too late, she notices the eyes of the thing that was a tadpole, now sunken, black pools—two miniatures of the pool it is struggling to escape. She jerks her hand back in horror.

In the middle of the pool, the muck bubbles, and something under the surface swims towards her.

Robin sees the thing in the water and shouts in warning, as he runs towards her. She looks up, as something like a claw reaches up out of the depths and grabs hold of her ankle.

Screaming in terror, she tries to pull away, but it has her tightly in its grip. She loses her footing and is pulled nearly halfway under before she feels Robin’s hands grasp hers and pull.

“Hang on,” he shouts, “Don’t let go!”

His eyes dart around for something to grab hold of, anything to keep himself from slipping in with her, but there is nothing within reach.

She knows if she holds on, they will both be dragged under. Only her head and arms are above the surface now. She has to save him—has to let go of his hands.

“No!” he cries out, as he feels her grip loosen and grabs her wrist with both hands. A thin layer of slime now covers them and his grip is slipping, he can’t hold on.

“It’s okay, Robin,” she says, in a whisper, the slime oozing around her neck.

Tears are running down the boy’s face and as the thing wrenches her away and down, his hand slips free of hers and she is gone.

Below the surface, Pandora tries hard to break free, but it is like moving in syrup, and she can’t hold her breath much longer.

She feels a splash from above and arms wrap themselves around her. Her lungs burn and her eyes sting, but now there is the sudden warmth of happiness wrapping itself around her heart—*stupid, crazy, wonderful boy.*

Moe brought the motorcycle to a stop as the bars of the crossing came down. Soon the train was rushing past, the cars a blur of motion.

With the rush of wind in his ears, he never heard the patrol car pull up behind him and the door open and shut. Suddenly, he was being dragged off the seat and his face was being crushed against the asphalt.

As he felt the handcuffs closed around his wrists, he understood—the patrolman had caught up.

The last train car passed, and Moe could see, across the tracks, another patrol car stopped, this one with Delaware plates. The policemen got out and Moe saw that he was black.

He called out as he approached, “What’s the problem here, officer?”

“This man is wanted in Mississippi, I’ve been following him for some time.”

The other policeman drew up and stretched out a hand.

“Officer Hall,” he said, introducing himself. “You’ve come a long way.”

“Officer Crowe.”

“Crowe?” said Hall, an eyebrow raised.

“Yes, James Crowe.”

Jim saw the look spread over the other man’s face, as he grasped the proffered hand and shook it. He waited, wondering how the joke would feel coming from a negro.

“That must burn you up.”

It took Jim a long moment to take in the meaning. No one ever cared to know where names came from these days, but he had. The image of himself, the hard cop without humor, on stage performing a ridiculous minstrel routine *had* burned him up.

Maybe he *did* play the minstrel in his way—raising himself up by keeping others down. And wasn’t that the

act? The caricature? Progress scared the hell out of him, because progress meant he would be knocked down a peg, forcing him to prove his worth on his own merit and not by comparison.

“Can’t choose our names.”

“Too true. What’s he done?”

“Stole a motorcycle, evaded the police—”

“You came all this way for that?”

Jim said nothing.

“Kind of out of your jurisdiction, isn’t it?” said Officer Hall.

“Are we going to have an issue?” said Jim, his hackles raised.

The passenger side of Officer Hall’s patrol car opened, and if Moe had started to hope, he was disappointed.

“A two eleven just came over the radio,” said the officer, standing up and leaning on the car door.

“Well, have a good trip back, Officer Crow.” said Officer Hall, turning and walking away.

“You might want to have this bike picked up.” Jim called after him.

“Will do,” Officer Hall called back, not turning.

Jim waited until the other patrol car had driven off, then reached down to the man laying face-down and hauled him to his feet by the cuffs.

“Had a good run, I’ll give you that.”

Jim reached for the pack of cigarettes on the seat. It appeared to be empty. He shook it, squeezed and felt a lump inside. *One left.* He steered the car with his elbow as he pulled apart the pack, putting the bent cigarette between his lips and throwing the empty pack down on the floorboards.

On reaching inside the ashtray for the cars’ cigarette lighter, he found the slot was empty. He fished around in the ashes and found it. As he started to push the

lighter in, there was a metallic *clink* and a thin electric spark—and Jim’s heart gave out.

Moe was gazing blankly out of the window when he heard the sudden grunt and looked up in time to see the cop slump over, his hand in the ashtray and his head against the steering wheel.

“Hey! Oh God—”

The car was accelerating under the dead weight of Jim’s foot, but so far it was heading in a straight line. Moe’s hands were cuffed behind him, and for a panicked moment, all he could do was stare at the lights of oncoming traffic through the windshield.

Then, slouching down in the seat and bringing his knees to his chest, he passed his cuffed hands under him, and slipped them up over his feet.

With his hands now in front of him, he leaned forward and reached over the seat to grab hold of hunched officer. It was then that the passenger side tire found a depression in the pavement and the car swerved violently to the right, sending Moe against the door.

The car hit the ditch at speed, launching the front end into the air, before it slammed down on soft earth. After rolling a dozen yard, it came to a stop.

Moe had been flung to the floor of the car and he lay dazed, his eyes shut. He opened his them to find the vacant eyes of the cop staring back at him from over the seat back, one arm hanging over—his face frozen in a shocked expression.

Startled, Moe sat up, but a sharp stabbing pain shot through his shoulder. He didn’t move and the pain subsided a little.

Cars were passing on the motorway and at any moment a driver would take notice of the crashed patrol car. The lights were still on and pointing out onto an empty field.

Moe tried to raise his elbow, there was a popping sound, a blinding flash of pain, and then it was over.

The dislocated shoulder had snapped back into its socket.

There was still a throbbing pain, but Moe could work through it. With some difficulty, he extracted himself from the floor and up onto the back seat. The cop was hunched over the seat in an awkward position—chin resting on the seat-back and arm slung over it.

With effort, Moe climbed over the body, and stretching his cuffed arms out as far as he could, found the nob for the lights and pushed. *That should buy some time*, he thought.

He fumbled inside the nearest pocket of the cops blue uniform pants—no keys. He sank back into the rear seat, and pushed the cop forward. The body was heavier than Moe had expected, but when it started to lean, it fell the rest of the way, slumping back against the car door. Moe reached into the other pocket and found what he was looking for.

Free of the cuffs, Moe climbed into the front seat and opened the passenger side door. Out of curiosity, he leaned back and looked into the open ashtray. The lights of a passing car glared off something metallic inside. Moe reached in and drew out a silver wedding band. There was a scorch mark on one side.

“Love will set you free.”

He set the ring on the dash, climbed out of the car and began walking.



The force of the water is like a truck hitting her. All the air is pushed out of her lungs, and she cannot breathe in to fill them. There is no air, only water. She is being driven backward along the asphalt and the loose grit is like sandpaper against her skin.

The torrent sweeps to her left, to where there are people standing with their arms locked together, their heads down to face the blast. On their faces she sees determination. Hundreds stand in rows, all facing forward, every one of them in their Sunday best. There are a few her own age, some too old to walk without assistance. All of them are locked in step.

The line is holding, but the cannon moves in closer and the pressure increases. She recognizes a man at the front.

The man, firmly braced against the beam of water, holds onto the arm of a woman next to him. He is iron in his resolve, cut from the rock beneath the ground he stands on. He is her father.

She has to get up, has to stand with him. Somewhere near, a dog snarls and bares its teeth. Ahead, lined in ranks like tin soldiers, she sees them. Stiff uniforms behind shields, every fifth man holding the leash of a dog straining against it. Two columns stand to each side of a truck, like a crimson tank, whose turret is hell bent on forcing the crowd to yield.

She has made it to her feet and is starting towards her father, when a hand grabs her arm, spinning her around. A woman, only a few years older than Pandora, screams over the roar of the water, over the shouts of the uniformed men and the barking of the dogs.

Pandora cannot hear what she is saying, she doesn't understand why she is being pulled away.

“Stop! I have to go back—”

The woman isn't listening.

Two of the uniformed men and a dog have broken away and are following after them. Pandora can hear their shouts drawing nearer. They are at a full run now. The street where they had just been is at the foot of a bridge and Pandora can see now that on it march many more uniformed men.

They are heading downward, towards the tracks that pass under the bridge and behind them, the men are gaining. The ground is uneven and Pandora stumbles, but the woman is strong and keeps her on her feet.

There is the crunch of gravel—they have made it to the edge of the tracks. Four lines, eight rails. They're over the first when they hear the rumble of the train. The conductor sounds the horn.

They're over the tracks of the second line when Pandora feels the dog's teeth scrape the back of her leg.

The woman pulls her forward, just out of reach of the snapping jaws. Over the third, and the train rounds the curve—they won't make it.

Between the rails of the fourth, Pandora feels the hands grab her from behind. The rails are shaking, the spikes driven into the sleepers, strain against the wood. The hands don't let go.

Pandora feels herself being pulled upwards. Over the littered, oily ground beneath her, tracks run down tunnels in both directions. What had been a low rumble becomes a deafening roar, and from one of the tunnels a train emerges, hurtling towards her.

The hands grasping her are desperate as they wrench her up and onto the platform. The air becomes violent, the roar deafening. The train speeds past, barreling down the tracks and disappearing into the tunnel at the other end of the station.

"You alright then, lass?"

A man is looking at her, his hand on her shoulder. Behind him and to the side, people stand in rows facing the tracks, as if nothing has happened. None of them

move. They stand like mannequins in a store window, arms at their side and eyes fixed straight ahead of them.

There is a woman wearing a blue hat and next to her a boy who looks enough like her to be her son. Behind them stand two men in suits, each carrying a briefcase. To the left of the men, an old woman leans on her cane and in front of her is a little girl in a red coat—row after row of people, on every face a blank expression.

“Can you hear me, girl?”

Pandora turns back to the man in front of her. He is short, with a bushy mustache and heavily lidded eyes. The dusty sleeve of his jacket smells moldy. His eyes follow hers to where his hand is on her shoulder. He lowers the hand and takes a step backward. “That was nearly the end of you.”

She thinks his accent is odd and that she should say something. She mutters, “Thank you” and looks away from him.

“Aye, it’s alright lass. You had a bit of a shock.”

She remembers having been frightened, that she hadn’t been able to breathe and that something or someone has been lost. Everything in her head seems fuzzy as if she has just woken up and cannot remember the dream, but can still feel it.

The man is still watching her and he has been kind.

“I’m sorry. I’m not sure how I got here.”

She turns to watch, as another train passes without stopping. She is sure that she has never been to this station before.

“Where am I?” she asks, turning back to the man.

He is now standing as the others do, arms at his side, eyes fixed ahead of him and a blank expression on his face.

She grabs his arm and shakes it. “Sir?”

He seems surprised that she is there.

“Hello there, lass. Shouldn’t be long now, eh?”

“What shouldn’t be long—what is it everyone is waiting for?”

He peers around the station as if realizing the others for the first time. "Waiting for our train to arrive. Obvious isn't it?"

"What train, which train are you waiting for?"

He looks confused and fumbles for the answer. "I can't for the life of me remember which one, but I'll know it when I see it, won't I?"

A rumbling grows, then fades, and the air rushes around them as another train passes by.

"That's three now that have gone through without stopping."

"Aye, they don't stop."

"You mean no trains actually stop here?"

"Aye, lass. That's the sum of it."

"Then why does everyone keep waiting?"

Again he looks around, surprised by the people that fill the platform. "The train will come. Anytime now, lass."

She feels frustrated by him. What is wrong with these people? What is it that she had been afraid of? Why is she here?

Another train has emerged from the tunnel. This train doesn't pass. There is the grinding screech of metal against metal, as it slows and comes to halt beside the platform. It must be a reserve train because it looks older and more battered than any she has seen.

*Ding—South 4th Street station, stand clear.*

The doors slide open.

"Sir, the train has stopped—Sir!"

"Huh? Oh, hello there, lass. Shouldn't be long now, eh?"

"It's here!"

"Can't be. Not the train I'm waiting for."

"How do you know it's not?"

"I should think I'd know the train I'm waiting for."

She begins going from person to person and shaking them.

“Is this your train?”

“Wha—What you on about?”

“Lady, is this the train you’re waiting for?”

“Mind your manners, girl!”

“Little boy, what train are you waiting for?”

“Dunno. Dad’s taking me somewhere.”

Back again to the man in the moldy jacket.

“Why will no one get on? What is wrong with you people?”

“Obvious, isn’t it?”

“What? What is obvious?”

“That is your train. Go on then, you best get aboard before it leaves.”

Pandora turns to look. There is no letter mounted to name the line, there is no one inside. The man is right, this train is for her. She steps over the gap and into the waiting train-car.

Out of the window, she sees that no one has noticed her board, none have moved to join her—they are still waiting. She wonders for how long they have waited, there on the subway platform, or if the train they are waiting for will ever arrive.

*Ding—*

The doors slide closed. She reaches up, and her hand finds the loop hanging above her. With a lurch, the train begins to move.

The train clinks rhythmically under her, as it rolls down the tracks. She is standing at the center of the car, holding onto one of the straps that hang from a pole. The train sways to one side, as it rounds a sharp curve, and she nearly falls.

She decides to take one of the empty seats. All of the seats are empty. She wonders why it hadn’t occurred to her to sit before.

She is excited. She isn't sure how, or exactly where, but she is back in New York. How long has she been gone? It seems to her both a long time and not long at all. What will Miss Evelyn say when she walks through the front door?

She imagines them in the sitting room—Miss Evelyn seated on the edge of the chair, her father anxiously pacing the floor. Bumpy might be there and of course Miss Evelyn. Her thoughts turned dark. What has happened to Miss Evelyn? What has become of her home?

The train hasn't stopped. There has been no announcement over the speakers of an approaching station. Where in New York is she? What is it that happened after the fire started, and Miss Evelyn had come rushing upstairs to get her?

Her thoughts are clouded, unclear. Not for the first time, she becomes concerned as to why there is no one else aboard. She is startled, as the train brakes suddenly—screeching as it slows.

*Ding—Now approaching City Hall Loop.*

Pandora has never heard of a City Hall Loop. She thinks she should stay on board until it stops at a station she knows.

*Ding—City Hall Loop, as you exit, please be careful of the gap between the platform and the train.*

The doors slide open. No one gets on. She waits, but the doors don't close and the train stays where it is. Perhaps, this is the end of the line. Finally, she stands and makes her way off the train.

*Ding—*

As soon as she is clear of it, the doors close and the train springs forward, disappearing down the tracks through the tunnel at the far end of the station. The station, like the train, is empty of people.

She is curious to see that, unlike most subway stations, this one feels open, more spacious. The ceiling rises in archways, done up in patterned brickwork. At the peaks of some arches are skylights with intricate panels of leaded glass, through which she can see the night sky.

It must be late. That would explain why there is no one here waiting for a train. She needs to find out where she is, but nowhere in the station can she find a map of the subway. She finds the stairs, easily enough, and climbs up them to the city above.

She emerges from the station and steps out onto the sidewalk. Near her, in the center of a tree-lined park, stands a stately building, built of white stone. She looks at the cross-streets—Broadway & Warren St.

Here too, there is no one around. The city is silent, not even the sounds of delivery trucks or taxis. Inside the buildings, rising up from the street to touch the sky, not a single light is on.

No matter how late at night, or how early in the morning, there are always people awake—always work being done. So why, now, is the city so still? Where is everyone? She has to find her way home, and perhaps on the way there she would find the answer.

The signs over the shops that line the street are written in a foreign, blocked script, alongside their English translation:

*Wo Ping Restaurant – 24 – AIR CONDITIONED,*

And

*Old Shanghai and Me Sum Cafe.*

She is in Chinatown. Bumpy has been here before. From the way he had talked, it was as if he had visited a foreign land.

“Like I wasn’t even in New York anymore. Everyone was out in the street celebrating the Chinese New Year. Hundreds of paper lanterns were strung out over the street.”

Admittedly, she had been excited by his description.

“They set off strings of firecrackers and some people were carrying a huge, red and gold dragon down the street—they made the dragon look like it was flying through the crowd!”

There are no firecrackers now, no dragon.

She stops in front of a shop and peers through the streaked window. Behind the glass hangs a flickering neon sign that reads: Oriental Gifts.

On the shelves, standing in rows, across the shop’s floor and lining the walls, are curios in every shape and size. Paper lanterns in every color flattened and stacked together. Ceramic cats, each with a paw held up, waving to no one. Boxes of incense. Thin glass jars, with shoots of bamboo, stuck into the rocks with-in. Small figurines: dragons, samurai warriors, dogs that look like lions.

Inside the shop are all the treasures of the Orient. She wants badly to go in and have a closer look. She glances up and down the street, seeing no one. She slips inside the doorway and tries the handle—locked.

“Mostly worthless, you know, piles of junk.”

She jumps. She hadn’t noticed the statue next to the door and bends down to look at it.

The statue is half as tall as Pandora and carved out of green jade. A bald man, very fat, with a laughing face and unusually large ear lobes, seated cross-legged on a low pedestal.

She is sure that she has just heard the statue talk.

As she stands puzzling over it, the hand of the statue moves to scratch at the side of its round belly.



So startled is she, that she loses her balance and ends up on her rear end—eye-level with the smiling face.

“Orange? Bubble-gum?” he offers, pointing down to a bowl in front of the pedestal. Along with the orange and pack of bubble-gum, there is an apple and a few coins in the bowl.

“Uh, bubble-gum, please. Thank you.”

He reaches a pudgy hand down and picks the pack of gum out of the bowl. He waits, as she takes a piece from the pack in his outstretch hand, before taking a piece himself and dropping the pack back into the bowl.

He chews noisily and blows out a pink bubble, nearly as big as his head. The bubble pops and he laughs so cheerfully that she finds herself laughing with him.

“Why do you want the stuff in there, anyway?” he asks, jerking a thumb in the store’s direction.

“I don’t know.”

She says the words hesitantly, knowing that she longs for the things inside the shop but feels ashamed that he has found her out.

“To look at? To put on top of my dresser?” she says.

“And what if the thing you want breaks, or is lost?” he asks.

“I would be upset.”

“Why?”

“Because I wouldn’t have it anymore.”

“So you feel bad now, not having a thing from the shop and you would feel bad if you got it, but couldn’t keep it?”

She isn’t sure what he is getting at.

“Yeah, I guess.” she says.

“Ha! So it would be better to not have the thing at all.”

He makes a point.

They sit. She on the concrete stoop in front of the shop, the statue with his legs crossed on his pedestal. He starts humming a tune, blowing out bubble after bubble and laughing his cheerful laugh whenever they pop.

“You know how I can get home, to Harlem?”

“Oh, is that where you’re from?”

She nods her head.

“The D train from the Grand Street station would get you there, but you would have to walk a few blocks and the lines are running a few weeks behind schedule. A taxi of course, if you could find one.”

“And if walked the whole way?”

“Go down this street, until you get to 6th Avenue. Take a right and stay on 6th until you get to Central Park. Go straight through the park, or around it if there’s trouble. Once you get to 110th Street, you’ll see Harlem in front of you.”

That seems easy enough.

“You know a lot about the city for a statue,” she says.

“The shop sells maps. The only things of value in there, really.”

She stands to leave but turns back to him. “Where has everyone gone?”

He shrugs. “No one hides forever.”

The little jade man watches her go, blowing pink bubbles the size of his head and laughing every time one pops.

A rat scurries beside the curb. It pauses to test the air, before disappearing down a storm drain. Even now, with the city empty of its people, there are still rats.

The shops along the street have become upscale, the merchandise displayed in the windows finer, more expensive. The silent cars parked in the street are newer—models she has never seen, except in magazine advertisements.

She stops outside a jeweler to marvel at a display of diamond pendants and earrings. The jade statue of the fat man laughs in her head—*mostly worthless, you know, piles of junk.*

She moves on. Her eyes follow the line of buildings until it runs out. Beyond them must be the park—only a few blocks further.

There is a crash, a shattering of glass ahead of her. Two people emerge from a shop and Pandora stops. They are facing away and do not see her. One turns and yells something to a third still inside, who joins them on the street moments later.

They stand together talking, what they are saying she cannot hear. She is frozen, afraid. Until now, she has seen no one and now there are two men and a woman, all three are carrying iron bars.

One of the men looks back. He has seen her. He shouts something at her, and the others turn and look to where she is standing. There's an alley to her left that dead-ends, an unbroken line of building on her right. She turns and runs back the way she came.

Their legs are longer, faster. She only makes the block, before they have caught up to her. The tallest man reaches her first and she feels his hand grab onto her shirt, dragging her backwards. They have stopped running, and the man turns her around.

He is thin and wiry, his pants bunched up under a belt that is fastened at its last hole. His hand is still grasping her shirt where he caught her.

“Why you running, girl?”

She can’t answer. In a city without people, three suddenly appearing is frightening. He lets go of her. The others stand near him. The second man is shorter with a stockier build. The woman is hawkish, boney and reeks of cheap perfume.

“Who are you with? Are there any more of you?”

“No, just me.”

She regrets it as soon as she says it. She should have said there were dozens—that they were a block over, that they were on their way. They seem to relax.

“Not lying are you?”

“No.”

The woman gives the tall man a look and steps closer to Pandora.

“It’s all right, kid. No one’s gonna hurt you.”

Pandora is silent. How can she know they won’t hurt her? Just telling her they won’t means nothing.

“Where are you from, kid?”

“Harlem.”

“Harlem. Just up town. You trying to get home?”

“Yes.”

The woman turns to the tall man, “See? Just a kid trying to get home. Maybe we can help her. We’re heading that direction anyway.”

“Why would we do that?” He seems genuinely surprised.

“Because we are nice people and that’s what nice people do.”

The men laugh, but stop short when she looks from one to the other—eyes flashing daggers. She puts her hands on Pandora’s shoulders. Her perfume is overwhelming.

“We know you just want to get home, so we’re gonna help you. You help us, we’ll help you—deal?”

“Help you with what?”

“We’ve tried everything and can find no other way in.”

The woman is talking. She is animated, excited, but Pandora isn’t paying attention.

They are in the backseat of a late model Cadillac. The thin man is driving. The other sits in the passenger seat. They are driving up Central Park West, and from the window Pandora can make out the landscape in the lamplight.

The woman does the talking; too much, Pandora thinks, she is being overly friendly—trying too hard to put Pandora at ease.

“We went through every desk drawer and cabinet we could find and no key.”

They want her help to break in to somewhere. They are making her an accomplice, but what choice does she have? There is no one left in the city, only these three.

She doesn’t believe they will take her to Harlem after she has helped them. She doesn’t bother to hope, only wants to find a way to escape, to get away. She can find her way home on her own.

The thin man slows the car, bringing it to a stop beside the curb and all four of them get out.

*American Museum of Natural History—Central Park West & 79th St, New York, NY 10024*

“If there’s no one left in the city, why are you stealing stuff? What can you do with it? There’s nothing you can trade it for that you can’t already take.”

They seem to not want to give her a straight answer, looking at each other before the woman is again the one to speak for the lot.

“That’s a dumb question. We finally got a chance to have everything we could ever want—why wouldn’t we take it?”

*Isn't this what the little jade man meant? There is no point in having things just to have them.*

"What's there, what do you see?" the woman's voice is anxious, excited.

"There's a lot of drawers and cabinets, and boxes stacked together."

"Start going through everything. Tell us what you see."

She moves about the room, pulling open drawers and cabinets, describing as best she can what she finds—small gilded boxes, (add lost artifacts). She begins to wonder at their worth. Could she slip something small away with her without the lot outside knowing?

"That's great, really great. You can have whatever you want. We want something in particular. Something specific."

She feels a jolt of excitement. They would let her keep what she wanted. Forget the Jade man, those were trinkets, baubles—these are treasures worth more than she can comprehend. One of the treasures, though, they want for themselves.

"What is it I'm looking for?"

"We'll know it when you find it."

She looks around the room for something out of place—something that doesn't belong, and there, atop a stack of iron bound chests in the corner, she spots a small flat box.

In a room filled with old things, the box is more ancient by far. She goes over to it, pulling along a chest to stand on, and on her tiptoes, takes it down.

She turns the box over in her hands, looking for a latch or clasp—anyway way of opening it. It smells of dust and cedar, and the wood is dry and cracked. It's roughly crafted by crude tools, but solidly designed.

Along the edge are carved symbols, worn faint with time past. They remind her of the signs above the shops in Chinatown, but with more curves.

She runs her thumb over the symbols, and begins to think she can understand them—no, she is sure she can: *The Queen of the South*.

Pandora hears a clockwork click and the lid of the box springs open. The inside is lined with bright gold, inlaid with intricate patterns of amber and ivory.

The square of folded leather inside is too plain for the interior of the box. It clashes with it—looks out of place within it. She takes it out and unfolds it. A long strip of leather, folded and well stitched at either side, with one end forming a flap that is fastened with a simple bronze clasp—a satchel or bag of some kind.

She unfastens the clasp and opens it, disappointed that it is empty. Nothing more than a simple leather bag.

“You found it, didn’t you, girl?”

Pandora suddenly realizes that she’s stopped describing what she finds, for some time now.

“It’s just an old leather bag. Looks like it’s about to fall apart.”

“Bring it here.”

The woman’s voice has changed—more harsh, almost metallic.

Why, out of all the treasures in the room, did they only want this?

Curiously, she no longer feels like taking any of the things she had just moments ago been excited about. They are not meant for any one of them. They are gifts from past civilizations to this one.

Now, the bag in her hand seems the most valuable treasure in the museum. She can’t let them take it.

“Hurry up!”

They will never let her leave. She is trapped inside this room with no way out, but to give them the bag.

Knowing this, she only feels more certain that she cannot let them take it.

“You really wanna do this, kid? It’s just an old bag—couple strips of leather, stitched up. Be reasonable.”

“It’s not just a bag, is it?”

“Course it is. And you can have what ever else you want in there. I think you’re getting the better deal.”

“So, why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would you give me the better deal?”

“Come on kid, don’t get too smart for your own good. Don’t you wanna go home?”

Pandora turns the bag over and over in her hands, runs her fingers along the stitching, thumbs the clasp—it’s just a plain leather bag.

No. There is something about it.

She slumps down against the wall, with the bag across her knees.

It’s strangely familiar. It seems to have aged since she took it out of its box. The leather is more worn and cracked, and the stitches frayed in spots, the brass of the clasp tinged and dull.

“All right kid, you asked for this.”

She hears fumbling and the flick of a lighter. Soon, she smells smoke. So that was it, they’re going to smoke her out. They’re willing to burn down the place around them, with all its priceless artifacts, just to get at this bag.

This was no ordinary bag.

They could never be allowed to take it. She knew it in her soul.

“I’m not giving it to you.”

“You will, you have no choice.”

There was nothing human about woman’s voice now. It was like sound of scraping metal against glass.

*Click.*

The clasp opens easily. *It’s not just a bag*, she thinks. And it’s not.



Inside is the universe in its entirety, spanning from the beginning of time to the end, and back again. Pandora cannot comprehend what she is seeing, it's all just too much.

Outside the room, the three have begun beating against the door with something heavy. *They will tear the place down to get at me*, she thinks, before returning her focus to the universe inside the bag.

She watches as the first dawn breaks on earth and the last and final dawn, as it is before the earth is reborn.

She sees the first creature crawl out of the sea, the evolution of amoeba to human, and the final gasp of the earth's last living thing.

Cracks have begun to appear in the plaster walls of the room, as the continuous booming of their makeshift battering ram shakes the room, but Pandora takes no notice.

She finds herself inside the universe within the bag, as she is now. Seeing herself within reminds her of the image in a mirror that has another behind—an infinite repetition of reflections.

She reaches into the bag, and with the slightest effort, changes the location of where the door in the room opens.

Closing the bag, she buckles the clasp and stands up. Outside the room, the three continue their attempt to break down the wall, and from the sound, she can tell they are close. The alarm is pounding in her ear.

Without hesitation, she walks to the door. She knows without the shadow of a doubt what she will find when she opens it. The handle turns easily. As the door swings inward, Pandora steps through, onto the stoop of a row house that is her home.

### XIII

Her home looks as it always has, but the sky is dark and casts the red brick in shadow. There is a gloom about the place and the acidic smell of charred wood hangs heavily in the air. She turns to look at the block and gasps at the sight of it.

Hers is the only house left standing. What remains of what had once been the homes of her neighbors are just the skeletons. They are like the boney rib-cages of giants. In windows where walls still stand high enough to have them, shards of smoked glass cling to the sills like broken teeth.

Her house is the only one untouched by fire. Turning back, she reaches out for the doorknob, turns it and pushes the door open. Stepping inside, she finds the house dark, and the switch dead.

“Hello?”

No one is home.

She walks through the sitting room and finds it as she left it. The Impressions album is on the record player, the impression on the sofa from Miss Evelyn is still there and volume nine of her encyclopedia lies open on the floor.

She picks it up, reading the pages she had left the book open to:

*The American robin (Turdus migratorius) is a migratory songbird of the thrush family. It is named after the European robin because of its reddish-orange breast, though the two species are not closely related—*

She closes the book and sets it down on the coffee table. There is an unnatural stillness, an unnerving quiet. She turns and sees herself standing on the first step of the stairs.

She knows she should be frightened, but the other her doesn't look frightening. She is, after all, herself.

Neither Pandora speaks. Instead, they stand looking at each other, as if seeing themselves as they are for the first time.

“It’s not at all like looking in a mirror, is it?” says Pandora, finally—the one standing on the stairs.

“Not at all.”

“What happened out there?”

“In this when—this where, I was lucky.”

“And in mine?”

“I think you already know.”

“Do I go back? I still have the universe,” says Pandora, holding out the leather bag she has brought with her from the room in the museum.

“You might spend an eternity searching that way.”

*What choice does she have? What was it that happened before the train brought her to that curious station?* There it was, the blind spot.

“Come on,” says Pandora, turning on the stairs and gesturing to follow. “There is a way.”

They ascend the first flight of stairs, walk down the hall to the attic door and there Pandora stops, and turns to herself.

“You’ll have to open it. I can’t,” says the other.

She steps to the side and watches, as Pandora steps toward the door. The knob is cold, and she feels a draft of frigid air through the gaps between door and trim. She looks at herself, and sees her expression has saddened.

“Have courage, yours is a cruel world.”

The knob turns, the door opens. Beyond the doorway, nothing waits.

In the nothingness beyond the door, something terrifying waits. There is pain and hurt, and hate and fear.

She cannot see it, but she knows that it is there. She stands facing it, but it feels as if it were standing behind her.

She turns to herself, who is standing next to her, her eyes avoiding the doorway.

“Do I have to go through?”

“It’s your only way back.”

“Is it real?” she asks, hoping she will tell herself it is all in her head.

“It’s real, but you know that.”

“The nothingness, it’s—”

“It’s what everyone’s afraid of, isn’t it? Why people choose to believe in something bigger than themselves—to tell us there is something, instead of nothing? Without it, everything would cease to have meaning. If every color was red, how would we know what the color blue was? If we never felt bad, how would we know when we were feeling good?”

Pandora reaches her hand out towards the inky darkness that looms beyond the door. The dark reaches back. Where it closes around her hand is burning cold. It stabs like needles up her arm.

At once, the blind spot is gone and everything comes flooding back. Through the pain she remembers the longing of being trapped inside a room with no doors, the loneliness of being lost in an empty desert. She feels each time she has been put down, everyone she has loved and has lost. She feels the absence of her father and the full burden of empathy, as she remembers all that he has suffered for the sake of her future.

She pulls her hand back and the chilling grip is gone. The memories fill themselves and became bittersweet.

“I remember,” she says, to herself.

The other Pandora takes her hand and looks into her eyes, her own eyes—full of wonder and hope, and fear—and little flecks of gold.

“There was more than just being lost and afraid. There was a little yellow canary and a kind old man, and a boy—a wonderful boy. There are the memories of the ones I’ve lost, and the gifts of those before me, who have

done what they could to make my life better. The universe is beautiful, even if it is scary.”

Pandora looks out into the nothingness and letting go of her hand, she steps forward. The void reaches out for her. Fear, like cold metal fingers, grips her heart as it pulls her in.

The pain is unlike anything she has felt before. A stabbing, aching, burning pain, made worse when she tries to move. She is laying on her back and a steady beeping is coming from a machine somewhere to the side of her. She feels a pinch on her arm, where an IV has been stabbed into a vein.

The smell is unbearable, metallic and bitter, pulling at her throat. The sharp burn in her nostrils of rubbing alcohol, the nauseating stench of soaked gauze.

Through closed lids, she can see that it is bright. When she opens them the brightness becomes blinding. Slowly, her eyes adjust and the room around her comes into focus.

She can sense a hand reach out and hover over hers, as if resisting the urge to grasp it.

“Pandora?”

The salt tears burn her cheek, but the happiness she feels is overwhelming.

*Her father's voice.*

## TOBAGO GYAL

Miss Evelyn stands alone on the platform of the South 4th Street station. The silk fabric of her head-wrap is patterned in orange, gold and red—matching the orange and red dress that she wears under a khaki, knee length coat.

About her neck, thin strands of red beads wind in an intricate knot around a piece of shell—worn smooth by sand and saltwater, shimmering where it catches the harsh, fluorescent light.

She looks younger. Perhaps it's a trick of the light, or the play of shadows across her face. The thin lines around her eyes have disappeared, her shoulders are held straighter, her curving figure has become firmer, taller.

She reaches up to touch the shell at her neck. It feels cool against her skin, as if it has just come from out of the ocean and has not yet warmed to the heat against it. She is humming the line from her favorite tune, which won't be recorded for another sixteen years.

From a short strap over her arm hangs a purse, small and unassuming. The purse is new, its closure fastened with a shiny brass clasp, but otherwise it appears completely ordinary.

A train speeds past without stopping, sending the air rushing around her like an island breeze.

In her head, she can hear the bright sounds of the horns—feels the drumbeat. She begins to move her hips along with the rhythm, the words of the song swelling within her.

Without realizing it, she has started to sing. The words come pouring out of her—

*This ole man from ohee oho,  
Spend he holiday in Scarborough,  
Time up he ain't want to go,  
why bredda I really don't know*

Her eyes close. Lost in the music she dances across the station platform. She won't stand quietly still, with her face fixed blankly ahead—she knows which train it is she waits for.

Somewhere in the city above, a girl is looking up at the stars from out of a row house window and Miss Evelyn smiles with the thought of her.

*All them Tobago Gal  
Sweet sweet sweet like a Kaiserball  
Burroughs you could call or Ring Interpol,  
Me ain't going at all  
First I love them sweet Tobago Gal*

Is it the vibrations of her feet, as they move over the concrete? No, too harsh. It has none of the rhythm of Miss Evelyn's steps.

A clanging, the screech of metal against metal, a sudden draft of wind—a train is rolling down the track towards the station. It emerges from the gloom of tunnel, slows and stops in front of the platform. The train cars look old and battered. It must be a reserve train.

*Ding—*

The doors slide open. This is her train, she is sure. She knew it would come and it hadn't taken long. Without looking back, she steps aboard—careful to mind the gap. She takes an empty seat by the window. They are all empty.

*Ding—*

The doors slide closed and the train jumps forward, gathering speed as it moves on down the line.

The universe inside of her purse is reborn, and it is full of beauty.

