SOUCOUYANT

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Old skin, 'kin, 'kin,
You na know me,
You na know me . . .

—verse fragment from a Caribbean tale

One

She has become an old woman. She looks out from the doorway of her own home but seems puzzled by the scene, the bruised evening sky and the crab scurry of leaves on the shoreline below. These are the bluffs at the lakeside edge of Scarborough. This is the season named fall.

'You should step in,' she says, reaching for the security chain but finding it already dangling freely. Her eyes only then darting up to meet mine.

I crouch to unlace my shoes, avoiding the stool that has always been untrustworthy. I hang my coat on the peg tucked invisibly beside the fuse-box. She notices these gestures and slows with thought while leading me through this shipwreck of a home. The same drafts and groaning floors, the same wildlife calendar with the moose of September 1987, now two years out of date. In the kitchen, she sets a kettle on the element and turns the stove dial while saying 'on.' Then checks again to make sure.

The gas has been disconnected. I see this immediately and know that we will wait in vain for the flame to catch or the kettle to scratch to a boil. She is silent now and her eyes are downcast and

away from me. There's a cavernous rhythm that seems to emanate from the floorboards and rafters, though this is only the lake having its say in the quiet of our brooding. This could continue for a long time. With the sun going its way and the shadows thickening around us. With this old woman, my mother, so entirely unwilling to admit that she has forgotten me. With both of us free from our past.

I do this.

I stand and unbuckle my belt. I unbutton and zip down and let my pants fall to my knees. Mother doesn't laugh at me advancing with wobbly duck steps. She doesn't panic when her hand is held and guided to the skin of a dark young man.

Here. Press your fingers against the walnut-shaped lump of bone at the side of my knee. Hold them there until my knee bends and some rogue tendon bunches against that lump and against your fingers before suddenly snapping over. With a click. My body's trick.

Her smile.

'He have strange bones,' she says. 'Quarrels deep in he flesh.'

'Your son. . . .'

'He grandmother too. You can't do nothing for bones. They like history. But you can boil zaboca leaves to remedy body ache. And planten leaves to slow bleeding. And there used to be something called scientific plant which could protect you against curses and bad magic. . . .'

'Your son. Your youngest son. Remember, Mother?'

'Aloe on light burns. Everyone does remember that. But there was something else. Something wet and pithy they could give you when you burns was brutal. When you skin was gloving off. . . .'

I STAY WITH MOTHER, though I haven't truly been invited to stay. On that first evening of my return, Mother walks suddenly out of the kitchen and up the stairs to her bedroom on the second floor. I hear the low grate of a deadbolt. Later, I make my way up to the other bedroom on the second floor. The bunk bed that I once shared with my brother is still made, though the sheets and pillows smell of dampness.

My bedroom window looks out over the weathered edge of the bluffs to a great lake touched by the dying light of the city. Below, some forty feet down, a few trees lean about on a shore of sand and waterlogged litter. Dancing leaves and the tumble of an empty potato chip bag. Despite the view and the fact that many consider the surrounding neighbourhood 'a *good* part of Scarborough,' our place is difficult to boast of. We are alone in a cul-de-sac once used as a dump for real-estate developers. The house is old and bracing now for the final assaults of erosion. Even in summer, all windows facing south are kept shut. Because of the railway track, scarcely ten feet away.

I'm jolted awake during the night. The house has taken on some brutal energy, and dust motes have turned the slanting moonlight from the window into solid beams. The noise peaks and only then is it clear to me that a freight train is passing. I wait for the caboose to pass and the lake sounds to pool back. I watch the wind blowing ghosts into the drapes. I dream, close to waking, of the sound of footsteps in the air above me.

IN THE MORNING, I walk in on a young woman sitting with Mother at the kitchen table and reading a book. She has hair of wild bronze, frizzy mixed-girl hair barely kept in check by an elastic,

and she is wearing the white two-pocketed shirt that Mother used to make me put on for special occasions. She has apparently set food in front of my mother, cornmeal porridge with sugar and vanilla essence beaten in. A pot of tea so strong that it seems to stain the cups and corrode the spoons. Seeing me, she stands abruptly, her hand darting involuntarily to a mark on her neck. For the shortest while, she reads my face and body before dropping her hand and sitting back down.

'I'm her son,' I say.

She picks up an eating spoon to offer some of the porridge to Mother, who purses her lips but otherwise doesn't move her face. The book is now splayed cover up on the table. *The Diatonic Mode in Modern Music*, the title reads. The mark on her neck is red. A puzzle against the light brown of her skin, the sharpness of her collarbone. A birthmark most likely.

'Are you a nurse?' I ask. 'I'm just visiting. I won't get in your way.'

'How considerate of you,' she replies.

And then ignores me, though her eyes look like they're thinking far beyond her continued attempts to feed Mother. I nod and leave quietly, spending most of the morning and afternoon in my room and staying clear.

In the evening, I'm alone in the sitting room when I hear from above the sounds of a faucet squeaking open and the deepening rush of water in the bathroom tub. I hear two voices and muffled splashes, then the young woman singing and Mother joining in without hesitation or flaw. I want to hear more of this singing and to know how Mother can manage to carry any song at all in her condition. I wait for the bath noises to stop and the drain to stop sucking,

but I walk upstairs and into Mother's room before it's at all safe to do so. Mother is topless and facing me, and the young woman is standing behind her, giving her a massage. Mother's eyes are closed and she is still humming, her voice grating as the young woman kneads into the flesh hidden from my sight. The glossy wrinkles on Mother's upper shoulders and neck, the portents of her body's true damage. There's an oily thickness in the air and on my tongue, and the nakedness and intimacy humiliates me somehow. I turn to leave but not before the young woman catches my discomfort and smiles wickedly.

I hear it that night. Unmistakable this time, the young woman in the attic above. The creak of her movements.

The next morning, I enter the kitchen just as the young woman and Mother are sitting down to breakfast. Cornmeal porridge again and more of the vicious tea, but also a mango with a thin knife laid out beside it. The lake is unusually quiet and the sun has turned the kitchen walls lemon.

'I'd like to help out with the groceries,' I say. 'I just need to know what to buy. I could cook too. I'm not such a bad cook.'

The young woman shrugs and picks up the mango and the knife, but this time Mother's stare transforms into unmistakable nervousness. I do my best to smile reassuringly, but Mother looks away and then steals glances at me while adding spoon after heaping spoon of wet brown sugar to her tea. She has created a warm and overflowing cup of syrup before she finally manages to articulate her worry.

'What are you doing here?' she asks. The woman is looking up and waiting for an answer too, the knife motionless in her hand and

the juices from the mango inching down her arm.

I don't know how to answer this question. I don't even know how Mother is reading me. As a stranger who suddenly roams her home, or as her younger son who has mysteriously returned after discovering, two years earlier, just how impossible it was to be around her. I don't know if Mother has been hurt by my absence, or if she's even noticed it. I don't know what meaning there can be between us now.

'You mean you don't remember, Mother?' I try.

This works perfectly. Mother steels her eyes and tightens her mouth. She finds her old pride.

'Of course I remember,' she says, bringing her cup to her lips.

Long ago, she began to forget. It started with ordinary things. Shopping lists and recipes, bus change and savings cards, pens for jotting down those household tasks that always manage to slip away. But then Mother began to forget in far more creative ways. She began to forget names and places, goals and meanings. She began to forget the laws of language and the routes to salvation and the proper things to do with one's body. She began to excuse herself from the world we knew.

My brother and I were the first to notice. We were young children when it started and naturally alert for the smallest signs of adult weakness. When Mother wasn't looking, we'd climb up to the cupboards and eat peanut butter and corn syrup, lime pickle and molasses. Also the most perverse delicacy we could then imagine, Crisco shortening, spooning up the white sludge with our fingers and leaving greasy prints on the cupboard doors and the walls and the doorknobs. Mother couldn't understand why she never remembered to replenish her cooking goods. Why she never remembered to give the home a good all-round scrubbing. We were never caught.

Of course Mother was minding five or six other children in those early days. Her wits were already strained to the limit. Friday evenings, the children's parents would come and apologize for the days when they were forced to work overtime at their offices without proper warning. They would smile apologetically when handing Mother envelopes. But what messages were these people passing her, really? What kind of people envelop their words? This was still the earliest stage of Mother's condition and she had already learned to conceal her confusion from others and trust that in time things would become clear. She would wave the children's parents goodbye and open the envelopes carefully with a knife, sorting through the small number of fives and tens. Dirty numbers. Meaning new safety boots for her husband and belts for her boys and, of course, more endlessly dwindling cooking goods. Money was still too precious a meaning to forget.

But soon there came the times when Mother hurriedly dressed one boy in his snowmobile suit and ushered him to his parents waiting outside. Only then to remember (too late) that these parents had a girl. That girl with the haunting glass-marble eyes and the brilliant golden hair. Or brown. She would have had brown hair, Mother reminded herself. Mother would laughingly explain to the parents just how difficult it was to tell the difference between boys and girls these days. Just look at the rock stars, she would say.

Nanny standup. But her jokes fell flat and Mother steadily lost her jobs. She was supposed to be minding children, after all. She was living on the edge of the bluffs, near an active railway.

Metal monsters in the night. Dirty numbers and greasy doorknobs. This was our belonging. Memory was a carpet stain that nobody would confess to. History was a television set left on all night. The car chases and gun fights sponsored by oil companies. The anthems at the end of broadcast days.

Then a crisis in something called 'the economy.' Father was laid off at the factory but later rehired as a temp after two agonizing weeks. The work was erratic. The factory wouldn't need him for weeks on end, but then, faced with a last minute order to fill, it would suddenly call upon him round the clock. Father became a maniac on those days, a blur of energy bursting through the front door to bolt cold dal and rice from tupperware in the fridge. Frantic nap. Bathroom. Frantic nap. Chugging lukewarm cups of instant coffee, then back out to catch another shift, a toppled milk carton in his wake, pattering white upon the floor.

Mother's jokes continued to fall flat. One afternoon, Father took his first long chug from his coffee mug before running to the kitchen sink to retch endlessly. Waving away our concern as another belt of sickness took him. Mother had accidentally filled the sugar bowl with salt, and Father had unknowingly made himself a briny pickle of a coffee. All four of us were in the kitchen that day, three sitting quietly until Father's spasms at the sink had passed. Such an awesome sight, his big shoulders heaving up. It was my brother who finally broke the silence.

'It's April Fool's Day. Right, Mother?'

'What you say, child?'

'You know. April *Fool's* Day. When people do jokes and nobody suspects because nobody remembers what day it is anyway?'

'Yes …' said Mother, 'you's right, child. It certainly *is* that day. Merry April Fool Day, Roger.'

'You know, girl,' said Father, finding his breath, 'thirty years, and I still don't know how to celebrate in this country.'

My brother always knew the right thing to say. He was older than me but also surer in his talk and more sensitive to manners and gestures and tones of voice. He figured out a while ago that Mother's condition offered him a special freedom, and so instead of going to school he spent most weekdays alone in his bedroom.

'Child,' Mother might ask, 'why you ain't at school?'

'It's a PD day, Mother.'

'PD day?'

'A professional development day. When the teachers get a day off and spend their time smoking and thinking up trick questions. Don't you remember, Mother?"

'Of course I remember, child. You think you the only intelligent person in this house?'

Meanwhile, my brother screened all of the letters that appeared in our mailbox. He could tell a report card envelope merely by its density and weight. He used a flashlight or a bright bulb to spot official school seals through unopened letters, and so he intercepted and destroyed messages from guidance counsellors who were expressing their concern that my brother was skipping even the most practical courses in shop and automobile repair. Some of the letters explained in simple and patient terms that schools were

now learning to respond to hands-on students 'just like yours.' One of them came with a glossy pamphlet describing a new program where students would get to work in 'relevant' settings for half of the school year. Behind the cash register in fast food restaurants, for instance. *'Real-life business skills.... Common-sense education....'* The pamphlet showed a rainbow of coloured faces.

But my brother wasn't interested in school. He was going to be a poet.

I didn't know this at first because we rarely spoke. Like our father, he seemed inaccessible and slow to meet your eyes. He was big too, and with a bruised edge to himself that you weren't ever in a hurry to poke at and ask what's the matter. But then, one sharp spring morning, my brother told me to make two peanut butter sandwiches with the crusts cut off and to take two bananas from the fruit bowl and to come with him for a while.

He carried a red toolbox which he normally kept locked underneath our bunk bed. We walked to a secret edge of the bluffs near the back of our home, and we slid-stepped down the slope of clay, holding onto brush and radically leaning trees and even thistles when a fall suddenly threatened. We reached the shore and walked east until we got to that place where a fenced sewer pipe from the old factory blocked us from going farther. A gull was perched on the inside lip of the pipe, its feathers puffed up and ragged and its legs forking a trickle of water that moved like oil. We climbed over the fence and sewer pipe, and did ten minutes of wobbly walking along the stones and washed up trash until we got to a place where you could squint your mind and imagine that you were elsewhere. The wet skins of lake-smoothed stones. The bones of driftwood bleached by the sun. The dense silence of the bluffs towering

above. And of course, the great lake with its unmarred horizon.

We sat on driftwood and ate our sandwiches immediately, taking a bite of banana with each bite of peanut butter, the way Father once showed us. After this, my brother unlocked his toolbox and showed me what he hid from everyone else. Books. A battered Gideon Bible, perhaps stolen from a nearby car motel. A book entitled *Surviving Menopause* by one Philip G. Winkler, MD. A Finnish cookbook with the cover ripped off. A very old leather-bound book written in some strange but beautifully sinuous script. Another book that merely listed chemical compounds following some obscure principle of organization. Other strange choices too. And why not? Why shouldn't a poet know a lot and draw from all languages and meanings? My brother took his books one by one out of the box and placed them carefully on the stones. He removed a real fountain pen and a notebook with handmade paper, the sort all rough with invitation. He sat there not writing but as if he were just about to write, and he held that pose for a long time before me.

I don't remember my brother ever writing anything that day. I remember him pointing out to me the smeared toothpaste of clouds upon the sky and the guerrilla art of bird shit on the rocks. I remember him describing the oatmeal of lake scum and the constellations of trash and plastic bottles that had washed up on shore. I remember my brother fishing a packet of chewing tobacco from his coat pocket and how he found in the trash around us a juice bottle chipped at the rim but good enough. I sat there with my brother well into the arcing afternoon, chewing and spitting. I never spoke to him about Mother's condition or Father's increasing distress because we were talking about poetry that day and mindful of things far greater than our personal circumstances and fears. I remember

the bite of the wind on my face and the endless steel of the waters. I remember feeling light and almost dizzy with an exultation only partly due to the tobacco. I remember watching our spit rising in the bottle, all swirling amber and leather in the sun. That stuff so precious.

But Mother still staggered into forgetfulness. She wandered the streets of our neighbourhood and upturned people's garbage bins, looking for 'the good things these wasteful people does throw away.' She 'borrowed' things from corner stores and people's garages, failing to recall the concept of private property. Relying on some deeply Caribbean hunch, she kicked any dog that approached her, once sending a miniature poodle spinning around its owner like a tetherball. She became easy prey for the most unimaginative of crank callers, and she'd answer and listen for long moments before calling out for us to catch the refrigerator since 'it running,' her hand cupping the wrong end of the phone for privacy. Left alone at home, she'd forget where the washroom was and would be forced to wait for agonizing hours until someone came home to show her. Later she'd see no reason why she should wait, and we began to notice that certain potted plants smelled of urine. We tried to stop her from accomplishing many household tasks like washing clothes, but we didn't always succeed. She performed experiments with bleach and vinegar on our shirts and jeans, and we ended up wearing the acid wash look in entirely the wrong year for us to be considered fashionable.

One afternoon, she left a pot of milk on the stove that soon bubbled over and filled the air with acrid smoke. Returning from school, I smelled the calamity and ran up the stairs to a scene of

confusion and teary eyes with Mother running about the house trying to find and rescue a three-year-old child from the imagined fire. When she crashed into me she screamed not with relief but with outrage. How could I be a teenager already?

'Tell me, how!? *How!?*'

Always her questions.

'How old are you?'

'Twelve and a half.'

'How old are you?'

'Thirteen next week.'

'What's your name?'

'Mother … I wish … I mean, I'm scared sometimes, Mother.…

'Don't be stupid, child. I does know what your name is. I just wanting you to say it *properly*. *Caramba*, child, just say it properly for me, nuh, and stop setting up your face like some baby…!'

The week I turned fourteen, Father took us out to an all-you-can-eat buffet. He was uncharacteristically happy. He'd voted for the winning Conservative party in the past election, and he felt that he had thus contributed in some small way to the strengthening economy that the newspapers were describing. There'd surely be the chance for full-time work at the factory or somewhere else very soon. My brother was also happy. He'd attended a poetry reading in the city and some old guy in khakis had approached him and urged him to keep writing and to begin submitting his work to magazines. My brother explained to us that he wasn't ready to show his stuff to anyone just yet, but he added that he was happy to know that there

were people out there. People who cared about these things. Father said a quiet grace and then ordered my sixteen-year-old brother a beer, to my amazement and secret jealousy. We then laughingly set out on what my brother called our hunting operations, with the goal of happily confirming beyond all doubt what others in the restaurant might have already suspected about the appetites of dark-skinned people. We were sitting down with plates piled high when we noticed that Mother had disappeared.

We split up and searched everywhere. We went to the ladies' washroom and called into it and asked women who looked at us suspiciously to please check the stalls. We angered a raccoon while checking the dumpsters behind the restaurant. We asked people table by table if they saw someone leave. A black woman. Excuse me, but would you by any chance have noticed a black woman? Finally the manager pushed open a door and found Mother in the staff dressing room, sitting in a corner. Her hands were clasped around her knees and her long pleated skirt fanned out neatly on the floor. Her head was down but we could see that her makeup was streaked. I waited for my brother to say something reassuring, something appropriate, but he was quiet. I waited for Father to act but he remained quiet and still, though he clenched and unclenched his thick fingers. I called to Mother, but she didn't answer.

I lowered myself beside her. I sat there reading the soap bucket stains on the floor with her for a few moments. A zag like a 'w,' an unclosed 'o.' I took her hand in mine. Mother raised her head and looked at me. It took a while, but then she smiled.

We all returned to our table and quietly ate the food now cold and gelid on our plates. We skipped the dessert bar with the voluptuous strawberry tarts we had earlier noticed. Mother sat beside me

on the bus ride home, and at one point she cupped her hand on top of my own.

'I knew it,' she whispered just for me to hear. 'I knew you would never leave me.'

I STARTED TO think about Father's paralysis that night. The clenching and unclenching of his fingers. The futile grasping. There were money matters to consider since Mother couldn't mind any children now. We couldn't afford to lose this income. And what if Mother needed special treatments? What unimaginable end was she travelling toward? Weeks later, we found that the papers were right and that something called 'the economy' did indeed strengthen, but the factory still laid off dozens of full-time workers, and temporary work became even more scarce.

Dirty numbers. But perhaps Father was thinking of something else, of the relationship that he once had with his wife. It's never good to think deeply about the relationship between one's parents, that most unbelievable of relationships. But Mother was black and Father was South Asian, and though they met here, they both came from a place where there were serious misgivings between these peoples. There was something special in their relationship. Despite history and tradition, they had loved each other.

But now things were changing. I witnessed moments when Mother would pause and stutter when she tried to call her husband by name. Those dreadful moments when Mother sitting empty-eyed might suddenly look down to see Father's fingers laced in hers, some coolie-man's dark fingers laced in hers, before politely freeing herself.