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IBI ZOBOI

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

AMERICAN STREET

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DEDICATION

For my sisters: Theresa, Ingrid, and Carine

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ONE

IF ONLY I could break the glass separating me and Manman with my thoughts alone. On one side of the glass doors are the long lines of people with their photos and papers that prove that they belong here in America, that they are allowed to taste a bit of this free air. On the other side is me, pressing my forehead against the thick see-through wall. My shoulder hurts from the weight of the carry-on bag. I refuse to put it down for fear that they will take it away, too.

"Manman," I whisper to the glass, hoping that my voice will ease through, fly above all those people's heads, travel on a plane back to New York, and reach her.

We had been holding hands for courage when we arrived at Customs in Kennedy Airport. Manman had carried all our important documents in a big yellow envelope tucked into her large purse—our passports, her visa, and the papers to prove that we are who we say we are, that we are from the city of Port-au-Prince; that I am an American citizen by birth and I left for good when I was only an infant; that we own a little house in the neighborhood of Delmas; and that Manman has a business selling brand-name *pépé*—secondhand American clothes. All these things to prove that we are only visiting relatives and plan to return home to Haiti.

But how could they have read our minds? How could they have known that my mother's big sister in Detroit had been sending us money to leave Haiti forever? How could they have known that we didn't plan to go back?

"Ms. Valerie Toussaint, I need you to come with me," the man had said. His voice was like the pebbled streets in Delmas, rough and unsteady as they pulled Manman's hand from mine; as they motioned for me to continue through the line with Manman's desperate pleas trailing behind me—*Alé, Fabiola! Go, Fabiola! Don't worry. I will meet you there!*—and as I got on the connecting flight from New York to Detroit. But too much has happened for me to cry now. On the plane ride leaving Port-au-Prince for JFK, I had curled into my mother and together we looked out the window. Up high in the sky, all the problems we had left behind seemed so tiny—as if I could pick them up one by one and fling them out of the universe.

On the flight to Detroit, I am alone. I look down at America—its vastness resembling a huge mountain. I felt as if I was just a pebble in the valley.

My mother will be on the next plane, I tell myself over and over again. Just like when she sends me ahead on my own by foot, or by *tap-tap*, or by motortaxi. I tell myself that this won't be any different.

Here in Detroit Metro Airport, there are no long lines to show papers and proof to uniformed people. I ease into America's free air like a tourist returning home. With every step I take out of the terminal, I look back, and up, and around, as if my mother will appear from out of nowhere. I search for her face in the crowd of new arrivals rushing past me—some with their eyes as weary as mine, others tracking every too-bright light, every movement of each person around them, peering into every corner of this too-big place. But none of them is Manman.

I spot a lady official who is wearing the same uniform as the ones who took my mother away. I take several long steps toward her, dragging the carry-on behind me. My shoulder is

sore. “Excuse me, miss? I am looking for Valerie Toussaint coming from New York,” I say with my very best English.

“I’m sorry, young lady. I have no idea who that is. And there isn’t another flight coming in from New York into Detroit till the morning. If you’re waiting for someone to pick you up, follow the signs that read ‘baggage claim,’” she says, and starts to walk away.

I shake my head. “Valerie Toussaint in New York,” I say. “They took her. They say she can’t come to the United States.”

“You had someone with you in New York?”

I nod.

“Is she being detained?”

I stare and blink and shake my head. I search my brain for this word, trying to find the Creole word for it, or a French one—*détenir*: to hold back, to keep from moving.

The woman places both hands on her hips. Her blue uniform shirt stretches over her big chest and two buttons look like they will pop. A small black strap on the shoulder of her shirt reads TSA. Her fancy gold badge says she’s an officer and another thinner badge on the other side of her black tie says her name is Deborah Howard.

“I can’t help. You’ve been standing here all this time and your luggage is still at baggage claim. Now, follow the signs to pick up your things. I’m sure you have family waiting for you.” She speaks slowly, as if I am stupid.

I purse my lips and clench my fists. How do I tell her that I am not going to the other side without Manman? How do I say that my mother has not seen her big sister, Matant Majorie, since they were teenagers and Manman wanted nothing more than to hold her face and plant a big wet kiss on her cheek? But the English words don’t come as fast as the many Creole insults at the tip of my tongue for this Deborah Howard.

“All right. Then I will personally escort you to baggage claim,” Deborah Howard says.

“No,” I say. “I have to be with Valerie Toussaint.”

Deborah Howard steps closer to me. At first she smells of her freshly ironed uniform, but then I smell the faint scent of cigarettes and oily food lingering behind her starchy presence. “Look. Just come back with a relative in the morning to straighten all this out. Do you understand what I just said?”

I don’t make a move and I hold this moment for a little bit. Then I nod. “I understand,” I say. My English is not as smooth. “I will come back.”

Our four big suitcases stand alone between two luggage carousels like orphaned children. I want to ask Deborah Howard what Manman will use to brush her teeth and wash her face tonight. But I’m afraid if I give her anything to take to my mother, she will keep it and sell it at the market—if Detroit is anything like Port-au-Prince. Officer Howard grabs a nearby cart and a man helps her lift up the suitcases. I rush toward them to make sure that they don’t take anything.

Night is a starlit blanket outside, and the cold air reaches my bones. I have on a long-sleeved shirt and it is not enough.

“Hope somebody’s bringing you a coat,” the man says, and leaves the cart right there on the sidewalk as I hug myself and rub my arms. I watch the cars pass by.

I look around and then stretch out my arms on each side of me. I pray that Manman will get to taste this cold, free air before she rests her eyes tonight, wherever they are keeping her. And then tomorrow, she will come to this side of the glass, where there is good work that will make her hold her head up with dignity, where she will be proud to send me to school for free, and where we will build a good, brand-new life. *Une belle vie*, as she always promises, hoping that here she would be free to take her sister’s hand and touch the moon.

TWO

THE COLD THREATENS to swallow me whole. Manman said that cold air is better for our skin. It will keep us fresh and youthful. In Haiti, we used to travel to the top of the mountain ranges near Au Cap for their cool winds. But here, I will turn into a block of ice.

America is more colorful than I imagined. The people are a mix of white and not-white. If only Detroit had a bunch of *blan*, it would be easier for me to pick out a single black woman and three teenage girls, but many of the women look like my aunt with their brown faces; black, shiny straightened hair; and their big, dark coats that hide their shapely figures.

I search the faces of all the people passing me and think of my cousins—the oldest, Chantal, and the twins, Primadonna and Princess, who are my age. And my aunt Marjorie. I have not seen them since I was a baby. How will they recognize me?

I am so hungry and tired. I want a container of hot, sizzling *fritay* from the streets of Delmas, my mother's warm, thick arm in mine, and her strong shoulder so I can rest my head.

A girl steps in front of me as I fidget with one of the suitcases. She lifts up her phone to my face.

"Hold up, I'm trying to see if you look like somebody," she says.

I can only tell she's a girl by the shape of her body—but her oversized jacket, loose jeans, high-top sneakers, and hat with three bumblebees on it make her almost look like a boy. I examine her round face, her deep-set eyes, and her cheeks. "Princess!" I say.

"Yep. That's you. Dang! Where you been all this time?" Princess turns and calls behind her, "Yo, I found her! She's over here!"

I reach to kiss her on the cheek and give her a big hug, but she steps back.

"Nah, I'm good, cuzz. Where's your moms?"

Another girl runs toward us—Chantal. She's smaller than Princess, with black-framed glasses—almost twenty years old. Primadonna is behind her—tall with long, flowing hair reaching down to her elbows. She's wearing sunglasses even though it's nighttime.

"Fabiola!" Chantal calls.

I reach to hug her because she's my favorite. Chantal is the one who posts links to articles and sends me messages on Facebook. She's the one who told her friends how excited she was about her cousin coming from Haiti.

"Where's Aunt Val?" Chantal asks, looking around and behind me.

I shake my head, unsure of what to say. What if they are mad that my mother didn't make it through? What if they tell my aunt and she is even angrier?

Primadonna moves closer to me, and I look her up and down to see that she is much taller because of her fancy high heels. She lives up to her name with her diva hair and sunglasses at night.

"Hi, Fabiola," she sings. Her voice is like a billion tiny bells. "So good to finally meet you. Call me Donna."

Princess steps in front of me. "And I'm Pri. Not *Princess*. Just Pri. And big sis over here is Chant."

Princess and Primadonna, or Pri and Donna now—my twin cousins. *Les Marassa Jumeaux*, who are as different as hot pepper and honey. Their faces are mirrors of each other, but their bodies are opposites—one tall and skinny and the other short and chunky—as if Princess ruled their mother's womb and Primadonna was an underfed peasant.

Chantal pushes up her eyeglasses and looks over at the baggage claim. "It's fine if you call me Chantal. So where *is* your mom?"

I turn back toward the busyness of the airport. I wonder if my mother is waiting for her flight to Detroit and praying that I don't worry about her. I wonder if she is still arguing with those uniformed people and if she has thrown those important documents in their faces and cursed their children's children. Manman will not go quietly. She will fight with her claws to get to me. "She's not here yet" is all I say.

"How long do we have to wait for her? We didn't pay for parking," Chantal says. I feel like she's looking straight through me.

"Well." I pause. "They said she's being detained in New York."

"Detained? What? She wasn't on the plane with you?" Donna asks.

My face goes hot. "From Haiti, yes. But when we got to Customs," I start to say, but my voice cracks. "They took her into a room. But maybe she will be on the next plane?"

"Shit! We thought that might happen," Pri says.

"Shut up, Pri. Don't scare her," Donna says. She pulls Pri aside and takes out her cell phone. "I'm calling Ma."

Chantal shakes her head, then turns to me. "This doesn't sound right, Fabiola," she says as she grabs my hand and pulls me back inside. We wait in line for a long time at the Delta Air Lines counter before finally reaching the man at the desk. "Hello, sir? We're looking for a passenger who might be on the next flight from New York."

Chantal's English is like that of the newspeople on TV. Her voice is high and soft, and every sentence sounds like a question, even when she gives them my name and my mother's name. It's as if she isn't sure of anything and this uniformed man behind the desk and the computer will have all the answers in the universe.

I spell out Manman's name for Chantal, who then spells it out for the man behind the counter. He prints Chantal a piece of paper and she steps off to the side. I follow her as she starts searching her phone for answers.

"What's your mother's birthday?"

I tell her. Then she asks if my mother has a middle name. I tell her that, too. She shakes her head. Chantal shows me her phone.

My mother's name is on the screen. All the other words and numbers I don't understand.

"Fabiola, your mother's going to be sent to an immigration detention center in New Jersey. She's not coming to Detroit," Chantal says. She pauses and the corners of her mouth turn down. "They're planning on sending her back to Haiti."

I can see Pri and Donna watching me from a few feet away. Donna has hung up the phone. Her brows are furrowed and she bites her bottom lip. The same look is on Pri's face.

I am quiet. Then I say, "What?"

She repeats what she said, but I only hear *sending her back to Haiti* over and over again.

If there were no blood vessels, no rib cage, no muscles holding up my heart to where it beats in my chest, it would've fallen out onto the floor.

I set my mother's carry-on down on the floor. "If New Jersey is still in the United States, then we can go get her. We can explain everything and show them that her papers are good," I say. My voice trembles.

Chantal shakes her head and puts her hand on my shoulder. “I don’t know if that’s how it works, Fabiola.”

Chantal steps away from me and talks to her sisters with her arms crossed. Her face looks as if she is carrying the weight of all our problems on her head. We make eye contact and she smiles a little. She comes over and takes my hand. “Come on, cuzz. Let’s go home.”

I don’t move.

I remember all those times in Port-au-Prince, standing in the open market or at an intersection waiting for my mother as the sun went down and it started to get dark and she still didn’t arrive. Even as the busy streets of Delmas began to empty out and no one but *vagabon* and MINUSTAH troops passed by on motorbikes and trucks, I waited.

And she always came. She’s never left me alone.

“Donna just spoke to Ma. She wants us to bring you home.”

She tugs at my arm, but still, I don’t move.

“Fabiola, my mother is gonna handle it, all right? She’s the one who sent for you both in the first place. She’ll make a few phone calls, and before you know it, your mom will be here.” Chantal’s voice is candy—sweet but firm.

She takes off her thick, long scarf and wraps it around my shoulders—a gesture that only my mother has ever done for me. Back in Haiti, it was always just me and Manman. But now, my world has ballooned and in it are these three cousins, and my aunt, too. Family takes care of each other, I tell myself. We will get my manman.

We leave the airport. It feels like I’m leaving part of me behind—a leg, an arm. My whole heart.