"Whose baby was you, lickle Christ-bearer? Whose lickle baby was you?"

NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN. No miracles. None of them knew miracles. They must turn the damn thing upside down. Fight fire with fire. Burn. Yes, burn it down. Bu'n it dung, bredda. Catch a fire. Catch afire. Send flame through the hills like you light the cane. Watch de snake run 'way. No hab no choice in de matter. Do this or give up the ghost. Dem nuh kill Bob and tu'n him inna myth.

Cyaan tu'n back now. Capture the I in I. Then say Bless me Jah/Shàngó/Yemanjá/Jehovah/Oshun/Jesus/Nanny/Marcus/Oshun. I am about to kill one of your creatures. Some of your children.

III

THE DISSOLUTION OF MRS. WHITE

I have an assassin for a lover.

—Yoruban hymn to Shàngó

Boy Savage finally got his wish for a new life and embarked with his family for America—in 1960, when Clare, his elder daughter, was fourteen. Years later he would remark on the wisdom, nay foresight, of his decision—when he heard how Charles and his family had been chopped by some ungrateful gardenboy, a few among other sudden deaths.

The family flew from Montego Bay to Miami—fled, Kitty Savage said. In Miami, Boy found a used Plymouth for sale cheap on a flat dusty lot near their motel and bought it from a sympathetic *gusano,* himself newly arrived. Two island men, their islands visible across the water from each other on clear mornings, stood on the tail of a huge land-mass, speaking in their un-American tongues of the freshness of opportunity and the superiority of American automobiles.

The Savages loaded their possessions in the car that very afternoon and began their journey northward, New York

City their destination. Economy had dictated this method of escape, but Boy, as was his nature, spoke as if this were the perfect way to enter America, one which demonstrated his intelligence and bespoke their privilege. When in fact, the whole thing, the journey itself, came from a panic created by bad debts and racetrack losses, misfortunes, he told his wife, brought on by the boredom of being trapped on a small island and not the bad blood her family ascribed to him. He would put the immediate past behind him, he assured her. This was a new start in a new world. How could they not be thrilled by its prospect?

All became excitement, adventure for Boy—encountering but trying to evade the quiet apathy of Kitty, who didn't hold to metamorphosis and felt but homeless, breaking silence to tell her husband that he sounded like a character in a boy's annual. He ran on and on, spinning his head into the backseat to address his daughters—Clare and the younger Jennie. "Mind the road, man," came Kitty's sharp advice. But she did not quell him.

They knew about America mainly from the movies shown in Kingston; here, he told his girls, was a grand chance to find out about this country firsthand. The greatest country in the world, he stressed, since the Great Mother had turned socialist.

All traveling north in the bulky black car, that Kitty said "favor cockroach," were blessed to have such a chance at a new life.

No Statue of Liberty for them—oh, no—their emblem of welcome, going almost unnoticed until Kitty commented on it, was a small sign obscured by the cracked and boarded-up glass of an abandoned NAACP office they passed on their way out of Miami. A MAN WAS LYNCHED YESTERDAY, it said. "Hello, America," Kitty muttered to herself, after repeating the words on the sign for her family.

"Daddy, what is *lynched?*" The elder daughter spoke, not to her mother, but to the man whom she could count on to reassure her. The emotion in the car collided, and the girl knew the parents were at odds.

"It is a form of punishment for wickedness," her father told her—tidy and just, Dickensian almost. Like he had explained Tom Cringle's silk-cotton tree on the Old Spanish Town Road to her. Mus' be one old sign, he said to himself. Don't America finish with that business long time now?

Kitty sucked her teeth at his explanation but offered her daughter nothing more.

They stopped that first night at a motel in Georgia. Boy left his family in the Plymouth and went to the office to check in.

"Where you folks from?" the motelkeeper immediately asked Boy, after they had exchanged "evenings." His tone suggested challenge, rather than mere curiosity—concerned, no doubt, about the stranger's apricot color, which Boy would have explained as a suntan, given the chance—and the unfamiliar cadence of his voice.

"We are recently arrived from Jamaica," Boy responded, in his most formal, Jesuit-educated manner.

"Now, you wouldn't by any chance be colored folks, would you?" The man spoke at first with a patient hostility.

"I beg your pardon?" Boy stalled, and the innkeeper's patience vanished.

"Niggers!" He made a horrible harsh sound. "Because if you're niggers you can't stay here. You ain't welcome. It ain't legal." He paused to let the message sink into the alien's brain. "It don't matter where you come from. Mars. Venus. Timbuktu." The innkeeper smiled.

Boy, the bluefoot, barely touching the earth in this new world, wavered, quite struck by the man's directness. "Well," he responded, "we're not . . . ah, what you said." Glad that the black car with his slightly darker wife and mango and guava daughters was parked out of sight.

"Ain't that Jew-maica some little island off of Cuba?"

"Yes, that is correct," Boy immediately responded, not bothering to adjust the fool's pronunciation—better to let him think him get away with something—picking up the slur nonetheless.

"I thought only spics and niggers lived in those places." The innkeeper, suspicion heightened because Boy had not used *the word,* baited his prospective guest, not at all certain who this man was. He cast his trained eye across the stranger's face. Thin lips—but dark curly hair. Large nose—but no tinge to the voice. Colored skin—but a manner that was quite white. If this was a Negro, he had never encountered one of his ilk before. Not so he knew it anyway. Still . . . it was a tricky business. You could not relax for a moment. Someone might slide by. Sometimes it felt to him like the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers.* Who was real, who was not? Niggers were slick. Remember the county nurse with the bright skin whose husband was the good old boy who ran the filling station and whose baby gave her away? The midwife passed the story. The baby started brown. By the time the news reached the center of town the baby was coal-black. No matter. The man hightailed it out of town. The Board of Health took the baby—silently. And the woman provided entertainment one bug-ridden summer evening during the Great Depression, when the innkeeper was a boy. One of those nights it was too hot to do much of anything—the least effort and you were bathed in sweat. But the people managed to rouse themselves and later gathered at the river as the night cooled and enjoyed washtubs filled with ice and Coca-Cola while the sheriff fiddled. Vigilance, his papa said. Vigilance secured the safety of the people.

What shall I say to this man? Boy wondered. A lesson from the third form on the history of Jamaica sprang to mind: mulatto, offspring of African and white; sambo, offspring of African and mulatto; quadroon, offspring of mulatto and white; mestee, offspring of quadroon and white; mestefeena, offspring of mestee and white. Am I remembering it right? he asked himself. These Aristotelian categories taught by a Jesuit determined they should know where they were—and fortunate at that. In the Spanish colonies there were 128 categories to be memorized. The class of multicolored boys rose and recited in unison.

The memory retreated as fast as it had come and Boy took the plunge, making himself at home in this new country. "I am a white man. My ancestors owned sugar plantations." There it was. Discreet but firm. No mention of personnel, but *slaves,* of course, jumped into the space between the two men, connecting them. An understanding was struck. As if this belly-burdened innkeeper could have sprung from the likes of Judge Savage, Boy's great-grandfather.

With this sudden clarification, Boy's manner changed from petitioning immigrant to ill-used scion. Pauper tu'n prince. No matter that at least one of the Jesuit's categories applied to him—no matter. He was streamlining himself for America. A new man.

"You wouldn't kid me, would you?" The innkeeper more relaxed but still distracted by the epidermis of the man before him.

"I wouldn't kid you." Boy smiled slightly. You stupid bastard, you make it easy.

"Well, then, welcome to Georgia and the Red Clay Motel."

"Thank you kindly, sir." Boy almost choked on the *sir,* well aware, despite his own presence of mind, that his wife could not be counted on and would tell the man soon enough who she was, should he ask her, should Boy allow him within range of her. He acknowledged the man's power over him. He said *sir.* To himself he called it "not sinking to his level."

The phone rang in the office. The innkeeper turned from Boy, spoke briefly into the receiver, and left to deliver a message to his wife, caught in the glow of the television out back.

Behind the counter across which the two men had spoken a collection of notices, postcards, signs clustered in a space of aged flowered wall. Guests were advised of checkout time, church services were announced, local attractions advertised. Boy passed the time during the innkeeper's absence scanning the wall, almost comfortable. Eyes moving from a framed dollar bill to the world's largest peanut to a

five-legged dog in a glass case, on display behind a gas station on the northbound highway—on view for twenty-five cents. The face of a little girl smiled from a black-and-white photo beneath which someone had printed, in ink fading into the flowers, BUDDED ON EARTH TO BLOOM IN HEAVEN. Boy stopped there briefly, wondered about her, the absent man, then moved his eyes to a natural cross, pictured on a postcard, not to be missed, the legend said, a sign in granite of God's attention, laid bare by a farmer clearing ground. Somewhere a cockatoo on roller skates pulled a monkey in a chariot. RACIAL SELF-RESPECT IS NOT BIGOTRY, black ink on a white background promised, as if explaining the signpost beside it: YOU ARE IN KLAN COUNTRY.

Boy had seen *Gone With the Wind,* a very big hit in Jamaica, in an open-air theater near Lady Musgrave Road in 1941. As Atlanta burned, the screen turning that garish early technicolor orange, the skies of Kingston suddenly let go, and the spectators in the cheap unsheltered seats jumped the fences into the sheltered mezzanine, yelling all the while for Rhett and Scarlett to "run to rass before wunna bu'n up!" and for Miss Melly to "hole on, gal, hole on." As their moviegoing finery dripped across their freshly whitened, moviegoing shoes. The hot rain ran in sheets across the screen, creating a strange effect, as the fires of General Sherman raged, unquenched. The rain retreated during intermission and the audience settled down.

The Klan of course was featured in the movie—a chivalric organization, Boy was given to understand, filled with the likes of gentle Leslie Howard. The man who had challenged him favored Wallace Beery.

The innkeeper returned and Boy started, frightened the man knew what was in his mind, at least that he saw where his guest's eyes had stayed.

To further his acceptance, secure his family's safety, Boy questioned the innkeeper politely. "Are you a member of the Klan?" As if he were asking, "Are you Catholic?" "Did you go to Oxford?" He did not want to distress the man.

Once in, you could not let down. Even Boy had not believed the Leslie Howard–fraternal organization presentation of the white-sheeted disgruntled gentlemen scaring the gape-mouthed manumitted slaves into obedience.

When the man only stared at him, Boy went on.

"I couldn't help noticing your sign. . . . I understand it is an organization with deep historical roots."

"That's right. . . . Anyway, how'd you know about the Klan?"

"Oh, we are quite civilized in Jamaica, you know." Not immediately aware of the absurdity of that statement at all.

They left the motel early next morning, all waving as they passed the innkeeper's office—Boy's suggestion, of course, got to keep things smooth. He explained, as they drove off into the foxfire of the dawn, that there would be fewer stops from now on and everyone would have to take care of her needs at the same time. He said they needed to conserve money and make time.

He pushed the '52 Plymouth as rapidly as possible over the southern roads, past the unpainted shacks in the center of small fields, their one light an omen for Kitty, who grasped their distant presence as a reminder of *home,* their unseen inhabitants as familiar, and commented to Boy that she had no idea there was so much poverty in America.

"You *know* they put roads beside the poorest places, man. Rich people don't want confusion going on around their houses," he answered her, knowing full well the woman was no fool but needing to quiet her.

At night, when the girls were asleep on rollaway cots and he held on to his wife in the lumpy motel bed, they talked softly. "It will be different in New York," was his constant refrain in answer to her talk about poverty, about the mauger children at the roadside, about the rundown outskirts of towns they navigated through, about the goddam signs advising people of their limits. Kitty was fixed on

these signs. She persisted. She knew damn well why Boy took secondary roads and could not seem to find a bathroom when one was needed, so that they used the countryside more often than not. Why they avoided restaurants and bought their food in general stores. Why he made all the arrangements at the motels and suggested they keep to their rooms. She told him she was no fool. Then he told her it was not so much different in Jamaica, you know. "But at least there is not so much *hate,*" she whispered into the air in front of her face. "There are no signs in Jamaica."

"Don't be so sure, darlin'," he said quietly.

Silence between them then. *Home* was different—she would hold to that as long as she lasted. She who was cut from home.

They were shipmates, as surely as the slaves who crossed the Middle Passage together. Even as Boy's enthusiasm persisted and Kitty's quiet grew on the journey north, the two were not as opposite as might seem.

Stopping in the nation's capital, Boy pulled them through the memorials and monuments, educating his daughters along the way, while Kitty reminded him of Marian Anderson and what the *Gleaner* had reported. Yes, he replied, in earshot of his girls, but Abraham Lincoln was an honored American—standing beside the seated martyr, dwarfed in his presence.

This was a huge, a difficult country and each was outside of it.

Upon the New Jersey Turnpike. The burning excess of the refineries lighting their way. Boy almost bursting now as he envisioned New York City for the girls. They made their way across the Goethals Bridge to Staten Island, passing the truck farms, slag heaps, small houses, rundown docks, neat churches, brick schools—across to catch the ferry to Brooklyn. On the boat they could see the lights give shape to Manhattan. The spike on the Empire State a delicate wand. On the other side, among flatter buildings, they came to a

stop, and Kitty went into an all-night drugstore in Bay Ridge to phone her relations in Queens and get directions.

Darker than the Savages—from Kitty's mother's side—the relatives, who made them welcome and offered to put them up until they could find an apartment, were employed on Long Island, in a large house a train ride away, as maid and chauffeur. Working for a man named Mr. Saxon and his grown children, they kept strange hours—Mr. Saxon was an important man, a banker, they explained—and saw their own home irregularly. This late night, when the Savages reached their destination, the relatives had just returned from work, and were dead tired, but stayed up nonetheless to offer food, brought fresh in shopping bags from Mr. Saxon's kitchen, ask news from home, and give their advice to the new arrivals.

Winston, a man of fifty, his hair sparse under the navy chauffeur's cap, came straight to the point. "Unnecessary struggle is for fools," he said.

Grace, his wife, wiped her hands on the pink nylon dress she wore, slightly stained from a day of picking up Mr. Saxon's house. "Winston speak true. Pass if you can, man. This not a country for us. No bother with the aggravation . . . for dem love to give aggravation."

"What you mean?" Kitty asked her cousin.

"I mean," Grace continued, "the Americans dem don't understand Jamaicans dem. This not our country. Dem have dem own rules. The Black people here not from us. The white people here not from us. Maggie, the cook in Mr. Saxon kitchen, an American Knee-grow, so she call herself, give me as much contention as the man himself . . . and she cyaan pay we salary."

Kitty and Boy sat quietly and listened. The girls were asleep in another room.

Winston picked up the lesson where Grace left it. "Don't make any sense a-tall to make yourself miserable. Don't suffer fe dem sake. What dem don't know not gwan hurt you."

"But we nuh trap ourselves?" Kitty's voice alone.

"No, man." Winston came back at her. "You mek some dollar, you go back home. Is what we plan to do. Mek enough to pay down on a lickle house in Cherry Garden, then we gone like so." He clapped his hands together sharply.

"But what if we never get back?" Kitty questioned through the echoes of the handclap. Boy was silent.

"Nuh mus' get back? Is nuh home?" Grace put an end to the conversation as weariness descended on the company.

A few months later, in an apartment in Brooklyn, Boy picked up the telephone and it was Grace, asking to stop by on their day off to spend time and see how Boy and them was doing. Boy hemmed and hawed and Grace understood. She said she would make it another time but never called again, and the Savages were not asked back to Queens for evenings of rice and peas and curry chicken and fast games of dominoes and playing mento on electric guitars and marimbas and congas and claves. Children dancing and then dozing among unfamiliar clothing. Evenings when Grace and Winston saw some light in the time they gave Mr. Saxon and gathered other Jamaicans working similar jobs.

One connection had been broken. "Look like dem tek we advice, Grace."

"Look so, bredda."

Nothing of substance was spoken between the Savages and the cousins. Whoever received news from home would pass it on. But Boy began to call them Kitty's distant cousins, and she worried at their loss.

Boy had no visible problem with declaring himself white. It was a practical matter, he told his wife. There was no one to say different. And he said it in not so many words. He told people he was descended from plantation owners—and this was true. Partly. With each fiction his new self became more complete. His color fixed in those earlier centuries as if he had been birthed then. Robert Browning come to Brooklyn. Boy took up painting and decorated white china plates bought in bulk at seconds shops with the Savage family crest—mongoose and Moor rampant, *mihi solicitudo futuri*—arched at the center in gilt. He displayed his creations around their apartment, balancing them on the dark wooden ledge which ran a foot below the ceiling. Kitty made gentle game with his pastime but offered no resistance. It kept him home at least—and he needed it.

When he tired of china plates and there was little space left on the ledge, he moved to slabs of wallboard, painting his images of the great houses and the past. Louvered windows. Iron-railed verandahs. Bleached limestone. Some caught in high ruinate. Contained by vines and other growth. With black paint he taught himself to draw cracks across the façades, delicate spidery lines.

Kitty said her life was nobody's business. And then there was the day when she wandered through a graveyard in Brooklyn, near downtown, the cemetery of a large old Episcopal church, where she spied an ancient stone, cut hundreds of years before, marking the passage of Marcus, no other name, a man born in Jamaica, a slave to some family, who had been frozen to death crossing the water during the perilous winter of 1702. She passed her fingers over the letters cut into slate: F A I T H F U L S E R V A N T. And she feared she would join him.

She bent down and pulled a few wild violets from Marcus' grave and took them home and pressed them into her mother's Bible.

During the summer of 1960 the Savages watched Wilma Rudolph run in Rome at the Olympic Games, where she won gold medals wearing tennis shoes. Much was made of this. Tall, dark, lanky, with a willful grace, she made Kitty think of Dorothy, at first her girlhood companion, then her maid in Kingston. She remembered her, then she returned her to the back of her mind.

The Savages watched the Black runner on their rented nineteen-inch portable television set, hearing the Italians cheer on La Negra, as they named her.

The Savages lived in a small apartment in Brooklyn, in the basement of a three-family frame house, painted yellow with a black trim. Their '52 black Plymouth Cranbrook with fake black and yellow tartan seats was parked in the cracked cement driveway, the sparse city grass between the cracks tickling the underside of the car.

There were Italians above and around them, people who grew grape arbors in their backyards, put up thick red wine, and planted tomatoes by emptying the contents of Progresso and Contadina plum-tomato cans into well-defined and fertilized furrows. The tomatoes that grew from the cans were unlike any the Savages knew. Deep-red inside and out, they seemed to hold sunlight and had a sweetness that filled all three stories of the house when the women inside boiled them down to make their own tomato paste. Italian tomatoes—from the old country.

The yards were all well-kept, tidy and small, and the neighbors were generous in wanting to share their produce, but the Savages kept tightly to themselves, especially after one of the neighbors, a Mr. Antonelli, told Boy he understood only eggplants—he used the Italian word, then explained the metaphor, showing Boy the smooth purple skin of the fruit—came from the "islands." Poor Boy—people in America seemed always to be making that particular mistake, and always lumping the islands together, with an ignorant familiarity, as though they were indistinct places, sharing history and custom, white sands and blue waters indiscriminately. The man was a fool, like the innkeeper was a fool—but Boy let go of any outrage, if he felt any. He was not equal to this.

Kitty did not speak to the women around her; their accents clashed and they said they could not understand each other. She soon learned to travel out of the neighborhood and, forsaking the *salumerias* close by and the *bodegas* some blocks away, found a passage into Bedford-Stuyvesant, where in between the high-priced ghetto-specific chain stores she discovered shops from *home,* as if they had been airlifted

intact, the only difference being that in Brooklyn the shops were not found in the shade of a stucco arcade, the goods held safe behind a stainless steel curtain in the night. These were small, crammed, glass-fronted shops, but they smelled so strongly of home that any other difference became superficial, in response to a changed climate, and not substantial.

Kitty mastered the route by subway and returned with mangoes, yams, cho-cho, saltfish, plantains, callaloo, goat-meat, and Jamaican curry to rub it with. She came home with these things laden in her arms, as if to say, Family, this is for you. In these shops she broke her silence, here she felt most the loss of home, of voice, even as she brushed the loose dirt off the yam-skin, imagining its origin in the bush, stroked the rough green lips where the cho-cho split, stuck her finger in the sap where the mango had been joined to the tree, remembering how it could burn and raise a sore. Resisting a desire to rub the sharp stickiness into her nostrils and around her mouth. In these places she was unto herself, speaking to the shopkeepers as if solitary.

Once, when the neighbors called down from a back window to complain about the smell of the curry, Kitty went out immediately and bought something called Air-Wick, a nasty-looking strip of wet green felt, anchored by wire, that emerged from a green bottle, reeking of a green chemical, with which the bottle was filled and which was supposed to remove all odors from the atmosphere. Instead, it seemed only to mask other smells, placing its own acridity over their sharpness or sweetness, distorting garlic, curry, tomatoes, and the smells of people. This was something new again. Like sticking a thick white plug into yourself, instead of letting the blood flow onto a folded cotton cloth washed in sweetwater and bleached in the sun. The green bottle with its foreign mission sat on the blond-veneer coffee table in front of the folding bed that served the Savages as a couch in the daytime and became Clare and Jennie's bed in the night. The table, like most of the furniture, had been bought

at the local Salvation Army—but not the beds. Kitty said that beds had to be bought new, as you never knew who had slept in them before and what the mattress might be harboring. A used bed might have experienced the death of someone—of cancer, or TB, two of the scourges of Jamaica. Her point of reference—the place which explained the world to her—would always be her island.

The Italian women called across the clotheslines and yards and fences to each other, their conversations sounding a constant background, embroidering the events of their days and nights, difficulties, celebrations, marriages, recipes, scandals, brand names, patterns, and the news of the movie stars—their marriages and deaths. Why did they matter so?

The dogs were howling. Oh, God, they were howling like she had never heard dogs howl before. It was an early morning in April. What was making them howl so? The charge in the air—had it changed? Did they smell storm? Was there a shift in the wind? A quickening? A flat stop? The light—had that gone from darkness to the yellow-over-dark before a hurricane? But this was not hurricane time. A false dawn—was that their reason? God, she had never heard dogs howl so, and it frightened her. Had the palms bent over to brush the newly poured sidewalks in front of the house—waiting, welcoming the downpour? She listened for the *swish-brush* of the fronds glancing the concrete—she heard nothing but the almighty howling.

As she raised her head to look out the window past Boy's sleeping profile, the sky was becoming red with sunrise. Clear. No storm. No sign at all. They were in Kingston, living in a rented development house near Hope Gardens. A house, like the sidewalks, newly poured. All around them was unfinished. She could make out the shapes of dogs in the yard. Strays among those belonging to other families. Their heads raised, their mouths pinched into circles. Some with prominent rib cages. Some fatted. Some with tags

glinting. Some with flaccid teats. All howling. Joined in something. In the slender bermuda grass, newly planted, already out of control, they stood. Gathered under the almond sapling.

Kitty was trying to rid the dread which had settled into her. She was terrified and did not know why. Trying to focus her mind on practical things, she thought she would have to cultivate the place around the trunk of the almond sapling, wash it down. The dogs most likely had peed against it. She would take her hand-fork that very morning and aerate the roots and put down some bone meal. She lay on her stomach and noticed that she had pulled all the sheets away from the bed. The mattress was naked except for where Boy slept, in a deep rum sleep.

The sun—a vivid disk—was up behind the one-room cement building Dorothy lived in. All of a sudden, Dorothy was at the bedroom door. Pushing it in. Frantic.

"Lord have mercy, Miss Kitty; why de dogs dem mek such a racket?'

"Me no say, Dorothy. I really don't know."

Dorothy had some idea, but according to custom tested her mistress first.

Earthquake? Kitty grasped at the one natural upheaval she'd not thought of before. No. Not so.

"Dem say dog only howl so when smaddy dead. Is one communication . . . it signify death. Wunna no recollect what dem tell we?"

"Oh, God," Kitty moaned into her mattress, remembering this truth of their girlhood. So it was. So it is. Raising her head, Kitty whispered to her maid, "Is what dem say, missis, is what dem say."

The dogs had not let up at all. Dorothy spoke again. "Den who it can be? Smaddy fe wunna, or smaddy fe me?"

"Lord Jesus, Dorothy!" Boy was finally awake. "Kitty, make her stop her goddammed yelling and leave us get our sleep."

Through it all Dorothy had not once raised her voice. She spoke desperately in whispers. The dogs had woken him, but he remained ignorant of this.

"Sorry, sah . . . is de dog dem, sah. Dem is inspired by death. Dem come fe tell we."

"You want us to tek you to asylum, girl?" The master threatened the woman.

Dorothy fixed her eyes away from the master's body and gazed into the yard. No threat of his could match what the dogs promised. She looked out and took her voice into a new cadence, a fuller volume. "Yea, dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircle me; they have pierced my hands and feet—I can count all my bones—they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots. But Thou, O Lord, be not far off! O Thou my help, hasten to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog!" She so stretched the last word that Kitty felt it vibrate against the iron bars of the window as the sound moved into the yard. Dorothy closed her eyes.

"Jesus! Jesus Christ!" Not supplication, but violent impatience in Boy's voice.

"Is nuh Jesus dat, sah. Is David, the King," Dorothy teased her master.

"Girl, you gone mad! You damn mad!"

The two women in the room caught each other's glance, as the dogs howled on, ignoring the man into silence. He could never understand these things as they did. The man was citified.

"Go put yourself in the shower, Boy." Kitty dismissed her husband. He left in silence—naked—and Dorothy remained. She had backed into a corner of the room, retreating there, turning her eyes from the master's body. What right him have to put him nakedness 'pon she?

"Can sit here, Dorothy"—Kitty patted the side of the bed—"as long as him in the shower."

Dorothy walked toward her mistress and cotched herself at the edge of the bed next to Kitty, ready to jump should the water stop in the next room. "Yes, missis."

"Dorothy, please take my hand." But Dorothy made no move, unused to such familiarity, instead lowering her eyes, considering the creases in her knuckles, drawing the skin tight across as she clenched her hands.

Tek she hand? What on earth was the woman thinking?

The woman in the bed, suddenly cold, was thinking from where her knowledge had come. She was thinking about the magic which had encircled their girlhood, which their stolid schoolmaster in the tiny country school had persisted in calling naïve science, bunga nonsense. He would mock her thoughts now, as he once mocked a girl who came to school with a crocheted bag of asafoetida pinned over her heart, saying she had seen Sasabonsam, and him out fe tek she spirit. He had warned them about false knowledge. That which was held in the minds and memories of old women. False prophets and false prophecies. Incantations. Blessings. Herbations. Libations. Number magic. Dirt magic. Water magic. Stone magic. Fire magic. Bush magic. The women intimate with the heavens and the movement of the heavenly bodies.

If it was false why it didn't disappear? Why did she respect it so? Why did the howling dogs bring her to deep terror?

The death of someone close to the hearer. As soon as Dorothy spoke it, Kitty remembered its promise.

All the psalms and gospels could not neutralize this knowledge—turn it to artifact, anthropological detail. The old women would say de Bible possess magic too. It all magic. The Bible only proved the ancient wisdom to be true. Her mother believed that. Her mother who kept church and read the Bible and considered the meanings embedded in one verse over the course of one week. Her mother intent on symbol. Her mother believed in other old women, just as she believed in the events of Gethsemane. Just as she believed in planting when the zodiac was favorable, and knew

which sign responded to which vegetable or fruit. Just as she arranged her flower garden according to plan. Just as she taught her children to fear Sasabonsam. To honor the Merry Maids in the river, for they brought eloquence to women. Just as she carved her calabashes with shapes she had been taught as a girl. Lightning bolts, a sign the spirits were alive in the heavens. Flying fish, the promise of resurrection. The eye of God. His merciful hand. His wrathful hand. His face moving across all creation. Four points of light—the moments of the sun—the solstices and equinoxes—telling the believer life might be without end. And the righteous return as a spring in the Blue Mountains. A rock in the river. A tree bearing Ethiopian apples. The sun-warmed swallowtail.

The woman in the bed was thinking about her mother. About her mother's coolness, holding, always holding, her knowledge, the things she understood, as the most precious to her, embracing these things more freely than she held her own children.

The worst possible loss she could dream of at this moment. To lose the one who taught me everything. Underneath was something else—something physical nagging at her. Kitty thought at that moment like a child. Lying on her back in that naked bed, the figure of Dorothy beside her. If I speak it, then it can't happen. Unless it has already happened.

"Dorothy, I don't know what I would do if Miss Mattie dead. What if it she?" She spoke to her maid exclusively, as if this would be her own loss entirely, not giving room at all to the fact that Dorothy had been one of Miss Mattie's adoptions, and that Kitty and Dorothy had wet the same bed when they were small.

"Nuh mus' go on." Dorothy rose in a sudden cool from the edge of the bed and walked out of the room. Out of the mistress's earshot she sucked her teeth. Dem never change.

When Boy and Kitty were finally dressed and drinking coffee, Boy having driven off the dogs with the full force of

the garden hose, telling Kitty she was stupid if she believed that nonsense; when they were sitting at the small mahogany table in the dining room, the telephone rang. It was Kitty's elder brother, Frederick, telling her what she already knew—Miss Mattie was dead. In her sleep—peaceful, peaceful, he kept saying, calling his sister Quit, her childhood nickname, which he had not used in twenty-five years. She had been a small child and ran everywhere, wanting to keep up with everyone, into everything, and so they named her after the bananaquit, with its quickness and fast-beating little heart.

The funeral would be the day after next, in St. Elizabeth.

Boy seized on this immediately. Now there was no reason to stay in Jamaica. They could make new lives—they must make new lives. Kitty wearily agreed. And soon after she buried her mother's body they left for America.

She dreamed she was on a clay road heading into a gully which at first seemed quiet and then gathered sudden strength. A car washed past her. Then some animals. Roots of old trees were at once exposed and twisted by the force of the water. A cow dropped a calf as she became entangled in the once-hidden roots. The water washed over them, taking along the placenta and the caul which wrapped the calf. The mother washed from her perch, but the calf stuck fast. Boy shook her. The plane was circling Miami.

When she dressed her mother's body—being the only blood-daughter left on the island—when she dressed her mother's body, it was the first time she remembered seeing her mother's nakedness. This secret thing which had been hidden from her for thirty years became hers, for she was the only member of the family entrusted to it. The breasts full—the nipples dark—were stiff with lifelessness, and she caressed them. From somewhere came an image of a slave-woman pacing aisles of cane, breast slung over her shoulder to suckle the baby carried on her back.

She kissed her mother on her eyelids and rubbed co-

conut oil across her body, into the creases and folds, softening the marks of childbearing and old age.

Her mother could not respond to her. Where had she gone? Where were her ideas? Her beliefs? Where were her mind and memory? It seemed impossible that these things could have vanished into thin air. A black spider lighted on the back of Kitty's hand and made her ashamed.

She wiped off the coconut oil and bathed her mother with bay rum. The sharp astringent smell of alcohol cut with laurel mixed with the sweet heaviness of coconut. Kitty may have thought that these ointments and the tenderness with which she applied them might have made the difference. But the heat was fierce that afternoon and the smell of her mother was high.

She turned the mirrors to the wall. She swept the room, sweeping out the dead. Throwing the contents of basins into the darkness of the coffee piece—repeating, "We done wid she now. We done wid she now. We done wid she now."

Boy drove a truck for a laundry in Brooklyn and Kitty took a job in their office. She did clerical work, of which there was actually little, filing and typing mostly—she was the office girl. Catching water from the tap in the basin in the one washroom to make coffee in a stained percolator for the boss, fetching him doughnuts from the bakery two blocks away, dusting the confectioner's sugar from the desk where it settled like a pale pollen.

Because there was little clerical work, she was also assigned the task of sending out "helpful hints" to the laundry's customers, sticking them into the stiff plackets of the shirtfronts or between the folds of bedsheets in the back room, where the packers—two middle-aged Black women—bundled the cleansed linen for delivery. Kitty sat in the middle of a long aluminum table, between the two women, receiving the as-yet-untied parcels of cloth from one, slipping in her advice, except it wasn't *her* advice, not yet, then passing the parcel to the third woman at the table. All was accomplished in quiet.

The advice varied only superficially, always concluding with the reminder that customers continue to use the services of White's Sanitary Laundry, est. 1945.

Kitty signed these notes, an authentic touch, in the name of Mrs. White, the imaginary wife of an imaginary man, conceived by Mr. B., the proprietor of the laundry. Mr. B. had Mrs. White's messages printed by his nephew Louie, who operated the printshop a few doors away. "A good boy," Mr. B. called him, even though Louie must have been forty at the very least.

Mrs. White and her philosophy of laundry, and thus her philosophy of wifehood, of which laundry was but one office, was the creation of Mr. B. Describing in his quaint sweet language that it was a wife's duty to make her husband's shirts, their crispness and their stiffness, a matter of her primary concern. That it was part of her mission to assure "sanitary sheets to bless the slumber of your loved ones." That a woman might be held to account if her tablecloth showed tattletale gray.

The word *sanitary* was important, a keystone, to Mr. B., who remembered a not-too-distant time of rooms jammed with darkness, people, and little else. No light once you walked into the hall and shut the street door behind you. Nothing green except the pale cabbage simmering through the rooms. The only water from a rusted tap shared by ten families. Crowded together, whether in tenements, sweatshops, on the docks, or in the streets, where their voices raised to be heard and split the air. He could see the peddler clothed in scales on Friday afternoons, aging merman hawking halibut or cod, as the day wore on his stench stronger, the fish cheaper.

Mr. B.'s concern was White's Sanitary Laundry; across the street was the United Sanitary Meat Market, two blocks away the Excelsior Sanitary Bakery.

To accompany Mrs. White's words, Mr. B. fashioned an image which decorated each page on which her hints and reminders were printed. Such an American image. In carriage. Physiognomy. Presence. Wisdom. Good nature. Part

altruism. Part salesmanship. Inspired by Fay Bainter, Selena Royle, Jane Darwell, as Mr. B. sat in the Brooklyn Loews during the Depression, perfecting his English.

An older woman with gentle gray curls, pink skin, two places on either cheek where the pink deepened slightly, soft rounded bosom, small mouth. Her lips indicating a smile that was not so much a reaction to something as a constant in her countenance—reassuring, never mocking or making fun. Her understanding nature accentuated by her tilted chin and clear blue eyes. Slender sculptured nose ending well above her smooth top lip, which had absolutely no hint whatsoever of the dark spiky hair that was common to all the older women in the neighborhood, who, after all, were not Americans and who had nothing in common with this image.

The jobs at the laundry were the jobs available to the Savages. An education in colonial schools, Jesuit or otherwise, did not seem to go very far here. And their previous experience—selling Scotch whisky and registering the names of tourists in a hotel log—seemed out of place.

They were ill-equipped. There was also the problem of their accents. Even if their credentials were of the highest, their skin of the palest, their accents unsettled most employers. Except Mr. B., whose own accent was very much with him. "It is not so much your accent, my dear," he once told Kitty. "It's that it is strange . . . I mean in the unfamiliar sense . . . to most Americans." He paused. "By now people are used to certain sounds . . . it confuses them when there are new ones . . . especially from exotic places . . . you know what I mean. . . ." He let his voice trail, shrugged, and sighed. He was, after all, a realist.

For the moment Boy and Kitty worked quietly, looking to further opportunity. Boy picking up white nylon bags filled with dirty clothes and linen, and delivering the carefully folded and tied parcels of laundry. Kitty using her voice only as Mrs. White, or as the office's quiet girl. Saving her twang,

her talk of home, for the shopkeepers of Bedford-Stuyvesant. Until Boy told her it was too dangerous, he felt, for her to travel there alone, or with one of their daughters, and he had no desire to accompany her.

He was making himself at home. Settling in. Branching out. Getting his information at the local bar where he stopped each evening, glancing at the ball games on the television suspended over the dark wood counter, telling his stories to the other workingmen who rested their behinds on patched plastic seats and drank Schaefer on tap. He didn't tell these men about his wife and her visits to Bed-Stuy. He listened as they talked on and on about the residents of the place—their displeasure turning ugly, so ugly that if Boy cared to defend the people his wife felt at home with, he would have been afraid to. He held his tongue, neither agreeing nor objecting. Silent in his mestee/sambo/octoroon/quadroon/creole skin. They naturally took his silence as acquiescence, believing, against their better judgment, that there was the son of a plantation owner in their midst—which is how he introduced himself.

Kitty did not cease her visits to her home away from home, but she limited them and did not talk about them, not telling Boy when she went, not taking the girls along with her, not bringing food from home, home to them.

She lived divided, straining to adjust to this place where she seemed to float, never to light, the shopkeepers of Bed-Stuy her only relief. She questioned why she was so miserable—and immediately responded that her mother was dead. Her mother would not have approved of her—her mother who told her to make the best of it. Whatever *it* might be. You lie wid dog, nuh mus' get up wid flea? Her mother's comment whenever Kitty quarreled with Boy. She smiled at the memory of it. She felt her mother's loss, keen. But there was more to her discontent, that she knew. She was not at home with pretense.

Time went on. After some weeks at the laundry, Boy got himself a position as a television repairman through

someone he met at the bar. It was still laborer's work, but paid a good deal more than driving the laundry truck. His hope grew. Meanwhile, Kitty remained at the laundry, moving between Mr. B.'s office, the bakery, the washroom, the packing room, the want ads, the interviews. Day after day.

Soon it was late summer. One afternoon Kitty took herself to a big bank near Montague Street. It must have been her fiftieth interview, she thought, as she trudged through the hot streets, her cotton dress sticking to the back of her legs. In the bank, she was ushered upstairs to a large white man with a blond balding head, who leaned across his fat cherrywood desk to take her hand. "How do you do, Mrs. Savage."

"How do you do," Kitty responded.

As they spoke—about his name and title, the job of receptionist and how vital it was, the weather, New York in summer, the heaviness of the air and when it might lift—the man eyed her curiously, stressing again the duty of a receptionist to create a positive impression on the public. Then he spoke a direct question at her. "And where does that musical voice come from?"

From one lickle piece of gristle in me t'roat, she thought to answer. Instead, she dropped her voice and responded, "I am a Jamaican."

"I see . . . I see." Silence. Then, "My wife and I have not had the pleasure of visiting your beautiful island, but we have heard all about it from our maid . . . ah, perhaps you know her . . . her name is Winsome."

Of course. Kitty ceased listening to the man, letting his inquiry hang in the air, waiting for a chance to get out. He began speaking again. She was thinking about Winston and Grace. Their jobs. Their advice. Her chance at departure came quickly enough. The man had risen and was obviously indicating a finish to their conversation, only slightly discomfited by the stone-woman across from him.

"But," he spoke in an assuring voice, "there *is* a vacancy in our executive washroom. Perhaps your husband

might be interested?" His manner eloquent, his smile gracious. See, we're not so bad after all.

She stood and walked out.

The whole business might have seemed a small thing. Should she have expected better? And she had kept her dignity. It was he whose stupidity was made plain. Then why did she feel in the wrong?

She left the big marble and granite building—hard as dem heart hard, she muttered—and walked over to the old Episcopal cemetery and sat on the grave of Marcus, FAITHFUL SERVANT. She wept. Then caught herself. This t'ing a fact of life. Face it, gal. Your mama counsel you not to venture where you nuh welcome. She took the subway back to the laundry.

Kitty and the women in the packing room—named Georgia and Virginia—spoke only from necessity. But when Kitty was in the outer office, not sitting between them, she could hear them chatting softly, laughing. The word *girl,* affectionate, was repeated often. That afternoon, when she walked into the packing room where the women were sharing a sandwich and fell silent on her entry, Kitty wanted to smash what was between them, the three of them, and shout "Me not dem!", the other them. She wanted to tell the women what had prevailed, who she really was, but she could not and held back, afraid of what they might think of her, knowing their own travels through the city would make her seem only like a cry-cry baby. A house-slave inconvenienced by massa whim, while dem worked the cane.

Unable to speak to them, she took her place between them, her feelings lit by a dim fury, sticking Mrs. White's messages methodically, automatically, almost instinctively by now, into the shirts and between the sheets. Reliving over and over again what had happened at the bank. The cemetery with her touchstone of a grave. Why hadn't she said something to the man?—on the one hand. Why didn't these women speak to her?—on the other.

Why had she maintained silence, calling it dignity,

through all the other interviews in which her musical voice, her golden skin, had become the center of conversation and the reason for refusal? Coward!

Her head began to ache. She took her ballpoint and, hiding the paper with her curved fingers, like a schoolgirl being examined, embellished one of Mrs. White's epistles—one announcing a two-for-one sale, a businessman's special on shirts. She drew a balloon from the upturned mouth of the benign lady and printed within: EVER TRY CLEANSING YOUR MIND OF HATRED? THINK OF IT. When Georgia raised her head to watch Kitty as she wrote, for the pace at the table had slowed, Kitty caught her eyes and said softly that she was repairing a printing error. She quickly stuck the message into the shirt pocket, a blue button-down Arrow, not unlike the one worn by the man who had so distressed her.

Later, on the subway, she thought about what she had done and worried less about the possibility of being found out—a woman creating her own noise was rarely attended—than the fact that she had done such a thing. Was she turning into a crazy woman? Like the one with sores who chanted on the D train? Or one of the women at home who talked to lizards and duppies? Who thought they could slip from their skin at night and follow the Old Hige, their raw flesh aflame?

No. She was not crazy. There would be plenty of time for that. She smiled to herself. No. She was lonely. She was angry. Yes. That was all.

Automatic writing, they called it.

It probably would not happen again.

Settling this in her mind, more or less, she took some pleasure in what she had done. Hoping some businessman would find her message. That she might be a flower on the wall as he was struck by Mrs. White's reprimand. How silly.

Then she smiled at the idea of Boy cleaning a white-man's toilet.

As she shifted in the subway heat, her skirt stuck to

her, more than perspiration. She rose and glanced behind and saw that the stain had begun. She left at a station two stops before hers and was grateful for the dim light on the platform. At the top of the stairs in the bright late-summer evening was a shop run by a woman from Puerto Rico.

Kitty sought the folded cloth she had been taught to use as a girl. She entered the domain of another island woman. The woman, one thick black-and-white braid wrapped around her head, stood behind the cash register in the front of the shop. Behind her was a shelf of sanitary devices and birth protection. Douches, jellies, pads, plugs, foams. The woman had arranged the whole into a pyramid, above which was a sign: SERVILLETAS, TAMPONES, Y CONTROL DE LA NATALIDAD. In the middle of the pyramid, enveloped by the goods for sale, blessing their offices, was a statue of the Virgin, aureole of gold, robe of gold, face and hands of dark wood. A plaque at her feet identified her as La Morenita, La Virgen de Montserrat. The woman smiled at Kitty as she entered, greeting her with a nod of her head and a phrase in Spanish. Kitty smiled and nodded in turn and indicated with her eyes that she needed something from the pyramid. "I am sorry; I speak very little Spanish."

"It is okay. I live in America long time now. I know English."

"I am newly arrived. I am a Jamaican."

"De Jamaica?" The shopkeeper gave the name of the island the Spanish pronunciation.

"Sí, de Jamaica."

"Bueno. What can I do for you?"

"I am having my . . . the curse . . . you know what I mean." Kitty's eyes turned down. The woman did not quite get her meaning. The *curse* was foreign to her.

"I bleed . . . *sangre.*" Kitty made herself whisper.

"Ah, sí. You need some pads? *Tampones?*" The woman turned to regard La Morenita and her display.

"I was wondering . . . in Jamaica we use cloth. Folded. We wash it each time by hand. Do you have such a thing?"

Around the shop were touches of the woman's homeland. Unguents, balms, candles in glass cylinders with saints and virgins fixed to them. Kitty envisioned a drawer with folded cloths.

"No. No such thing. La Morenita and I are in America long time now." The shopkeeper smiled. "These cloths are not convenient in New York. There is not the privacy for women to wash them, and the sun is too weak to bleach them."

"I see." Kitty felt very foolish, like a homesick child. "Well, may I have a box of Kotex, please, *por favor?*"

"*Sí.* Of course." The woman removed a box from the side of the pyramid, then walked to the back of the shop, leaving Kitty at the register and returning a few seconds later with a paper towel wet with water and salt. She murmured *pardon,* and began to carefully stroke the back of Kitty's skirt. Kitty was at first embarrassed, then gave in to the woman's care.

The shopkeeper returned to her place behind the register and, as she rang up the sale, Kitty's eyes glanced over at the darkness of the Virgin. "What means La Morenita?"

"It means the little dark one. They say she was cut from the life. From ebony."

There was absolutely no visible outcome from Kitty's impetuousness. Probably no one paid any mind to Mrs. White. Powerless icon masked as mother. Kitty trudged on.

When it seemed, after similar interviews, similar insults, similar assumptions that because she spoke in accented language she was illiterate—when it seemed, after months in this new country, that she would labor forever as Mrs. White, walking the streets of Brooklyn on her lunch hours, visiting her home away from home in secret, traveling each evening back to the small apartment where she cooked dinner for the girls, waiting for Boy to reappear, now he had traded his paints for the camaraderie he found in the bar. She, watching the infernal television, thinking it

would take her mind off her troubles, suffering as she was from a weariness which did not promise to leave her, wishing her life away, as the days got shorter, giving in more and more to Boy's warnings about Bed-Stuy, unable to return with the food she cherished—when all this got to her so she could not bear this place and the prospect of the cold with her thin blood, Kitty amused herself by sending more messages. They could hurt no one. No doubt she had been right and no one attended to Mrs. White or her silly hints—they would all end their journey on a garbage barge.

Her pen traced balloons and filled them in, putting words in Mrs. White's pert mouth.

WE CAN CLEAN YOUR CLOTHES BUT NOT YOUR HEART.
AMERICA IS CRUEL. CONSIDER KINDNESS FOR A CHANGE.
WHITE PEOPLE CAN BE BLACK-HEARTED.
THE LIFE YOU LIVE WILL BE VISITED ON YOUR CHILDREN.
MARCUS GARVEY WAS RIGHT.

Things did not really become difficult for Kitty until Boy found a sheaf of these pronouncements in her handbag while rummaging one night for cigarettes, and confronted her with them, waving them in her face.

"Kitty, for God's sake . . . what is this?"

"What you doing in my bag, man?" She was suddenly embarrassed.

"Never mind that. . . . What in hell are these?"

"In hell fe true. None of your business."

"Don't shut up on me, woman. You gone crazy? You want to lose your job?"

"Nuh gwan lose me job, bredda."

"You will if Mr. B. him find these."

"How him gwan find them? Chuh, man, is jus' something I do for entertainment."

Then quiet.

She was sitting on a second-hand straight-backed rocker staring at the television. Robert Young kissed Jane Wyatt on his return home and Kitty sucked her teeth.

"Busha, is maybe time we cut the cotta . . . what you think?" She broke the silence, addressing him as overseer, with reference to divorce among the slaves who had been among their ancestors. Slicing the device on which their burdens balanced. She spoke in code because the girls were in the kitchen washing the dishes. Still, her words fit.

"Why you call me 'busha,' woman? I don't drive you. I don't push you against your will." Boy, frightened.

She smiled at him. "You preffer 'slave' . . . 'massa'? Is what your American friends call you?"

Suddenly, she was in control. Silence again. And then he moved to kiss her and tell her he needed her and loved her more than life itself, and, as God is my witness, we will return soon. Soon as we get enough money. He put his arms around her and begged her just to be careful and not let Mr. B. catch she. That night they made love and he thought the cutting of the cotta was forgotten, not realizing, as she drew herself away to fold into sleep, she was not at rest.

She slid into a sleep in which she dreamed. On a green hillside she took to be her mother's land, ruinate, a small dark figure robed in gold and lit around by gold light was leading a procession. It seemed in the dream that La Morenita floated up the hill, as those behind her, unlit beings, scrambled and fell, tripping in the thick growth. Kitty felt herself present but did not see herself in the crowd. Darkness then. The light was gone. The dark lasted into confusion. Suddenly La Morenita beckoned through the dark, raising her arm, tongues of fire shooting from her armpit. They were inside the house of Kitty's mother, grown large in the dream. The fiery Virgin and the other pilgrims were gone. Kitty was left to find her mother in this house, which loomed larger than it had ever been. All was emptiness. On one wall was etched *This Do in Remembrance of Me.*

Kitty woke, prepared breakfast, dressed, and left for

work. It was time to end her nonsense once and for all. Once and for all. She took a stack of letterheads and colored in the pink face of Mrs. White. She drew a balloon next to each dark face. HELLO. MRS. WHITE IS DEAD. MY NAME IS MRS. BLACK. I KILLED HER.

She felt free, released. She spent the afternoon tucking the sheets of paper into clean linen. Sending her furious Aunt Jemima into the world.

She left at the end of the day and thought no more about what she had done.

When she returned to work the next morning, she was met by Mr. B., who was fussing around the office, scattering confectioner's sugar wildly in his passion. At first unable to speak to her, he pointed into the packing room. Kitty peered inside; the room was empty.

"Where are Georgia and Virginia?"

With this question the man caught his breath. "I . . . I . . . had to let them go."

"But why? They are good workers."

"Yes, and they have worked here for quite a few years and I have been very good to them. But look at this, my dear. Just look at this."

He thrust in her face a picture of Mrs. Black.

"Where did you get that?"

"Someone brought it here this morning. In person, mind you. As shocked as I was. He also brought instructions to discontinue serving as their laundry. One of my oldest clients . . . and there have been similar messages . . . telephone calls. . . . How could they do this to me? What did I ever do to them, except treat them right? I mean, it's not easy for them to find this kind of job . . . and they will starve before they get any references from me." He dusted confectioner's sugar from his vest. "But, you know, that kind is just no good. Unstable. You know what I mean."

Kitty barely shook her head. He explained.

"Something missing . . . something missing upstairs . . . a screw loose." He pointed to his head.

"I don't understand." Kitty was unprepared for this. "I just don't understand. Why did you fire both of them?"

"Because neither of them would admit to this . . . this desecration. But they always stick together."

"Mr. B., I did it. I am the one responsible."

"A nice girl like you? Don't be crazy."

"But I did."

"No. No, I can't believe that."

She took her leave that afternoon. Throwing the blasted letterheads into the wastepaper basket. She had committed an act of luxury. She had no way to reach either woman. And did not know what she would do had she that knowledge. That night she announced to Boy that she had had enough. In a week she took the younger girl, the one who favored her, back home, and told the elder one to look after herself and her father.