

THE MOON COLOR

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I would like to start by thanking all the people who contributed to the production of this book.

To all of you, thank you.

*There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it
so...*

Hamlet

Hell is other people!

Dear diary, hello,

Let's introduce ourselves. That's what people who meet each other for the first time do, right? You're not strictly speaking a person but, since we're going to spend a "looooooong" time together, we're going to pretend.

On your side, there's nothing to say. You're a diary, full stop. My name is Aineyeh. I'm 21 years old, and I'm in high school. Yeah, I know, I'm too old to still be in high school. Aineyeh is not a common name. Auntie Nadé gave it to me. It means "she is pretty." No comments, please... You can call me "Ney".

I am writing, and I just realized I'm talking to a diary! Funny, isn't it? Ah yeah, sorry. You can't answer. And that's the best part of you. You listen, or if you prefer, you read, but you can't respond. You can't make judgments. I made a promise to myself: to never keep a diary anymore. I even burnt the previous one (one of your brothers or cousins) a month ago. I hope that won't happen to you. I didn't want to read what I had written. I must admit, I was a little ashamed of it. There were too many weird "things" (laughs) inside. Anyway, I'm a bizarre girl. Did I tell you I was a girl? Well, I guess it's obvious.

So, I want to fill you with less weird moments (laughing, rather giggling). I bought you on Sunday, July 7th, at 7:07 am. Do you see the connection? The seventh minute of the seventh hour of the seventh day of the seventh month of the year (Sunday is also the seventh day of the week). I would have liked the year to end in the number seven, but it was not possible. So, I expect you to give me good luck. I know I'm superstitious.

I choose you to take my days down. I don't even know why I want to record them. I think I feel the need to. And thank God, you were invented for that purpose...

I call you diary but, you're just a "student notebook" — my student notebook. When your pages will be filled with my "very many non-weird moments" (I insist), I will replace you. Oh yeah, I'm cruel like the world, dear friend.

I almost forgot the most important: you shall not open up to anyone other than me, whatever the circumstances. It's imperative. In a short time, you will be my life. Not everyone should have access to my life. I know you can't stop anyone from reading you, but please try. On my side, I will try to keep you off wrong hands. You know, I wanted to take one of those diaries they sell with padlocks and keys. The pink ones, but it was too much. That suits the "little girls," the "kids." I am not a kid anymore. Moreover, those diaries had only 25 pages, nothing to do with your 300 pages (haha you can show off).

I hope you're not offended that you weren't the first choice. Just remember that in the end, you were the one who won my heart.

In a word, welcome to you.

She was walking slowly, calmly, staring straight forward with a slight smile on the corner of her lips. No, she was not walking; she was gliding. Everyone on her path looked at her. All the men stared at her with round and longing eyes, the mouth widely opened. She was seeing the world and people from a higher point than usual. Thanks to the eight inches of heels! She was beautiful. She was magnificent! But being a wonder wasn't enough. It wasn't only her lovely face that left men speechless, but she did have the Candace descendants' shape too. She felt sublime, splendid, attractive, desirable. She was overwhelmed by an assurance she thought she lacked.

The street looked familiar, but she had trouble recognizing it. It looked like that shopping street in the business district. Yes, it seemed to be that road with its luxury boutiques, its high-fashion clothes. There was this great jeweler, what was his name? But she wasn't on that street anymore. Was that a podium? The flashes were dazzling her. The crowd was yelling her name. She stopped and saluted. A voice shouted, "and the winner is..." Her name rang out in the place followed by a roar of the crowd and a thunder of applause. No way! She was the *Miss*! What she had always dreamed of. She was smiling. Could she be any happier? Lady providence seemed to say yes. She was still on the street. She was supposed to reach that place in front of her. Why did she have to go there? She couldn't remember the reason, but she had to go there. A surprise waited for her. She hurried up. A sudden light dazzled her; cries resounded in the distance...

She woke up with a start. She tried to get up but was caught with a violent coughing fit. Her room was full of smoke and in complete darkness. She got out of bed and crawled. She

could not see anything, and the smoke irritated her eyes and throat. She felt heavy and slowed down in her movements. It was sweltering. She heard screams, obscure words. With the little strength she had left, she tried to move forward in the dark, believing she was going to the door. She caught her head in a chair and then in a fan. She was out of breath and sweaty. Her chest, throat, mouth, and nostrils seemed to be burning. She reached out to where the door handle was supposed to be. She let out a cry of pain. The handle was burning hot. She collapsed on the ground, curled up on her. As she was rolling on the ground, her foot hit the edge of her bed violently. Tears automatically began to flow. Her body could no longer withstand all these attacks. The earth itself seemed to be shaking. Maybe she was still in her dream that had turned into a nightmare. She was probably going to wake up soon or not...

“There is somebody over there; I heard screaming.”

She roused. The voice came from the window. But where was the window in that darkness? “Help! Help!” she tried to scream, but her voice seemed like a barely inaudible whisper. Her attempt let in enough smoke to burn her throat and lungs. She started coughing again when a hand grabbed her by the waist and pulled her back. The fresh air that touched her face and filled her lungs woke her up. She opened her mouth and arms as if she wanted oxygen to enter her body through all her pores. Only her head had emerged from the window. The rest of the body had remained in the house, and the saving hands were trying to get it out as best they could. Soon, other hands came to grab her and take her out. She was alive; she was breathing. She had to admit; she

was scared. She was pulled out, away from the smoke, apart from the heat.

"Is she OK?" a voice asked.

"Bring her water," said another one.

She opened her eyes, weakly at first, and then wider. She was lying on her back, on the grass. The sky was cloudy or obscured by the scattered smoke escaping from the house, her house, on fire. Someone sat her; another gave her a drink. She coughed. Water ran down her chin. Her irritated throat softened. The light beam of a flashlight dazzles her.

"Check if she's not hurt."

People were moving around her. Hands touched her wrist and her neck. Why? She was breathing; she was coughing; she was alive. What were they looking for? They asked her questions. From time to time, she nodded. Around them, people were running, shouting, giving orders to each other in a cacophony, and a huge uproar. What was going on?

"She's fine!" concluded one of the rescuers with eagerness.

They moved away from her, leaving her lying on the sand. They ran toward other scrolls of rising smoke in the dark sky. She sighed. She felt like she was dying. She had seen herself die. The idea scared the hell out of her. We do not think about it, but when we feel the end coming, it's horrible. The idea of losing everything you have, leaving your loved ones... Your loved ones! The word clicked in her head. Her mother, her

father, where were they? A sudden fear seized and froze her. She did not think about them at any point since she woke up. How could she have been so selfish? Shame, anger, and despair overwhelmed her. She tried to straighten up, with difficulty. Her arms were aching and seemed to complain of the strain they have to make.

“Mom... Dad...” she whispered.

She was shuddering. No! Not her parents! She suddenly stood up and ran toward the burning house. She went to the entrance gate. There was a whole group of people trying to put out the fire. Her home was not the only burning house. She saw about twenty more homes preyed on by hell — all aligned one after the other. The fire seemed to have started in one and spread all the way to the others.

There were screams, cries for help. The murmur of the crowd that gathered in front of the blaze like they were staring at a show. One could see a glow in the eyes of the youngest ones and a terror in the eyes of the elders. Everyone was going in all directions, some with buckets of water to try to put out the fire, others with clothes, bags, and documents half crimson that they had been able to save. She hadn't saved anything, and she was in danger of losing much more.

She was facing the entrance of her house and kept shouting, calling her mother and father successively. She couldn't go any further because the fire was intense. She turned around, trying to recognize her parents in the faces around, to perceive a voice that the ambient noise might have been covering, but nothing. Maybe they were trapped inside, trapped in their sleep like she was earlier. She had to go in.

She began to stop passers-by, saying: “my parents are inside, they are inside” while indicating her house. But no one reacted, everyone was concerned. They also had their parent, son, mother, brother, administrative documents to save. She felt desperately lonely. She was praying inwardly, avoiding thinking about the worst.

Did heaven listen to her? A strong wind rose — one of those that precede storms. The crowd started screaming. The wind seemed to amplify the flames. As in a wild dance, they went to the right and then to the left, in an unpredictable movement. Suddenly, a thumping noise was heard. Part of the roof of her house had just collapsed with a loud crash. She felt like she received an electric shock. She automatically ran toward the building. There was no one to stop her, and even if there was, how could they stop her? In such a short time, she had just experienced two of the most terrible feelings you could feel in a lifetime: the fear of leaving this world, on the one hand, and the fear of losing loved ones on the other. She knew what the most difficult possibility to consider was.

She managed to get into the house. It was sweltering there but did her senses still work? She was following that instinct that pushed her forward. Her parents were everything to her, her world, her life. She could not afford to lose them. She kept shouting, calling them; she received no answer, nothing but the roar of the flames and the rumble of thunder. She could not move forward, everything was on fire, everything. The collapsed roof had generated a wall of burning rubles between her and the parental room. She wanted to go up, yet the intense heat did not allow her to do so. Her body had, indeed, accepted to enter this furnace but refused to go further. The rain started. Through the open roof, large drops

fell on her. She remained motionless in front of this battle between the flames and the storm. Impassive, too scared, or resigned? Desperate? Alone... Her face was wet, and it had nothing to do with the rain.



It was 7:30 am. She was definitely going to be late. She couldn't afford to be late — not today. Today was a great day, a special day. However, she had not yet finished! Do you know the most difficult household task in the world? Cleaning the bathroom, of course. An activity that involves all the muscles in your body. It was necessary to crouch, lower, kneel, get up and above all, rub. Imagine not dealing with a so-called “normal” shower but rather with a floor cemented in places and tiled in others — a soil where moss and mold reign supreme. But even then, imagine you had to clean that shower after sweeping and wiping “an entire” house, after doing the laundry, washing the dishes, ironing the clothes, and preparing breakfast... And all this after you got up at 4 am, because you fell asleep after midnight. Finally, imagine that after the shower, you had to go to school and walk to get there.

“Are you dreaming?” cried Auntie Nadé.

Ney looked up and saw her at the doorway of the shower, full of anger.

“Ohin and Tah are waiting for you to finish, so they can take

their bath and go to school, and you are dreaming. Do you want my sons to be late?"

"No mom," replied Ney, looking down.

"Yes, you do! That's what you want. You want my sons to be late so that they will miss their classes. They will fail their exams and become vagrants. That's exactly what you want. But that will not happen! Oh, no! It won't happen!" she repeated, raising her voice. "Just cleaning a shower is what you can't do? Why are you so lazy?"

Ney kept her eyes down, listening to Auntie Nadé pour out her anger on her.

"You're mean!" concluded Auntie Nadé. "That's meanness. With everything I do for you, is that how you want to thank me? You don't want to make any effort. Would you rather me to come and finish your work myself? Do you want me to clean that shower myself? ANSWER WHEN I TALK TO YOU!"

"No mom," Ney answered hastily, still looking down.

"If you're not done in five minutes, you'll see what I am made of," she threatened as she turned around.

Ney sighed. She was almost done anyway. Auntie Nadé liked melodrama. She was exaggerating when she said that Ney was not making any effort. Of course, she did, but she couldn't complain. She had been taught not to answer when elders raised their voices. God knows that those recent months, she would have liked to give a rebuttal to a lot of the

criticisms she faced. But she had learned that silence is a virtue in front of Auntie Nadé—sometimes at her own expense.

She got out of the shower and went to tell Auntie Nadé. Auntie Nadé looked at her with an evil eye. Ney hurried to get out of her sight. She went into the backyard. It's better to be very far from her at a time like this. Auntie Nadé has a terrible behavior; it's not a secret for anyone. But her condition seemed to be getting worse these days. For two days now, Auntie Nadé had been imposing a fast on the whole house, a fast that she had difficulty following. That increased her bad temper. The day before, she had also lost money. Not a fortune, but every single coin is worthy for her, especially in the middle of the month. That made her even angrier. And as with fasting and losing money, she could only blame herself, so she was looking for a whipping girl to spill her frustration. Ney was the ideal person, but she refused to give Auntie Nadé more opportunity to realize this. Life was already hard enough with her in her normal state; no need to endure other weird conditions. And besides, today was a great day...

How long had she been with Auntie Nadé? She couldn't remember. It seemed like she had always lived with Auntie Nadé. As far as she could remember, Auntie Nadé had always been there, yelling at her. She neither hate nor love her. She just dealt with her, even if sometimes the relentlessness she suffered irritated her. At least she had a roof over her head to sleep on and food to eat. Speaking of feeding, she was starving. But it was impossible to eat in this house until the seven days of fasting decreed by Auntie Nadé for some reason—whom she was the only one to know—passed. It was undoubtedly the same reasons for all the previous fast

Auntie Nadé had been imposing every month since the past year. Ney would have liked, for the happiness of her stomach, that the good Lord would hear Auntie Nadé. But apparently, he was not very receptive (one wonders why). Nevertheless, Ney cheats. She usually waits until she reaches school to buy herself a snack.

“AINEYEH!” Auntie Nadé suddenly shouted.

“Yes, mom,” Ney replied, rising in a jump as if she had received an electric shock.

Auntie Nadé came into the backyard.

“You stole from me!”

“No mom!” Ney replied hastily, taking a step back.

“Don’t lie to me!” shouted Auntie Nadé. “I can’t find my necklace anymore. My beautiful gold-plated necklace. It even has my initials on it! I don’t see it anymore. I know you took it from me. It can’t be the boys. There are only two of us in the house. And it’s not me!”

“No, mom, it’s not me,” replied Ney once again. As a reflex, she had put her arms over her head in a protecting gesture.

“If you don’t confess! I know it’s you.”

“No, mom, it’s not me,” Ney repeated tirelessly.

Auntie Nadé fulminated for a moment, then turned around

and continued to threaten Ney. She sighed. The storm had passed. She had to hurry to leave before the second gust came. And this time, it will be a hurricane. She waited until Ohin, Tah, and their mother finished washing to take her shower. By the time it was finished, the eighth hour of the day had already begun. She was late. Her high school was quite far from home, and she had to walk to get there. Auntie Nadé did not give her enough money to go by public transport. Not that she didn't want to, but she couldn't. So, Ney walked to school every day. It was not good for her skin, and it left her with many burn marks, but she had no choice. Usually, it took her an hour, but since she was so tired of the work she had done earlier, it took her two hours to get to school. She was exhausted and hungry. She had missed the first class of the morning, and she didn't learn the last lesson of the following course. If the teacher asked a question, she wouldn't know what to answer. Moreover, if the teacher decided to do a surprise control, she would have a zero. Besides, the following class was Mr. Baba's, the math teacher (her pet peeve). He did not accept any lateness. She hurried. The classroom was at the back of the school. She managed to get there before the professor. Blessed be the Lord! Students chatted in groups happily. She went to sit at the back. No one noticed her coming, no one greeted her, nor did she welcome anyone. She was used to it, and it was helpful to avoid derogatory looks and words. She wanted to read her lessons, but she was sleepy. She tried to rest for a few minutes on her table. Unfortunately, she did not have that pleasure. The teacher entered, and the class began.

She heard Mr. Baba speaking. She listened to the words without really understanding their meanings. However, she

could not ask questions. Why? First, she was half-asleep. Perhaps he had taken up and explained several times the concepts he was presenting. Even if he told them once again for her, she was still not sure she could grasp their meaning. Then, she hadn't revised anything; maybe if she had done it, she wouldn't have been so lost. Finally, she did not want to draw attention to herself.

The professor came to talk about geometry; he explained how civilizations and generations, applied mathematics in their activities. He gave the example of pieces of woven fabric with right-angled patterns or perfect circles. He also talked about masks as an example of symmetry and asked the class to present famous masks. In an almost synchronized movement, all turned their heads toward Ney. Some with a mocking look on the face. It took her a few minutes to realize what happened. The teacher himself was surprised by the movement but smiled. A student said something that she did not hear. The whole class laughed, even the teacher. She adjusted her glasses and lowered her head. In those moments, she would like to disappear. The other students could be very mean sometimes. She did everything she could to avoid their attention. But today, she didn't care what they could say or do. It was a great day, a special day. Nothing could hurt her. All she was waiting for was for school to finish. She'd go to her appointment. Just thinking about it made her smile. She plunged her hand into the pocket of her skirt. The object she had put inside was still there. She sighed with relief. Only two more hours left...

Mr. Baba's class ended. The second teacher entered the room and, without warning, pronounced the most feared sentence: "Put everything away and take a sheet of paper!" Jinx! Little men were dancing on her copy, like the little red

devils in cartoons, laughing at her. She knew she would fail to this control. She wanted to burst into tears. If she didn't get a good mark on this test, she wouldn't have enough grade this quarter. She was already under grade the previous quarter. But it wasn't her fault! At home she didn't have enough time to study. Besides, the teacher hardly came to class; he had only attended four classes since the beginning of the school year. However, he was very assiduous in the reinforcement courses he gave on Saturdays. He gave students who could afford to pay his hourly rates, detailed lessons with exercises. Moreover, it appeared that the current control was one of those exercises he had given. It wasn't fair. Ney already had to beg Auntie Nadé to buy the booklet he made in addition to the official state books, already purchased. She could not afford these private lessons. It wasn't fair.

When the time came to return her copy, she did it with a lump in her chest. She failed. It was as clear as daylight. Everything was done to put her in a bad mood, but not today. Today was her favorite day of the week. The classes ended at 1 pm. This left her a four-hour slot between the end of school and Auntie Nadé's arrival at home. Four hours of freedom. She planned to take full advantage of it. As if heaven would also want to celebrate this day with her, the teacher stopped his class earlier than usual, thirty minutes before the normal end. She took the opportunity to copy the lessons she had missed in the early morning classes.

As usual, she was in the back. The class was beginning to empty. Nonetheless, some students stayed, either to study or to discuss. In front of her, two rows up, was Pascal, who seemed to be in a lot of trouble. Pascal had a leg disability. As a result, he was in a wheelchair. It was always a challenge

for him to come and leave school. The classrooms were raised by at least one meter from the ground. So, to join the class, he had to climb up and down slight steps. That was not easy in a wheelchair. The other students usually helped him, but sometimes they preferred having a little “fun” with him like today, when they “stole” his chair to hide it at the back of the classroom. Poor Pascal asked them to give it back to him, but each supplication triggered a burst of laughter. Ney took pity on him and even wanted to take the chair and give it to him, but she remembered that he was one of those who had made fun of her for a few hours earlier. Also, she would have attracted the wrath of other students, which she needed the least right now. May God help him.

The bell rang. Ney threw her booklets into her bag without even storing them properly (or just closing the books or notebooks). She had no time to waste. She wasn’t planning on losing a single second. She rushed out of the room without a look back. Anyway, she left without regret. She was supposed to go to the *big market*. Her appointment was there. She hurried, even wanted to fly. The big market was not far away, but she wanted to reach it as soon as possible. She checked once again if the object in her pocket was still there. It was there.

She arrived at the big market. A little faster than usual. She stopped in the shade of a bus shelter to catch her breath. She had been so eager to reach it that she had a stitch on the side. But she had to rush. She missed the previous week’s appointment. She wasn’t planning on missing today’s one or wasting the little time she had. Besides, today was a special day. She straightened up and continued on her way.

The market was not very big, but it was so crowded that

crossing it took time. A considerable crowd was moving, mixing, bumping, and intertwining in all directions. The last purchases should be made before nightfall, and this was being done in a massive uproar of sounds and screams. Ney wondered which of the street vendors, “luggage carriers” offering their services, trade unionists, taxi drivers, or customers made the most noise. This show was the same every day, weekdays and weekends, on holidays as well as on working days. As suffocating as this atmosphere may be, Ney loved it. Being in contact with people (and contact was a fragile word, tightly bonded would be more appropriate) gave her a particular joy. The market was a meeting of cultures, languages, and nationalities. Sometimes people would talk languages she had never heard before, offer articles she had never seen before. But the aspect she liked the most of this commotion was the fact that she could contemplate all that quirk, taste all these people, without anyone noticing her. Her most ardent desire (to tell the truth, the second one), is to be melted into the mass, was fulfilled in this place. She was a stranger. A delight...

But not everything was so pink. The market was not the paradise that her mind wanted to show. Quite often, she was brutally brought back to reality by the smell of filth, poured on the ground, and dripping from the siphons and gutters. The bins planned to collect this waste, immersed in a halo of flies and mosquitoes, were overwhelmed. Sweating, and dumps’ perfume were an olfactory cocktail to thrill the most sensitive nostrils. The crowd was in a hurry, not bothered at all by this nauseating sight. Some people pinched or closed their noses with their hands, but the majority seemed to deal with it. It was someone else’s job to do something.

Ney hastened her step as best she could in the melee. As

strange as it may seem, she was always on alert in the market. It was well known that insecurity reigned there. The market was known as the center of pickpocketing. It was common to hear merchants or customers shouting, “thief!” and see groups of young boys running in all directions. Being stolen from was as casual as hearing the rooster crow at dawn. Although, as one says, “dogs do not eat dogs” Ney, put her bag on her chest (it always made her feel pregnant), and squeezed the object she had in her pocket even tighter. You never know what can happen.

She arrived at the crossroad she had nicknamed the “plate crossroad” because there were shops on either side selling cutlery and various kitchen utensils. She had almost arrived at the meeting place. She turned left and drove into a dark, asphalt-free alleyway. The further she went, the faster she breathed. Her heart was beating. She was walking, but the adrenaline had changed her step into a kind of dance. She could not hide her excitement and joy. She was smiling. People looked at her like she was crazy. It didn’t matter, he was there. The subject of her fascination was there, sitting on a pile of rubbish. He had a leaf rolled like a cigar in his fingers. A slight scroll of smoke escaped. Seeing him filled her soul with happiness. She refrained from running toward him and hugging him. He doesn’t like it. Gujo—his name (she called him ‘Jo)—had been her reason for living for a year. She had a purpose every time she left home; it was to see him after school. He was her everything. All she wanted was to be with him. She could not name what she felt for him. He was the only person on this earth with whom she felt good, happy, and drunk with happiness.

"Hello, 'Jo," she said shyly.

The boy came out of his contemplation and looked at her without expression.

"You're late," he blamed in a puff of smoke smelling like adulterated beer.

"Yeah, sorry, the class didn't end quickly. I'm sorry, it'll never happen again. I promise. Forgive me, please? It's not going to happen again," she replied, panicked.

'Jo barely seemed to notice her trouble. Apart from his answer, he had not sketched any movement, like a bird that doesn't belong in the pack. She loved him for that, his detached attitude, like he didn't care about anything.

"Do you remember today's date?" she asked timidly.

She had no answer. 'Jo did not react, like he didn't hear what she just said. But Ney was used to his behavior enough to know that he had heard it (he didn't like being asked if he had heard something correctly).

"We've been together for a year now," she said with a smile. "Happy birthday to us!"

She had trouble containing her emotions. Tears even appeared in the corner of her eyes. 'Jo, on the other hand, seemed to hear or understand nothing. No reaction. Always in his blissful contemplation of the horizon.

"I figured out I could give you a gift. Look!" Ney said while pulling the object out of her pocket.

She handed him a gold-plated necklace with an "N" shaped pendant.

'Jo, at that moment, looked at her. Then his eyes stared at the necklace. He looked at it for a moment, abruptly ripped it out of Ney's hands, put it in his pocket, and then stood upright.

"We're late. Are you ready?" he asked her.

"Yes, yes, I am. I am ready," she hastened to answer.

"Let's go!" he said as he entered the adjacent street, without a look back.

Ney followed him up. He loved her gift. If he didn't like it, he would have been upset. A broad smile appeared on her lips. She was so happy to have made him happy, and especially to be useful to him on this day. She was hoping that everything would go well. She'd do anything to make sure everything went well. She wanted him to be proud of her, just as she was proud of him. She hastened to follow him. Walk in his footsteps; nothing could make her happier.

Bonnie & Clyde

School newspaper Monday, September 9
Class Introduction section
Author: anonymous

Hello dear all,

Today I have the heavy responsibility of introducing my class. I don't know why the newspaper's editor chose me, but I'm very honored. I should warn you; I can't keep my tongue out of my mouth (laughs). I will tell you everything, absolutely everything you need to know about my class, the teachers, the students, the atmosphere, the anecdotes, everything! Your eyes, hungry of gossip, will be more than satisfied. First, I want you to keep in mind one thing: I love my class. I don't know who composed it, but I want to thank that person. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. The result couldn't be better. The students are all so different and exciting in their way, a real cocktail of character, and color (and even smell ha!). Of course, I will not name anyone. But I know that the most discerning minds will quickly put faces and names on the descriptions I will give.

I start with the most "interesting" person in my class, and it's a boy (well, yeah, I admit it's my crush). I'm going to call him "Charming." That handsome kid is the caricature of the good-looking face boy from a teenage sitcom. That means he is supposed to be kind, charming (again), athletic, very intelligent, and coming from a wealthy, loving, caring family. Obviously, as the most handsome student, he has a horde of girls around him, but of course, he is supposed to fall in love with the ugliest one. Except in our case, "Charming" is

everything but nice. He is haughty, arrogant, mean, and nasty. But I still like him anyway.

As a king needs a queen, I must talk about Miss "I-am-the-most-beautiful-one-and-you-only-are-losers." Ladies and gentlemen let me introduce you to another unpleasant fellow student, which is incidentally the companion of my heart's chosen one (a true teenage series). Hell yeah, she is beautiful and even very beautiful. I will never say it loudly, but sometimes I contemplate her (we all like to look at a piece of art, don't we?). But I can hardly stand her. In addition to not being the brightest in class, she takes a mischievous pleasure (like her king) in showing others that she is superior to them (just because she is beautiful? My poor little one!).

It's enough for the royal family; we can now talk about the peasants. So, we have Miss "useless." A melanin-deficit young lady (I said too much, oops). She is as useless in the classroom as a piece of wood.

What would a class be without the legendary "big-fat-Dumbo-the-elephant"? Still out of breath, but with a golden heart (another caricature, my class looks like a cliché). I like him so much! Well, that's all I will say about Dumbo.

There is also Miss "I-make-up-all-day-long," whose real face is unknown. I think she's a superhero who must have superpowers, which is why she hides behind a ton of creams so that people don't recognize her (laughs).

I should talk about Mr. "I-do-not-know-what-a-bath-is" who stinks (my God, he stinks!). We all avoid him so that he doesn't want to open his mouth in front of us (ugh!). Even the teacher had once asked a question. Mr. "I-do-not-know-what-a-bath-is" raised his hand, and the teacher took three steps back before allowing him to answer (even the teacher is aware of

the devastating damage of his breath). Legend has it that the Sahara was created one day when he went to the Sahel on holiday — just saying.

There's also the cripple with the bad temper (I know you'll recognize yourself and guess what? Everyone hates you!). The last but not the least, Miss "I'm the sweetest girl," who cries for nothing (by the way, we all know you like "Charming," unfortunately for you, Miss "I-am-the-most-beautiful-one-and-you-only-are-losers" knows it now).

I admit, I did exaggerate a bit the features of some people. I did it on purpose. The artist shows the world, not as it is, but as he feels it (yeah, I know I'm showing off). I hope I have introduced my class correctly to you and like me you have fallen in love with it. For those I forgot to introduce, don't worry, talking about them would not add anything to my story. The only question to ask is, who am I in this presentation? (Ha ha!) I let you guess...



She followed, 'Jo, who was making his way through the crowd. It was not easy regarding the number of people there, and she often lost sight of him. Besides, her heavy bag was compressing her chest and actively hindering her movements. Instinctively she knew where he was going and so she still managed to stay in his wake. It was never the same place. All the places he usually chose had the same characteristics, full of people in order not to be easily discerned, but less crowded than the market to quickly move and escape if necessary. The process was the same, and for

that, Ney could only thank 'Jo smart brain. He was sometimes weird and in a second state, but he knew what he was doing, and Ney was so happy to follow his commands. She was glad to follow him.

How did she manage to meet him? A pure coincidence. But for her, it was destiny. They were meant to meet. That was a year ago. She was using her free time before going home. The market was crowded, as usual. She had decided to go there to be in her element, lost and forgotten by all. Her steps had led her to the alleyway. How and why? She didn't know it yet. Now, she was sure; it was fate. That day, he was there with the same look, the same presence. Ney did not know what was going on, but when she saw him, she felt light, happy, and joyful. That feeling never disappeared. He had seen her, had stared at her for a moment (the most magical five seconds of her life), then had looked away. A group of young men were emerging from the impasse. She was too busy looking at her Apollon and did not see them coming. They shoved her. Strangely enough, she was the one who apologized under the insults of the young passers-by. But this incident had the advantage of having caught 'Jo's attention. He had straightened up, a certain glance in his eyes. He approached her and asked her to do it again. She remembered stuttering and asking, "Do what again?" "Push people," he replied. She recalled how this request (the first of a series of bizarre inquiries) had seemed incongruous to her. But she had done so, anxious to please him. She had approached a person from the back and pushed him with her shoulder like she was walking and didn't notice him. She apologized again and then turned her eyes to 'Jo. A smile was spreading over his face. He had a beautiful smile. His teeth turned yellowed, filled with tartars, though. Others were

missing or partially broken, but the whole thing seemed attractive to her. It was the first and last time he smiled at her. Her whole being was illuminated that day, and 'Jo's too. She remembered that he came to her and eagerly asked her if she wanted to make some money, she could help him; together, they would be rich. He introduced himself; he said his name was Gujo. He asked her name, where she lived, when she was free. He was celebrating, and she couldn't help but rejoice with him. Why? She didn't know it yet, but the prospect of making money and especially spending time with him, pleased her. And from that day on, they have seen each other every week. He saw an interest in being with her, and since then, they had a common goal. She followed him and helped him in his project. He barely speaks, contenting himself with giving orders. However, with him, Ney gave meaning to her life. Someone needed her, even if he didn't show it, he wanted her there.

He had his flaws, and alcohol was one of them. Once, he was so drunk that she had to carry him to his mother's home. She knew he was smoking weed or shooting himself. He didn't go to school like her. It didn't bother him; it didn't bother her either. She liked that *Bad Boy* side. Often, she would try to do the talk; sometimes, she would bring him something to eat. He answered, vaguely or not at all. He always ate what she provided. He was thin, very thin, even skinny, but it suited him well. Ney suspected that he didn't eat enough, but his mother was a "cordon bleu." She lives in a wooden house covered with black plastic in a slum-like neighborhood. This area was located behind the market on the edge of a ravine designed to drain wastewater. She sells pancakes. Like her son, her smile had the gift of enlightening you. Unlike him, she was not stingy with it. Mother Mahi was the way the

neighborhood called her. Ney didn't know if it was her real name. She had been happy to see Ney with her son. The latter tried to stop by to say hello very often. The real reason was she received a cake at each visit. Ney truly loved this lady; she deeply loved her son. And for a year, they had been her refuge in her muddy life routine.

They had reached the right place. As Ney suspected, it was open and sparse. But they still were at the market. The square was surrounded by bus stations serving hinterland cities and sometimes bordering countries. There were many street vendors offering bracelets, belts and a full bunch of items for the passers-by who would like to go to one of the other stations. The square, even though less crowded, remained just as unhealthy as the center of the market, full of sludge and plastic packaging. On the west side, where they had come, there were large areas separated by small winding alleys. Normally, a dual carriageway crossed the square, but the latter only appeared when a bus entered or left the station. Most of the time, it was covered by the crowd. Ney wondered what this square or the market might look like at night. Surely, they will be free of people. But she was not sure.

She took a quick look. There were no cops or rivals. She smiled. Once again, 'Jo had well selected his place. The moment was approaching. Ney already knew her role. For a year, she had been correctly trained and even become an expert. She was waiting for the maestro's signal. She began to walk, without a precise goal, her eyes still fixed on 'Jo. He, too, was moving forward, looking in all directions, like a lion on the lookout. He stopped by a young man. The latter looked lost. He wore a shirt and jeans pants that once had

been beige but now had a brown tint. In his left hand, he was holding a heavy suitcase, whose weight made him slightly lean. On his right shoulder, he had a bag shaped like a briefcase. He also had a full backpack. His head turned in all directions, as if he was looking for, or waiting for, someone. His eyes were both amazed and frightened. Ney knew that look. The one of the newcomers, all excited to come to the big city but finding themselves in the center of a colossal beast ready to catch them. A relative or a close one will come to pick him up. Sometimes, no one comes. At nightfall, they lie down on the market shelves with a simple cardboard box as their mattress, at the mercy of mosquitoes, cockroaches, and mice. All this for the urban dream. This one, let's call him "Koffi" (Ney liked to give them a name) didn't look like a winner. He would undoubtedly get swallowed. He was *the right person*. As always, 'Jo knew how to find them. He had a real talent for that. Ney turned toward Koffi. She moved forward as quickly as possible. The latter did not see her coming. His head was in the clouds; he could not have seen the wind coming up. She progressed with great strides as best she could, the crowd was less dense but remained compact. She reached his level without slowing his momentum and pushed him. Koffi almost fell. Ney apologized quickly and left without looking back. 'Jo had already gone in the opposite direction, Koffi's wallet in his hands...

The trick was effective, surgical. Ney would shove a passer-by, 'Jo, on the other side very quickly retrieved his belongings, and both would disappear. And if unfortunately, the victim (she didn't like that term), realized what just happened to him, he couldn't take it out on Ney. A young schoolgirl is very innocent; moreover, she wouldn't have his

stuff: *effective*. They had been doing this trick for a year, never twice in the same week, never twice in the same place. Thus, they have never been noticed, neither by rival groups nor by the police. It was a pity for the stolen ones. But they had enough money hidden somewhere; they would not miss the robbed one. That's what 'Jo usually said. Ney wasn't doing it for the money. Besides, 'Jo rarely shared the loot. She was doing it to please him, to be with him and because she was good at it. It had become almost like a game. It seemed simple, but no. It was necessary to choose the right angle to correctly push the subject so that 'Jo would have easy access to the valuable wanted item. Over time, she had learned how to accost people according to their age, morphology, and condition. It was an art where she excelled. Usually, after these robberies, they left each other to meet the following week. They shouldn't be seen together in the wake of the theft. During this time, Ney missed him badly. Those moments were short but rewarding for her.

So, she was walking straight forward. She had to make a significant detour to reach home (never come back to the crime scene). The sun was beginning to decline toward the horizon. She didn't want to give Auntie Nadé one more reason to spill her rage on her. She was on her way when, by a curious coincidence, she came face to face with Koffi. He was panicked, scared, and in tears when their eyes crossed. Ney did not know why, but it was as if a flash of understanding ran through his face. She knew she seemed to look guilty because she was so shocked to see him. That was not possible! She was gone straight ahead without turning. When did she retrace her steps? She turned abruptly to go in the opposite direction when Koffi started hailing her. Ney pretended not to hear anything; there was no evidence that

he was talking to her. It could have been anyone. And suddenly, the feared words were shouted.

“Thief! Catch her! She stole from me!”

Her heart fell to the level of her belly button. Thieves in this area were lynched in public, without trial. That’s why they had to be discreet. But she was so recognizable. Damned be her skin color! She wasn’t supposed to panic. Anyway, he had no proof, nothing. She had to keep moving forward as if nothing had happened. But her body was no longer responding. She had started walking quickly, running, her heart beating fiercely against her chest. She jostled at people in her path without looking back. She still seemed to hear “thief” or was it only in her head? She had to get away as soon as possible. She turned left, then right. She perfectly knew the area. All these countless streets formed a maze where only experts could find their way. She was out of breath, and her heavy bag was compressing her chest. She had a stitch on her side and leaned against the pole of a streetlight. She looked to the right and left. No one was coming in her direction. She didn’t hear screams anymore, either. She had lost him. It was rare to catch a “thief” in the big market. Anyway, she doesn’t define herself that way. She is not violent; she only frees some people from the excess wealth they have, nothing more. She straightened up, she was thirsty, and her shadow on the ground was beginning to point east. She had to hurry. Fortunately, in her race, she had headed toward the path of her house. She was now out of the big market. If she was quick, she could be home in fifteen minutes.

Along the way, she saw an old lady with bags full of food in her hands who was having trouble crossing the road. She didn't know if it was due to the weight of the bags or the age, but the old lady was bent at an angle close to ninety degrees. She was stopping on one side of the road and was having trouble reaching the other side. The cars passing by and the onlookers gave her no chance. Ney rushed to help her.

"Hello, mom, let me help you cross over," Ney said as she reached the old lady's level.

The lady looked at her with round eyes of surprise. She then whispered inaudible words that seemed to be thanks, with a smile. Ney took the old lady's bags. They were indeed very heavy. Ney wondered how she was able to carry them from the market to the main road. She also struggled to straighten up with these loads in both hands and almost fell. When she found her balance, she put herself forward, the old lady followed her. Crossing the road with these weights and in this crowd was not an easy task. Despite the presence of many pedestrians, cars (mainly communal taxis) were driving a little too fast and in total disregard of the traffic regulations and rules of decency. It was, therefore, necessary to be alert, to look from left to right while playing elbows so as not to get caught by the mass. After a real battle, Ney managed to reach the other side of the road, followed by the old lady. The latter thanked her (still inaudible). Ney asked her where she lived; she pointed to a building three hundred feet away. Ney went in the indicated direction. She would have had qualms about leaving the old lady with these weights. She had to finish what she had started, even if her shoulders and fingers were screaming. When they almost

arrived in front of the building, a horde of kids shouting, “Niannai! Niannai!” came to surround them and wanted to take the bags from her. Ney shouted at them and tried to chase them away when the old lady, with a pressure from her hand, seemed to tell her to let it go. The children took the bags and brought them into the building. The old lady thanked Ney again with inaudible words and entered. Ney stayed for a moment in front of the building, while the numbness in her shoulders and fingers passed. When she felt better, she resumed her path.

After this detour, which lasted at least twenty minutes, she’ll surely be late. Auntie Nadé was going to pour her anger on her again. She could already hear it. In addition to Auntie Nadé’s voice in her head, she also heard her belly rumbling. The afternoon’s adventures had almost made her forget that she was hungry. She needed to eat something before arriving home where Auntie Nadé’s fast will prevent her from eating. But at the same time, she didn’t want to waste any more time. But it wasn’t like she was planning to sit in a restaurant and order a hearty meal. Arriving around the house (but still far enough away not to get caught), she will stop by a grocery store and buy something to satisfy her hunger.

She had just left the big market and its surroundings. She entered a corridor leading to a series of low-rise houses glued together and aligned on either side of the street. One of those houses was Professor Baba’s. She knew because she had seen him several times smoking a cigarette in front of her in casual clothes. She had always managed not to be seen by him. She did not intend to deviate from the rule today. She hastened her step. She was getting closer to her home now.

There was a shop nearby where she could buy cookies and candies.

At the grocery store crossroads, and after her shopping, she was surprised to see John-Alexander standing like a picket fixing the house in front of him. John-Alexander was the best student in her class. The one who always had the highest marks on all homework. An egghead as they say. In addition to being smart, he was quite cute. His smile could make you melt. But John-Alexander was also a very unpleasant fellow student, who thought he was superior to everyone else. Coming from a wealthy family (at least more prosperous than other students' families), he disliked being in what he called a slum high school. John-Alexander told anyone who would listen that it was his father who wanted him to be there, because he had attended the same school there in his younger ages. So, John-Alexander was perpetuating the family tradition. Usually, he had a group of people who followed him, and strictly abided by all his requests. He looked like a king with his subjects. It was rare not to see them with him. That is why Ney was surprised to see him alone; moreover, far from school and still in the district, he hated. But Ney's other remark was that he looked worried, as if something was disturbing him. He was walking to one side of the street and then retraced his steps, his eyes fixed on the same building. Ney reached his level; she didn't know if she should greet him or not. He usually pretended to ignore her, and Ney didn't try to dissuade him. She had finally decided that she would pass him without greeting him when their eyes crossed. He had a surprise movement.

"Ahem... hello John-Alexander," she said.

“Hello, uh...?”

“Aineyeh,” she added, rolling her eyes. Of course, he didn’t remember her name. That’s not surprising.

“Yes... Aineyeh, right? Yes... I knew your name,” he said, embarrassed. “Are you alright? Do you live around here?” he asked, trying to play it cool. But it didn’t suit him at all.

For a reason Ney didn’t know, he seemed stressed. Perhaps he was ashamed to be seen in such a neighborhood. What a disgrace to his *majesty*!

“Not really,” she replied. “I’m just passing through. Well, see you tomorrow,” she added suddenly. She didn’t have time to talk; she was this close to being scolded.

“See you tomorrow? No, wait! Wait!” he said, holding her by the arm when she had already started to move forward.

Ney turned around, surprised. What could he possibly want from her?

“Yes?”

“Uh...” he looked immensely embarrassed while releasing her arm. “I need your help.”

“Excuse me? My help?” asked Ney, who was sure she heard wrong. “How can you need my help when you don’t even know my name, and you didn’t even know we were going to meet?”

"Yes, you're right. No, I mean, you're not totally right. Indeed, I didn't know we were going to meet. It's an opportunity. I mean... I mean, it's good, I didn't plan it, but it's good. Because I need you to do something for me," he ended up saying.

He still looked embarrassed, but Ney perceived something else in his voice and face, like a mixture of anxiety and sadness. For some reason, she felt sorry for him.

"How can I help you?" she asked.

He seemed relieved.

"You see, Mary. Mary, the cute girl and..."

"Yes, I see who she is," Ney cut off.

Of course, she knew whom Mary was; the whole school knew whom Mary was. It was like John-Alexander's female reflection but with less brain. The gorgeous girl in high school. The star... Ney didn't like her. Because she, more than anyone else in that school, liked to make fun of and belittle others. Yeah, she looked beautiful, like a model for a fashion show with exceptional features. Yes, Mary, the only person, John-Alexander, was bowing face to. Yes, she knew *Queen Mary*, with her *terrible* reputation.

"Yes? OK..." John-Alexander said, a little shocked by Ney's annoyed reaction, but he continued anyway. "I don't know if you noticed, but she missed the class today and yesterday

too. She hasn't been at school since the beginning of the week, actually."

"Yes, yes, indeed," replied Ney, who had not noticed it at all. But as he said it, she thought she hadn't seen Queen Mary for a long time.

"Actually, she's, uh... sick..." he said.

"OK..." Ney said, waving at him that she was waiting for the next sentence because it had to have a continuation.

"Yes, sick, so I want to give her a message and see if she's OK."

"Ook...?" Ney said with her insistent look. She still didn't know what his point was, and time was going.

"She is in this house," he said, pointing to the house in front of which they were standing.

"OK... So, you can just drop by and give it to her," she said eagerly.

"Yes, it sounds simple but... no," he said, annoyed. "Her parents don't want men... well... boys, to come and see her and as you are a girl..."

"Would you like me to carry the message for you?"

"Yes, yes, yes," he said, relieved? "Can you do it? Here you go!"

Without waiting for an answer, he pulled a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket and handed it to her. Ney took the paper. She was embarrassed. She was in a hurry, and she didn't really like being a matchmaker. Besides, she felt that John-Alexander had not told her everything. But all she would have to do was ring the bell, give the letter and turn around. Also, John-Alexander and his *Queen* will be indebted to her. She adjusted her glasses on her nose.

"If I hadn't been there, how would you have done it?"

"Frankly, I don't know. I was just there wondering."

"It's cute that you want to give her a message," said Ney, who meant it.

John-Alexander smiled (he had a beautiful smile).

"Uh... Thank you," he says embarrassed, but with an impatient look.

Ney turned around. For a second, he seemed charming to her, but then he became again the haughty character who irritated her in time. She headed toward the house. Like all the others in the neighborhood, it was an old building from colonial times with a tin roof. It had a French window. The front door was made of iron. There was no bell, no doe's eye. Ney knocked twice. She heard movements behind the gate, then Mary, with a voice that Ney found fearful, asked who was there. Naturally, Ney gave her name, wondering if she would know who she was. Ney heard the door locks move, while a clattering keys noise was heard. The gate opened

slowly with some care as if to avoid making noise. Mary's head appeared in the gap.

"What are you doing here?" she asked curtly.

"Hello Mary, you seem to be doing well for someone who is sick," Ney replied as curtly as Mary was, with a hint of sarcasm in addition. Geez! She hated that girl!

"What are you doing here?" she asked again, looking over her shoulder, to the right and left.

Ney found her behavior rather strange. Apart from the fact that she was unpleasant (that was in her DNA), her highly defensive posture and the fact that the door was not correctly opened gave the impression that she wanted to hide something.

"I have a word for you from John-Alexander," Ney replied, annoyed. She did not appreciate the tone in which Queen Mary was speaking to her.

"From John-Alexander?" Mary asked. She looked puzzled. But Ney could not help noticing that a shadow of a smile had passed over her face.

"Yes, here!" Ney said, handing her the paper.

"Thank you," Mary said, grabbing it hastily (and almost tearing off Ney's hand).

She wanted to close the door when a voice was heard from

the inside.

“Who is at the Gate, Mary?”

“No one! No one!” Mary replied, rushing to give the piece of paper back.

Ney was seized by the terror that appeared on her face—or rather on her profile, since she had turned around. She was like paralyzed.

“I heard knocking, and you were talking to a man,” said a deep and rocky man’s voice.

Mary wanted to close the door again when large hairy fingers appeared on the upright to block it. The door opened wider, revealing Mary, thinner than usual in a large, shapeless yellowish dress. Her hair, usually adorned with majestic braids, was poorly cared for, and her eyes had dark circles. Despite all this, Ney had to admit; she still was beautiful. Behind her was a bearded man with deep-set eyes, bare-chested with a belly like a twelve-month-old pregnant woman. He smelled like sweat and alcohol.

“You didn’t tell me we had a guest,” he said with an enigmatic smile.

“She was just about to leave,” Mary hastily replied, looking at Ney with insistence.

“Yes, I just came to see how she was doing, and I was leaving. Because she is obviously doing very well,” Ney replied. The

turn of events made her uncomfortable. She wanted to turn around when a hand held her back.

"No, sweetheart," said the man, "It would be impolite from me to let you go. Mary, invite your friend to our house."

"Not necessarily. I'm in a bit of a hurry, and they're waiting for me at home," Ney added.

But the hand exerted pressure to get her in. She looked at Mary, surprised and frightened. Mary looked horribly sorry. This was not a good sign. The man forced her into the house and locked the door. He put the key in his pocket. He then turned to her with his strange smile. He was not very tall; he didn't wear shoes and had a bald head. The room where they were smelled musty and sweaty and was hot. It was supposed to be a living room, but there was no furniture, only an armchair and a table, nothing more. There were two windows on the wall, the one facing the street was closed. There also were two doors. Maybe one gave access to the rooms and the other to the kitchen. The air was gloomy.

"Sit down, my dear," he said to Ney, pointing to the chair.

"I assure you, sir, I'm fine. I don't want to impose myself or last."

"Shhhh," he said, putting his index finger on his mouth, then on Ney's. "I will take good care of you. No *Sir* between us, call me Gilbert (he put his hand on her shoulder). Eh, we know how to take care of our guests here, don't we, Mary?"

"Yes, uncle," the latter replied with a small voice.

"NO!" he cried out suddenly, which made Ney startle. "I already told you, don't call me like that! NO UNCLE!" he exploded.

"I'm sorry," Mary said, raising her hands above her head as if she wanted to protect herself (but from what?).

Ney took a step back to the point she fell. Mary no longer had anything to do with the arrogant and confident girl in school. She looked like a scared child. Ney was also afraid and wondered how she would get out of there. Damn John-Alexander! Sure, he knew what was going on in that house. That's why he was so reluctant to come knocking on the door himself. He had found his scapegoat, and she, naive as she was, had cheerfully accepted, believing she was doing a good deed. If only she hadn't seen him, she'd be home right now. The light was dimming outside. Auntie Nadé was going to kill her if *Gilbert* didn't do it before.

"How should you call me? HOW?" he shouted as he approached Mary with a mean look.

"*Darling*, I must call you *Darling*," Mary hastily replied. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Well..." he said, standing up with a wide smile. "Your good manners are coming back to you."

He turned to Ney.

"We shouldn't frighten our guest. Oh, my darling!" he said, noting that she was on the ground. "What happened to you? I hope you weren't afraid. Wait, I'll help you up."

"No, thank you," Ney replied hastily. She got up. "I am fine. Thank you for your hospitality, but I'm not going to last any further."

"No, no no no no, you haven't even been served a drink yet," he replied in a voice a little too sweet. "But wait, you dropped a little piece of paper."

Mary let out a muffled cry. Her face had become livid, while Gilbert picked up the piece of paper. Ney was not fast enough to stop him. That was John-Alexander's word. She knew it, Mary knew it, and Gilbert was about to find it out.

"Thank you, it's kind; you can give it back to me," she said, reaching out her hand.

Gilbert smiled at her and unfolded the paper, his face hardened as he read the words. Ney didn't know what was written there, but he probably didn't like it.

"Who is John-Alexander?" he asked calmly, turning to Mary, who had huddled in the corner of the room. Strangely enough, his apparent calm was even more frightening.

"No one, no one, just a classmate..." she answered hastily. "Why?" she added, trying to adopt a surprising tone but who was actively betrayed by her panicked look.

"No one just a friend..." he said slowly. "And why does this friend say he loves you?"

"No, it's my letter," Ney replied. "It's... it's my boyfriend" (Mary raised her eyebrows).

"Your boyfriend?" Gilbert asked as calmly as ever. "I didn't know your name was Mary too?"

Ney's heart fell to her belly button.

"It's my first name; we haven't been introduced. But that's my first name."

"Your first name, eh..." he nodded with a low voice. "And I suppose you have a stepfather who is sequestering you?" he asked. "That is what it says."

Ney could not answer. Gilbert smiled at her face and turned to Mary, who seemed to be on the verge of collapse. What else did John-Alexander write? And didn't he know the situation Mary was to start writing such compromising things? How did he get excellent grades with this blatant lack of judgment?

"Hello, my love, my Mary," began to read Gilbert with a nasty and mocking voice. "I hope you're all right. I don't know if you're sick or if it's your crazy stepfather who's holding you back. I worry and miss you. Everything will be fine soon. Don't worry about it. I love you. I love you. Signed John-Alexander."

He dropped the paper.

“My Mary... huh?”

“No, I don’t know, it must be a mistake,” Mary stammered.

“Do you love him too?”

“No, I assure you, *darling*, no.”

“So, I’m crazy, huh? With everything I do for you?”

“No, you are not,” Mary replied.

He approached her with a mean look on his face. In a sudden rage, he pulled her toward him and then threw her against the wall with violence. Mary let out a cry of pain. He came to her and kicked her in the stomach. Then he squatted down and pulled her back, grabbing her hair.

“Who is this brat who says you’re his Mary? You are MY MARY. YOU’RE MINE! DO YOU HEAR ME?”

“Yes, I am your Mary, I’m sorry,” Mary sobbed.

“No, you’re not! You’ll never leave this house again. Never again! Do you hear me?”

He made her stand upright while pulling her by the hair and threw her face down. He kicked her again with greater force. Mary screamed in pain while begging him to stop. Ney didn’t know what to do. Events had unfolded so quickly that she had no time to react. She had remained paralyzed on the spot, staring at this scene as a passive witness while forever

asking herself the same questions: *how did she manage to find herself in such a situation? And how to get out of this room?* But she could not, even if she wanted to, leave Mary at the mercy of Gilbert, who was in a mad rage. Unable to endure more and in an impulse that was more like stupidity than heroism, Ney threw her backpack at Gilbert. The sudden shock caused him to stumble under Mary's astonished eyes. She seemed both grateful and sorry. But her eyes seemed to say: *you shouldn't have done that.* From the look on Gilbert's face when he recovered from the shock, she was right.

"You," he said, indexing Ney. "You, Mary number two. You're the one who sent her the letter from this John-Alexander. He doesn't have the guts to appear before me, but you do!"

He straightened up and began to approach her. Ney automatically ran to the front door to open it, but, of course, it was locked, and the key was in Gilbert's pocket. She started pounding it. Gilbert began to laugh and approached her, his belly bouncing off with every step. He was close, and Ney could feel his panting breath and the strong smell of alcohol, sweat, and mold. She became nauseous. Without warning, he squeezed her and threw her to the ground with violence. Ney fell on her shoulder and started coughing. She had her breath taken away. Her glasses fell off and went to Gilbert's feet.

"So, what am I going to do with you two?" he asked himself, a crazy look on his face.

Ney had taken refuge with Mary, and both watched Gilbert groped his big belly button, a naughty look in the eye. Suddenly, a sound of broken glass was heard behind them. Gilbert turned around and found himself face to face with John-Alexander holding a stick-shaped tree branch in his hand. The latter had entered through the locked window. He must have used his tree branch to break it. A silence settled in the room as Gilbert looked at the newcomer. John-Alexander, on the other hand, held his stick in both hands with a very insecure look. His eyes smelled like fear. Gilbert must have realized that. He looked at him; then, his enigmatic smile came to his face.

"John-Alexander, huh?" he asked, amused.

The latter nodded while swallowing.

"Hohohoho! Did you see that Mary? Your knight in shining armor came to save you!" he said, turning to her. "Finally, he has guts, this little one."

"You will no longer harm Mary!" John-Alexander exclaimed.

"Houuuuuu, I am scared," Gilbert pretended. "Kid, you don't know what you're getting yourself into, but you're going to find out very soon."

He rushed to John-Alexander. The latter, surprised, did not have time to react that the beast had already thrown itself at him. He tried to hit him with the stick, but it broke. Gilbert threw him against the wall and started hitting him with his fists and feet. Mary began screaming and ran to grab

Gilbert's hand. He sent her with a punch at the opposite angle and continued to beat John-Alexander copiously. The latter had his mouth, nose and eyebrow bone bleeding. He was in a poor condition. Gilbert was pouring all his anger on him. It was like he wanted him to regret in every inch of his body the mistake of having dared to say that Mary was his. At this rate, the worst could happen. Ney grabbed her bag again without letting go of it this time and hit Gilbert in the neck. He collapsed under the shock, all along the ground next to John-Alexander. The latter quickly straightened up but did not move entirely away from Gilbert. He looked at him like tetanized. A silence set in. Everyone was waiting for a reaction or something. But he did not react. Gilbert was flat on the floor, inert.

"Is he dead?" Ney ended up asking, a little worried. She didn't want to be charged with murder.

John-Alexander leaned over and carried his fingers toward Gilbert's neck to feel his pulse.

"No, he's alive, just passed out," he replied.

"Oh, my God, Alex!" Mary exclaimed. She ran to throw herself into the arms of John-Alexander.

The latter held her tightly against him. They remained in an embrace that seemed endless to Ney. She started coughing slightly.

"Excuse me, but I would like to go home. All my body is hurt. I'm very late. I'm certainly going to be yelled at. The worst

thing is I won't be able to tell why I'm late, what just happened to me. And even if I did, people wouldn't believe me. I know you're happy to see each other again, but I'd like to go home."

The two lovers detached themselves. It was like they just realized that they were not alone. Mary came and hugged Ney. The embrace took her by surprise. Was it real? Was Queen Mary really hugging her?

"I would like to say thank you for what you have just done," she said. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

She let go of Ney to plunge her gaze into hers. Her deep black eyes were slightly damp. How beautiful she could be! Ney said to herself.

"You didn't have to lie or help me, especially since I have always behaved horrible to you. I don't know how you and Alex got in touch, but it was a blessing to have both of you there. Thank you, thank you so much."

"You're welcome, uh..." said Ney, caught off guard and not expecting such a statement from Mary.

Indeed, what had just happened could only have brought them closer. They both faced the same peril. They worked together to escape from it. Mary was strong. Ney often complained about her life, but it was nothing compared to what Mary was enduring. She was ashamed of herself. She had hated that girl so much. Though, behind these haughty airs and this self-importance hid a suffering young lady who

had undoubtedly had to forge an image, a shell to face life. And what about John-Alexander! The courage he showed to enter the room to the rescue of the woman he loves. He, too, behind his facade of a spoiled rich rotten child, was sensitive and devoted. Ney had to admit, she envied them. They may behave wrongly outside, but their feelings were real, deep, and sincere. 'Jo had never asked how she was doing. When it happened that she missed an appointment, he had never sought to know the reasons for it. He had never come to see her at home. He probably didn't care. At that moment, she felt sad.

"What are you going to do now?" Ney asked Mary.

"I don't know. Alex suggested I live with his parents, but I don't want to impose myself. I had already started to contact a shelter. I think I'll go there or somewhere else. I don't know where yet, but far from here, for sure. I just needed a push to get away, and I got it this afternoon."

"We have to leave soon," John-Alexander pointed out. "We would regret if we were still here talking when he wakes up. The window is quite high, let's say one and a half my height, I climbed using stones that I stuck together, but they collapsed under my weight. I think it would be safer to go through the front door."

"But the key is in his pocket," Ney pointed out, pointing her finger at Gilbert. "Is there another key?"

Mary said no. Ney sighed. Everyone had the same fear. What if he woke up when they would try to get the key back? It would be another round.

“Finally, I think that falling into the void for two meters is not so bad,” Ney said.

The other two laughed.

“Mary, go get as much stuff as you can,” John-Alexander said. “I will throw the cushions of the chairs over the window to cushion the impact. Is that OK?”

Mary nodded and went to one of the two doors she opened and entered the room behind. John-Alexander took the cushions off the chairs, trying to make as little noise as possible and threw them over the window. Ney went to pick up her glasses. At one point, Gilbert stirred. They all stopped, their breathing cut off, and then, since he didn't react, they each continued their task. Ney took her bag, the weapon of two crimes that day, and carried it on her back. Mary came out of the room with a heavily filled school bag and a handbag. John-Alexander helped her to pass through the window; then Ney, then it was his turn. They were all outside, breathing in the fresh air full of fine droplets announcing a storm. Curious people had gathered around the house. Indeed, they had heard the screams and the fighting, but no one had come to see what was going on. As usual... John-Alexander and Mary thanked Ney again, warmly. Then, Mary and John went in one direction, Ney, in the other. They were running to get as far away from this house as possible.

Vade Retro

*Excerpt from Noa's speech
Annual Women's Leadership Convention*

I like my work. It's weird to say, but I love my job. I did find my way, my vocation. I find it so rewarding to help those in need, to be able to get a smile, a burst of laughter. There is no greater delight on earth than knowing your actions improve people's lives. Today, I am here to explain why I chose this job. As a child, I was already passionate about everything close to public service or volunteering. When I got involved in an activity, I felt that I was useful, useful for my friends, useful for my community, and I liked that feeling. I knew I wanted to do a job that would allow me to feel that way. Like many others, I followed general education with good marks. But I was present in all the clubs and associations of the school, the student office, the environment club, the book club, wherever I felt I could be useful. The most exciting thing was that in all these associations, my team and I managed to do some pretty good stuff.

Then I went to college. I wanted to be a doctor; it was the perfect job. Healing people, saving lives every day, for me, with this work, I was sure that I would be able to contemplate the impact of my work on a daily basis. Unfortunately, I had not prepared my project in advance, and my grades did not allow me to be selected. I was oriented in economics. It was not bad, I liked it, but for me it was still far from my life project. So, I was always involved in several student associations. We carried out social actions for the disadvantaged ones, students in need. One day we took part in an activity called listening. Quite simply, we let our comrades come and talk to us about everything and anything. Just like psychologists in movies, except that it was free and there was not a sofa on which the

student lay down but a hard-plastic chair (laughs). There, my classmates talked about their worries, their dreams, their difficulties. What seemed miraculous to me was that they felt better right after, just by talking. I saw their faces before and after the interview. They were radiant, transfigured. I wasn't doing anything extraordinary, but I was still able to help people. At the end of the sessions, two persons felt infinitely well: the student and I. I've decided that was what I wanted to do. I dropped out of university and joined a non-governmental organization that helped women, especially single mothers in the capital's disadvantaged neighborhoods. I joined the organization as a social worker, I did not have a diploma in the field, but I had the experience and motivation.

The event I wanted to share with you happened on my first day as a social worker. We were meeting in a room. We were sat in an arc, a bit like the meetings of people suffering from addiction. Each lady talked about her worries and how she was struggling to overcome them. There was this lady; she must have been in her forties. She was a beauty, but you could feel that the years left their marks. Her head was down. When it was her turn, she didn't talk. The instruction was not to insist too much on making the "patients" talk in order not to embarrass them. They had to feel comfortable and confident enough to be able to talk. But after the session, I went to speak to the lady. I remember that when she looked up, I was moved. There was such sadness in her eyes. So, I started talking to her. I asked her: "what was wrong?" I told her we were there for her and all the pre-scripted speech. Nothing worked, she kept her impassive look. That day, I felt a great sadness. I couldn't make the lady smile, and I wasn't sure I could make her happy. I felt useless. And against all the odds, I started crying. Yeah, the person who was supposed to give advice and comfort to

the lady was the one who was crying. She took me in her arms, with a maternal instinct, and told me everything would be OK. I don't know how long it lasted. Then I got up and finally guess what? She smiled at me and thanked me. I asked her the reason for that smile. I hadn't done anything. I had just cried, failed in my mission. She replied that everyone came to our meetings for various reasons. Some people found comfort in just talking about their worries; others only in the act of talking because they didn't have that opportunity. Others needed to be told what to do or were looking for different opinions. A group appreciated being in contact with someone else. Finally, the last group saw all this as a complete waste of time. They were sure no one in the assembly could understand their pain. She told me today she found out that someone understood her; she was not alone. That was her greatest relief. I remembered after that speech, she got up and left. I didn't see her anymore in the following sessions. I tried to find her, but in pure loss. It was like she had vanished. But what I learned from this experience is that when you want to help, don't immediately think about how to solve people's problems. You will not invent anything, the solutions have always existed, and those people undoubtedly know them. You must become the person you want to help, to get into their skin, their daily life, to speak the same body language. Only in this way the person can feel your contribution to their life. I have applied this method as best I can, and I think I have illuminated the darkened horizon of many people. Unfortunately, I never find this lady; I don't even have her name. I hope this message will come to her. If she saw it, I want to say to her: thank you.



Ney was hungry. She was huddled in a corner of the house dreaming about food she wouldn't see. At least, not today. She was starving. She came home exhausted and filthy. Of course, Auntie Nadé poured all her anger on her. It was obvious. Ney came home when the sun was completely down. She could not have escaped Auntie Nadé's wrath, especially on this day of fasting. The latter had a glassy look and, while she was insulting Ney, her belly kept growling. Why impose a fast if even you, the initiator, have difficulties to follow it? Ney didn't understand her. She wanted to sleep, but she was also too tired to sleep. Ney wondered if she could last until the seventh day alive. There was nothing to eat in the house, not even a piece of onion. Auntie Nadé had thrown everything away to avoid any risk of cheating. The entire household had to follow the fast. They were only allowed three glasses of water a day. The boys, on the first day, cried a lot and then calmed down. Maybe they had made up their minds. However, Ohin seemed to have difficulties handling this new regime. He had become all calm and sad. They didn't even have the opportunity to go out and eventually buy food on the sly. Auntie Nadé had forbidden them from the outside world. They had to remain *pure*, far from any contamination. So, no more television, and especially no going out, except to go to school. The worst thing is that Ney was forced to do the same household chores. This exhausted her even more. She needed to rest. But she couldn't go to bed now. The living room was her bedroom, but only when everyone had gone to bed, usually after nine in the evening. It wasn't time yet.

She could nevertheless lie down in the kitchen, she thought. Ney got up to go into her “wardrobe” in the backyard to take a sheet and lay it on the kitchen floor. She took another one and suddenly came up with the idea of taking a scarf that she would use as a headrest. The veil was in her school bag. She then began to search in her bag when her hand touched a cubic object wrapped in plastic. Ney’s heart jumped. She looked carefully and discovered a packet of biscuits. She had bought it at the crossroads of Mary’s house and completely forgot about it. Her belly began to moan. The proximity of such a carbohydrate source could only move it. Ney wondered what to do. She should have eaten before she came home. But the adventures of the afternoon had not allowed her to do so. If she took the risk of opening it and Auntie Nadé caught her... But she was so hungry... Ney gave in to the temptation. She opened the package and took a cookie that she carried to her lips. The deliverance! She never imagined that she would be so happy to bite into a faded cookie. She found it tasty, indeed the best meal she’s got since...

“You’re eating!” Tah shouted.

Ney turned around. A torpor seized her. Tah had arrived behind her, and she didn’t notice. She signaled to him to keep quiet and offered him some biscuits. Yes, she was bribing a child, but if she didn’t... Tah seemed hesitant when she handed him the cookie piece. But he was hungry too, and she could see his eyes shining. “Take little child, take this cookie and shut up,” Ney prayed crossing fingers. He reached out to grab the cookie.

“Tah!” Auntie Nadé called. “Where are you?”

The child jumped as if he had received an electric shock.

“Mooom! Ney is eating!” he suddenly shouted, while Ney was begging him to be silent.

“What?”

Auntie Nadé burst into the backyard with a fury in her face. Her gaze passed from Tah to Ney and from Ney to the biscuit still in her hand. She didn’t have enough time to hide it because she was so scared.

“What is this?” Auntie Nadé asked as she indexed the cookie packet.

“Nothing mom,” replied Ney, who threw the package in her bag.

Auntie Nadé took the bag and emptied it, pouring all its contents to the ground. Tah was laughing behind. The children liked to see Auntie Nadé angry with Ney. The books, notebooks, kits poured on the ground and, of course, the packet of biscuits. Auntie Nadé took it and showed it to her.

“What the hell is this? Huh?”

“Forgive me, I was too hungry,” replied a tearful Ney, who automatically got down on her knees.

"Forgive you?" Auntie Nadé asked. "Even Tah, who is far younger than you, respects the fast, and you couldn't? I always knew you were a witch, and I have confirmation today. You don't want me to be happy! But this is going to end today!"

And she started beating Ney, with her foot. She kicked her in the head. She threw her on the ground and grabbed a clothesline that was hanging there. She passed the rope around her wrists and tied them in her back, she did the same with her legs, so that Ney was lying on her side on the ground, totally tied up. Auntie Nadé took the pipe connecting the gas bottle to the stove and started whipping her with it.

"You're a witch, and I'm going to cure you tonight." She repeated incessantly with each lash.

The pain was sharp. Ney was yelling. Auntie Nadé was hitting her everywhere, her back, her head, her chest, her legs, her arms, and even her face. She could feel the blood slowly flowing out of her nose. Were the neighbors deaf? Weren't they hearing her screams? If they didn't come to help her, what would happen? Ney cried, screamed, groaned, begged Auntie Nadé to leave her. But nothing worked. The blows were still raining. Suddenly, she didn't feel anymore punches; she didn't hear Auntie Nadé's voice anymore. For a moment, she thought it was the end. But no, she felt alive. She felt the ghosts of blows on her body in pain. She was face down on a floor wet with her tears, wet with her blood.

Was she asleep? Everything led to believe it. Because it was by a violent kick in her side that Auntie Nadé woke her up.

“There she is, the witch!” she exclaimed as she indexed her.

Ney turned to the side and saw the pastor of the congregation to which Auntie Nadé belonged. “Thank God,” she thought. He was undoubtedly going to help her and reason with Auntie Nadé. She wanted to talk but did not have enough strength to do so. She gave the reverend her most supplicant look. But she received only a cold and disgusted look as an answer from the latter.

“I started the fast you prescribed for me with the children,” began Auntie Nadé. “The whole house had to follow; I insisted on it. But she refused to follow. Lately, she doesn’t do anything I tell her. I think she has a spirit that doesn’t want me to succeed or achieve my goals. I’m counting on you to get rid of it.”

The pastor shook his head as if he was disappointed, then gave Ney a dark look.

“Don’t worry, Sister Nadé. This evening we will drive out the demon inside her,” he said to Auntie Nadé with a calm and deep voice. “Your house and your family will soon have peace. Could you please warm this up for me?”

He transmitted to Auntie Nadé an object that Ney could not see from her position. The pastor crouches down to get to her level.

“Please help me...” begged Ney. “I’m not a witch.”

"You've hurt this family a lot, but you'll be defeated!" the pastor whispered with a smile of satisfaction.

Ney felt lost. It was over. She had screamed, no one had come to her rescue. She had begged God; the pastor didn't think she was innocent either. She was doomed.

The reverend began to sing prayers and then leaned Ney's head strongly against the ground, shouting out: "Satan, come out of this body!" He repeated the sentence several times, and each time he put more and more pressure on the girl's head. Ney started sobbing louder and screaming in pain. The pastor seemed to ignore her complaints and continued his way. He scratched Ney's temple repeatedly by rubbing her head on the bare ground, repeating tirelessly, "Satan comes out of this body!" Ney ardently wanted Satan, if he were in her body, to come out quickly. She had a headache, pain throughout her body, and the position she was in, hands and feet tied, increased her suffering. The pastor straightened up, quite angry.

"You resist, but you cannot stand the power of the almighty!" he shouted to Ney.

He climbed on the back of Ney, and stood up, crushing the girl against the ground. She gasped. He began a dance, lifting left foot, then right foot. What kind of exorcism was that? Ney wondered if he did not take pleasure in torturing her, because yes it was torture. She waited like a resigned victim that the end comes. Auntie Nadé reappeared with a bowl and a spoon. The pastor went down from the back of Ney to meet her.

“Are things getting better, pastor? Is the spirit gone?” Auntie Nadé asked.

“No, my sister, he is resisting. It is a strong demon which is inside this girl,” said the reverend.

He took the bowl with the spoon and approached Ney. Her heart began to pound when she saw him approaching. She did not have enough strength to beg or implore mercy. She wanted to be left alone so that she could fall asleep...

“Evil spirit, I command you to get out of this body!” He shouted.

He poured, with the help of a spoon, the content of the bowl on Ney’s forehead. She began to shout over again as the pain was excruciating. It was hot oil.

“May this blessed oil purify the soul of that girl!” the pastor said while continuing to pour boiling oil.

Ney cried like crazy, writhing in pain, while the “holy” oil burnt her head. The pastor had ended to overthrow the entire bowl; however, the oil that had not sunk on the floor continued to burn Ney’s forehead. She wept and lamented. People knocked violently at the door. Auntie Nadé went to open. Ney was too exhausted to scream. People who potentially had heard her cries and came to inquire what was happening were just there, but she couldn’t signal them her presence. She was not able to emit an audible sound except soft moans. Auntie Nadé would tell a story, full of lies. If those people quit the door, she would lose her only chance

to get out alive. Yes, Ney had understood, the purpose was to get out of there alive. She did not know which demon Nadé Auntie and her pastor were looking for, in her. Apparently, it did not want to leave, and Auntie Nadé obviously would not give up. Ney had to alert her possible rescuers. The pastor seemed to read her thoughts. He was staring at the entrance of the house where Auntie Nadé stood; then, he looked down at Ney. She knew that he understood what she wanted to do. His face became even harder than it already was. Would he hit her? If he did, it would be for her a real help. He crouched down and against all the odds began to strangle her.

“First, you sent demons in Sister Nadé’s house, and now you want her to have trouble because of you,” he said softly, his fingers firmly around the neck of Ney.

She struggled silently and began to choke. The pressure on her neck remained strong. She had trouble breathing, she gasped, and suddenly, it was total darkness.

She was awakened by water that was poured over her face. Auntie Nadé was standing in front of her, a dark look in her eyes. The pastor sat on a stool, a bowl of water in front of him. Ney sighed; she was, unfortunately, alive and without hope of relief.

“Untie her!” the pastor ordered Auntie Nadé.

She undid the ties. Ney felt her arms breathe. She tried to lean on them to sit up but could not. She was too weak. She wanted to make a second attempt when she was violently

torn from the ground. Her head was dived into the bowl of water.

“I command you! Get out of that body!” the pastor shouted.

He emerged Ney, who took a deep breath and then plunged her into the basin. Once again, she gasped; once again, she struggled. Once again, nothing helped. The pastor was flawless. He made her emerge and was about to plunge her one more time when Tah appeared distraught in the backyard.

“Mom! Mom! Ohin is not moving anymore!”

Immediately Auntie Nadé, rushed to her room closely followed by the pastor. Ney did not know what little Ohin had, but she thought she should take advantage of the situation to escape. She used the low strength she had to stand. She leaned on the walls. If she succeeds in reaching the door, after passing Auntie Nadé’s room and passing through the living room, she would be free. She started to move forward, painfully, when she heard a heartbreaking cry — a mother crying her son. Auntie Nadé was crying Ohin. Unwittingly, Ney marked a halt in front of her room. Auntie Nadé was slumped over the small body of Ohin, who had lost weight dramatically during the two days of fasting. She was lamenting, the hand of the pastor on her shoulder. For once, Ney felt a part of humanity, and even a little love in the attitude of Auntie Nadé. The latter turned her head, and her eyes full of tears met those of Ney. Deep rage could be seen within. Ney knew, she had to leave.

"It's your fault! You did this to my child!" Auntie Nadé shouted.

She then rushed to Ney, who ran. She bumped against the table and fell. Auntie Nadé behind had also slipped, a chance. Without that fall, Ney would have never been able to reach the front door before Auntie Nadé caught her. She threw away the chairs and storage units behind her to delay Auntie Nadé. The latter, with a savage fury, pushed all barriers. The desire to hurt was visible on her face, contorted with hatred. Ney arrived at the door. Thank God, it was not locked. She opened the door and started running straight ahead without looking back. She would never come back again.

She ran straight ahead, as she did in the market in the morning. The night was cool, and rainy harbinger wind had risen. How long was she running? She did not remember. Her tears flowed afloat. Her distress was profound. She was living a nightmare. She had to leave her home forever; she knew it. All she wanted was to wake up and see the pain and suffering of the evening fade.

Fine drops of rain began to fall, dipping her braids, wetting her clothes. The cool breeze made her shiver. But she advanced toward the only refuge she knew. She crossed the neighborhood, running straight. Hours earlier, she was with 'Jo, and for the first time in their relationship, she would find him after meeting hours. But she was not going to the regular meeting place. It was getting late, and she was sure he was not there. She went straight to his home; she would find comfort. Her tears kept flowing. She did not know if it was because of her aching body or her deep sadness. Her mind was slightly confused, too many conflicting emotions

overwhelmed her. But one question kept coming back to her mind: Why? Did Auntie Nadé hate her so much to put her through all this for a simple cookie? What had happened to Ohin? Would she come back someday? What would she do about school? Many other questions jostled through her head as she continued her race.

She arrived at an impasse; she was so moved that she had lost. She turned back. The onlookers lying around in the street watched her with weird looks. She realized she was still wearing her school uniform. She was afraid; she was easily identifiable. The evening was not very advanced, but in this part of the city, there was a tacit curfew. It was a den of thieves, not just simple thieves but real criminal. The newspaper has always talked about people, seemingly fearless or not aware of the customs of the place, who dared to violate the curfew and what happened to them. Ney did not want to be the next one.

'Jo's home was in a ravine. It was not a real home, but a wooden hut covered with plastic with a sheet-iron roof. It was built like other houses on the slope of a ravine dug for the sewage of the city. When the rains came, every year, some of these hovels were rushed into the ravine. But residents did not leave; on the contrary, others were coming. Where would they go? In this place, they had no rent to pay. Skillfully orchestrated connections provided them electricity, and some people sold them water. The funny thing was that on the other side of the ravine stood a wealthy neighborhood of buildings and beautiful villas. Things were well made. This disposition allowed everyone to have a motivation in life. The inhabitants of the slum awoke every morning, seeing the magnificent villas. That reminded them why they had to work hard if they wanted to live on the other

side of the ravine one day. Similarly, those in the upscale neighborhood, they awoke to see the disgusting slum. That view made them understand why they should also keep working hard not to have to go live on the other side of the ravine one day. It was a win-win situation.

She arrived at the gate of the house (a rickety wooden door). She began knocking. No answer. She hit even harder. Still no response. Ney started to panic. What if they were not there? Where else could she go? Maybe they were sleeping. She kept knocking.

“Who is it?” Mother Mahi asked with a fearful voice.

“It’s me, Mom,” Ney replied.

She heard a bustle inside the house. As if someone was looking for something while moving furniture. After an extremely long time passed, the door opened. The face of Mother Mahi appeared through the opening. She sketched a warm but not happy smile.

“Are you OK, my daughter? It’s getting late.”

“Yes, Mom,” nodded Ney. “Please let me in. I ran away from home. I’ll explain everything.”

Mother Mahi sighed. She cast a glance over her shoulder.

“Did you run away? You should not have done it. I’m not sure my home is the best place...” Mother Mahi said, profoundly embarrassed.

Something was wrong. Ney could feel it. She looked at Mother Mahi carefully. Her face showed a more profound sadness than usual. Her behavior betrayed obvious discomfort. But why? Especially why was she keeping the door closed? With force she did not know she had, Ney opened the door on a Mother Mahi surprised and stunned by the audacity. She went into the house. The unique feature of these kinds of homes was that they had only one room; the lounge, the kitchen, and the bedroom was common. As Ney could see, something was wrong. Plates were ashore, broken in pieces; clothes were lying around as though they had been thrown. The chairs were reversed and not in their usual place. Food was scattered and crushed on the floor as if someone had stepped on it. The house had been vandalized.

“What happened? Were you assaulted, Mom?” She asked.

Mother Mahi let out a squeak, as if she was afraid to answer.

“No! Nobody! I fell, and I made everything fall. I’ll fix it, my daughter. You see? The house is not presentable; you shouldn’t stay.”

Ney listened, but it sounded false. Mother Mahi seemed scared though she tried to hide it from Ney. She took a shovel and a broom to clean all this when Ney grabbed her wrist.

“Mom, do not stay here; it’s dangerous.”

The lady smiled (a real smile, one that could illuminate the face).

“Dangerous?” she said. “It has always been my daughter. You should go, you should not stay here. Why are you outside in such an hour?”

“I told you, Mom. I left home,” replied Ney without looking.

The lady stood up and looked at Ney with her deep maternal gaze. She put her hand on the forehead of Ney, where hot oil was poured. Without warning, she pulled Ney to her and hugged her. She felt like all the weight of the day had fallen, and all the bruises had closed. Ney felt good, protected, loved, raised from the ground. Time seemed to stand still. She was in the arms of a mother.

“Sorry, I am sorry, honey, for what you have been through,” Mother Mahi said. “But you have to leave,” she said brusquely. “Here, too, will not be a refuge for you.”

Ney jumped. She did not expect to be rebuffed like that. At least, not by Mother Mahi. It was bizarre.

“But I have no place to go,” sincerely begged Ney. “I do not know; I know no other place... I’ll wait here, ‘Jo to come back. Where is he?”

Mother Mahi jumped as if she had received an electric shock.

“He went out,” she replied hastily.

“To go where? It’s not normal. Does he know you were assaulted? We need to contact him. You cannot stay here alone.”

“It’s OK, my daughter,” Mother Mahi replied.

She sat up with a severe air and added.

“I need you to go. Now... I do not know where, but I can assure you that wherever you will be, is better than here.”

“But why? You said...”

She did not have time to finish her sentence as someone came with violence into the house. Taken by surprise, she started, letting out a little cry. She turned around; it was ‘Jo. She sighed. He scared her. She wanted to throw herself into his arms, but it was not the way they usually behaved to each other. But she was really relieved to see him. However, something was wrong. Mother Mahi didn’t seem relieved. On the contrary, her countenance was even more sullen. She stepped back and kept her eyes fixed on ‘Jo, staring from his hand to his face. He, too, did not look “normal.” He had deep red eyes, slightly unsteady gait. He had come into the room, and then he suddenly stopped, Ney presence surprised him. He was downright frozen in place, looking from his mother to Ney. A heavy silence had settled as if something eminently serious would happen. And suddenly, there was chaos.

With a fury never seen before by her, ‘Jo attacked his mother so fast that Ney had no time to react. Mother Mahi let out a cry of terror. In front of a stunned Ney, ‘Jo beat his mother with his feet and arm. At one point, he lifted a glass bottle that was lying on the ground. Ney feared the worst; she pounced on him and pulled him back.

“Stop, ‘Jo! Please,” She cried.

But it was not 'Jo. It wasn't the 'Jo she saw earlier in the morning. He strongly smelled weed and alcohol. It was someone possessed by a demon. It was here that the pastor would have been helpful. With force, he pushed Ney against the wooden wall of the house. She felt in her body the shock of the impact. She was pretty sure she heard a bone crack. Ney let out a cry of pain when she realized that a tip nailed to the wood was in her flesh. 'Jo overthrew everything in his path, like the eye of a cyclone. His mother was cowering in the corner of the room in tears. Ney straightened, despite her sore back. She took plates and all she could and threw them on 'Jo. The same insane madness that was driving him may also have taken her. But she was in pain, not only the body but the heart. 'Jo had a mother who loved him, he had Ney who loved him too, but he could not see it. Currently, he was harming the only two people who truly believed in him. He did not deserve their love. She thought of John-Alexander and Mary. She felt an unprecedented jealousy. She, too, wanted to have it. She also wished that every day someone took her in her arms as Mother Mahi did. 'Jo had everything. He was taking advantage without giving. At that moment, she hated him. She began to beat him with everything she found. Surprised by such aggressiveness, 'Jo retreated, trying to protect himself with his hands. He retreated but did not flee, as if he wanted to kick back but did not have time. Ney continued her assaults when she was pulled back by Mother Mahi.

"Stop, you're hurting him!" she reproached.

Ney looked at the lady with incredulous eyes.

"That's the purpose," she said. "If I do nothing, he will harm you."

"I'm his mother I'd rather suffer than see my son suffer."

"He's mean, he's violent. He's a scrub; he respects no one. He will kill you one day if you do nothing."

Mother Mahi smiled (her sincere smile).

"I know, but he's my son. I carried him; I raised him up; he is my failure. Everything he is, all the things he does, it's all my fault. At one point, I don't know when, I have not done things as I should... It's my burden, and I will carry it, even if I have to die for it."

Ney widened her eyes; she did not believe what she heard.

"It is the sacrifice that I pay for my mistakes. When he pours his anger on me, he doesn't harm other people who did nothing to him. I am the cause of his pain, our pain. What he tries to drown in robbery, alcohol, and drugs, I am the cause. If I had made the right choice, my son would have been different. As a parent, we are fully responsible for the future of our children. This is why I will always defend him, because he does not know what he is doing, I do."

'Jo was sprawled on the ground, asleep. He started snoring. The storm had passed. Mother Mahi straightened out to her son; her tears flowed as she stroked his hair. She tried to straighten him. He slapped her (unintentionally?). She did not let go. She put a worn-out mattress. There, she affixed a

piece of cloth and pulled her son as best she could in the bed. She put a blanket on him and kissed him on the forehead. All this in front of a stunned Ney who had not moved from her place. Mother Mahi turned to Ney.

“This is my son; I’m his mother. I pray you have a child one day so that you understand that feeling. He is all I have; I’m all he has. He can do what he wants; he knows he will always have his shelter here. Here is his refuge. That is why I said that here could not be your refuge either.”

She gave another maternal smile to Ney. She hugged her and whispered in her ear.

“I’m sorry, but I need you to leave...”

Salem

Monday, June 29, 20...

I remember that night when everything had changed. The sky was cloudy, no stars. Air was cool. A light stormy wind was blowing between houses. I was sitting in my uncomfortable old chair that had collapsed long ago. Damn! I hated that chair! Back in the days, I could not afford to get another one, and it suited well in my apartment, my tiny little apartment. I also hated it. Rather, I hated being there, living there. I had by that time 41 years, with nearly 20 years as a teacher, and yet, I was a single man with no children, living in a "box." I hated my life. I hated life. I remember the anger and rage that drove me during those years. I wanted more, wanted to be more. My status and my living conditions at that time disgusted me. I had been so brilliant at school. All the girls used to fall in love with me. I had been blessed on the physical side, and my particular eye color left no one indifferent. I was predestined to be an authority in my country, a great among the greats. But I was only a high school teacher, living in a seedy neighborhood. Some colleague liked this teaching job and got down to their task as if it was a priesthood. It disgusted me. Always the same thing, the same routine, no prospect of elevation, while some privileged lived a life of dreams. I could see their gleaming car parked in front of the school each morning. I could see their haughty look. Damn! I hated them! I swore every morning I would take my revenge. I will be like them, and I will make them bite the dust. But my situation had not moved for twenty years.

Like all teachers of that time, I did politics. But I was quickly forgotten in the cake sharing once the backed candidate had reached the desired position. Horribly upset, I turned back to

the competitor, but ingratitude followed me there too. I had given a lot of my time, my money, my person. For those people, I had alienated my family and my community. I had neglected no rally, no sacrifice, no morbid task because I believed in them. I saw myself at the right of the almighty father candidate, but nothing. Others, less devoted than I, had been honored because they were wearing the proper name, or had the right sponsors. But something will change. I remembered that night someone made me a proposal. They offered me a way out; there was a condition, though. That condition didn't seem impossible to fulfill. However, it included "technical" details to adjust. Where would I find the right person?

I was there in my thoughts when I heard a knock at my door. I remember being slightly frightened. I was not expecting anyone that day, and nobody would visit me either. I was worried because I had made a lot of enemies, and I feared to open the door to one of them. I remembered having opened the door to the ugliest and also the least brilliant of my students. How did she find my house? I did not know. She begged me to enter because she did not know where to go. I had let her come, a little stunned by this encounter. But something else left me speechless. She was the "right" person I was looking for. I could not believe what was happening to me was real. It was like the same fate I blamed, one hour ago, had decided to give me a boost (which has never happened before).

I remember the girl thanked me enormously. She suddenly started crying. She spoke of an abused student, a violent friend, a family member who beat her, a pastor, witchcraft, and many other things that seemed erratic. But I was not listening. She had the right skin tone; no one will miss her. She was the "right person" I needed. Why did the providence send me the ideal person when I needed it? But I did not have the

time to answer the question. The girl was still talking all in tears, frightened, scared. She was in a pitiful state. I remember my hesitation; she was my student. Besides, she had the same particular eye color than me, which accentuated her saddened air. However, I knew I would not have another chance like this. It was a sign of destiny without doubt. I had to get out of poverty, whatever the price. I had to become someone. I had suffered too much; I was not going to move back now. I brought the girl some water. She drank, thanked me, and then slowly collapsed. I took the phone and dialed the number...



She was seated, tirelessly asking herself the same question, “how, why, and when did the situation become out of control?” She pondered the events of the evening endlessly in search of the word, the gesture, or the fault that had set off the chaos. This was hypocrisy; she had the answer to her concerns; it was even obvious. She knew exactly what had triggered it all. It was useless to close her eyes and look for another reason. Once again, she had gone too far, much too far. And this time, she might pay a high price. She held her head in her hands.

“My God, why me?” she sighed.

Hasn’t she suffered enough yet? An unusual grief seized her. Not that she had not been used to sorrows. God knows the pains she faced in her life. But this one was not limited to a deep malaise and a desire to disappear, which characterized

most grief. It was more violent, more profound. It was a heartache, a heartbreak. It had, like all the other sorrows, the power to generate tears in her eyes and making her lose taste or desire to exist. But this time, there was something else, a whole new thing, the fear. She was terrified, her whole being trembled with fear. Yes, she was afraid, afraid of losing everything but mostly afraid of losing *her*. She never thought she was so attached to *her*. She had only vented her anger on *her*, passed on *her* all her frustration. Just being in *her* presence annoyed her because it reminded her of certain things. Things she did not want to remember. Seeing *her* reminded her of those moments when she was mistress of her fate, full of life, young and desirable. Those moments when she was not suffering but was drawing her own way, she had no obligations. She had lost those moments when *she* came in her life. Regrets were too strong, and regrets had then given way to shame. She hardly bore her current life, and seeing *her* every time reminded her of life, she had missed because of *her*. She remembered her disillusionment, pain, loss of a better world. But above all, her presence reminded *him*, as a permanent scar left in her life — a poisoned gift. When their eyes met, she almost always seemed to see *him*. The truth is she didn't look like *him*, except perhaps the eyes' color. But this detail was enough to trouble.

She did turn against *her* all her hatred, remorse, and contempt. *She* was the personification of her failure. And failures, she has been through a lot, disappointment on disappointment. She always committed the same error. She still reaped the same result. It made her bitter. She was well aware. But could it be otherwise? We are only a reflection of the behavior of others toward us. She knew that she had

hardened, withdrawn, she had become a hateful person. The subsequent pregnancies had worsened this trait. She knew it wasn't *her* fault. But she could not help blaming *her* for all her miseries. That was a relief. Shame on her!

"The doctors say he'll be fine," the pastor said, sitting at her side.

Nadé sniffed in approval. She stroked Tah's head asleep on her lap, curled up on himself. She adjusted the clothes she had put on him, to prevent him from the cold. The bench on which they were sitting was frozen. Fortunately, the air was slightly hot, even heavy, surprising for a hospital. After her chase, she had returned to her younger son. He was pale, amorphous, did not move, but she could feel a pulse. She then lifted him and ran toward the public hospital. Her tears flowed along the way. If he did not survive, she would never forgive herself. She was the one who made him hungry for her selfish desires. Always her! She still did everything wrong. She was crying: "Help me! My son is dying, help me!". It was more of a whisper than a lament. The few people still on the way were looking at her. There were street urchins and homeless men. They were all staring with a mixed expression halfway between compassion and annoyance. This was to be the last sentiment that had taken over because no one deigned to approach her, move, or do something. They were indifferent to her distress. We do believe that people in poverty are supportive, but life had taught her that it was only a decoy. All is about interest, and everything is an opportunity to abuse the trust of others. Do not ask for help. If you are not useful, you should mind your

own business. This law, Nadé, was experiencing it tonight at her expense. Yet, the worst was still coming.

She had arrived at the public hospital, followed by a panting pastor with Tah in his arm. It was closed. She knocked with all her might, calling for help. A woman, with nurse clothes, came to the door and shouted at her, asking her to make less noise. People were sleeping, and the hospital was closed. Nadé showed her unconscious child and begged her to let them see a doctor. She was greeted with a categorical refusal. There was no doctor on duty tonight. The hospital was closed; she had to return the next day. Nadé replied it was a matter of life or death. As an answer, the lady with a bloodcurdling laugh told her, “everyone dies one day” while turning on her heel. Horrified, but far from defeated, Nadé strengthened and made it clear to the pastor that she wanted to go to the private hospital. The latter seemed to suggest that letting him pray for the child was all he needed. She paid no attention to him. Ohin over one shoulder, she grabbed the hand of Tah and started walking.

The Private hospital was an hour’s walk but just fifteen minutes by taxi. She was not used to taking taxis, but this was not the time to be stingy. Sadly, no taxi wanted to take her. Everyone thought that the child was dead (they did not want to carry dead bodies) or, worst, would die. She then resolved to walk, walk while invoking heaven to save her son. He should not pay for her sins. Her shoulder was sore; her feet were exhausted, her left arm holding the hand of Tah almost dislocated. The child did not complain. He was showing an endurance that surprised her. He, too, had fasted. Although she admired his strength, she did not want him also to collapse. She untied the cloth she had put around her waist and put Tah on her back. She girds the cloth so that it fits. She

then continued her way, a child on the back, another on the shoulder, the (useless) pastor far behind.

She felt the pulse of Ohin from time to time. Sometimes it seemed that he was gone. She panicked but then try again and finally felt it. However, she was afraid of being wrong. What if it was just her imagination which was tricking her knowing she could not stand the thought of losing him? What if from the beginning, she was carrying her dead son's body? She drove away these ideas from her head as fast as they came. Her son was just passed out, tired, and hungry. He would be better. She had arrived at the private hospital, exhausted, almost dead. Staff took an hour to receive and care for the child. First, she had to pay for care before they moved any finger plus an additional charge called "emergency tax." Nadé paid consultation and treatment. Those people made her sick. How could anyone get rich on other people's pain? Nevertheless, they took her son. The doctor asked questions, did his auscultation then put the child on a drip. He asked the mother to leave the room, assuring her that it was nothing serious and that all would be well. She was half-relieved.

She sat on a bench in the waiting room. She bought sweets from a vending machine in the waiting room for Tah, who finally fell asleep. The useless pastor had joined them, breathless, nearly fifteen minutes after their arrival. He had taken a worried mine and had asked a lot of questions to nurses on duty. He feigned to inquire about the health of the kid. He then turned back to carry news that Nadé already knew. Useless, he was. Fortunately, she did not have the strength to notice all that. Her mind and her heart were elsewhere.

The pastor put his hand on her shoulder and gave her an enigmatic smile.

"It's OK," he said.

Nadé looked at him and then looked down. She sees him coming. She had always seen him coming. She always saw them coming. She attended his church because it was the closest to her home. It was a congregation of only twenty members with only two men (the pastor included). She remembered the look he gave her the first time she went there. That look had not changed, inappropriate excess familiarity either. There were times she had to admit; his preaching allowed her to feel better. That's why she had respect for him. For her, their relationship was confined to the strictly religious sphere. But she knew his thoughts. She guessed them all. The phrases he wanted to tell her, but he could not due to the aggressive image she reflected. But, tonight, she seemed weak, the mask was broken, the veil was rent. She couldn't contain her emotions. After all, she was a woman, a mother like any other, a simple human being. Surely, he saw the flaw in the wall...

"I know, my sister, you are worried, but I can assure you it's a good thing that your niece has gone," he stated triumphantly with slightly increasing the pressure of his hand. "Her demons were the cause of your unhappiness. They have been tired you out for years. Beware of those girls that we brought from the village."

"She was not my niece..." Nadé whispered, head down. "You do not understand."

“Really?” he asked. “Never mind, she’s gone, you’re safe now, with me,” he added. “Ohin is safe. Everything will be fine, you’ll see,” he blurted out, sitting down next to her, way too close.

Nadé slowly pulled away from the grip of his hand, stood up, and turned her gaze on him. She stared at him carefully and realized that she had never really paid attention to his face. He was thin, almost scrawny. He had deep black bloodshot eyes with protruding arcades. His jaws were projecting, and his cheeks were hollow. His forehead was quite sparse, and he had a thin skin. His eyes glowed with a light that was so familiar to her, a desire so common with men. He was not anymore, the GOD-whisperer he used to be. She had in front of her a simple man, with man’s desires.

“You do not understand; you understand nothing,” she replied slowly. “I’m sad, not just because I almost lost a son, but because this evening, I certainly lost *my daughter*, *my only daughter*, *my first child*. And for that, you can do nothing.”

She burst into tears in front of a stunned pastor.



Ney awoke. The world seemed to waver around. She had a terrible headache. She blinked but couldn’t see anything. She was in a dark fog, lying on a hard base in an awkward position. She was on her stomach and, strange to say, her

hands in the back. She tried to sit up but could not. She realized she had the feet and hands tied and mouth gagged. What she took for a fog was caused by a veil over her head. What was happening? She struggled and tried to undo links that tied, but she received a violent blow in the ribs. She let out a scream muffled by the gag. A voice shouted over her, and then she heard laughter. What happened to her? She did not understand. She had escaped from Auntie Nadé's home. Why was she still retained by links? Did Auntie Nadé get her? She remembered arriving at Mr. Baba's house. It was the nearest and only house from 'Jo's house that she knew. But she had trouble remembering what had happened there. How had she ended up here? Where was she? Who were those guys? What would they do with her? She tried to struggle but received a second more violent blow.

"If you move again, I will sting you!" a gravelly voice threatened her.

The threat was clear, even obvious. Where was she? Ney didn't move. She began to feel all the pain from the previous hours. How many hours? She did not know. But she had difficulty breathing, and her whole body was sore. Above all, she was hungry. She felt she was in motion. The support on which she was laying down seemed like the back of a pickup truck or a van. Why and where were they sending her? Despair gradually began to take hold of her. Why always her? She was asking herself a lot of questions when she heard the man with the gravelly voice talked on a phone.

"Yes... We'll be there in two hours... Yes... Yes, we have her, as you asked... Yes... What about our money? OK, boss."

The discussion lasted only two minutes, but it was the most terrifying two minutes in Ney's life. She tried to remember the events, how she managed to be in that situation. But memories seemed to escape; everything looked blurred. The more she tried to think about it, the more everything seemed to disappear. Like trying to hold water with a sieve. Obviously, she had been kidnapped, but by whom and why? Anyone who knew her would know that no one would pay a ransom to get her back. Unless the goal was not to ask for a payment. A terrifying thought seized her. An idea that chilled her back. She had heard stories of missing persons that were found with missing parts of the body. She had also heard of a vast human trafficking network. People were kidnapped and sent to another country. There, they were either reduced in prostitution or used as slaves. None of these ideas was made to reassure Ney. She did not move but tried to get slowly in a position that would allow her to run away as soon as an opportunity arises. That day was like an endless nightmare, with infinite episodes. She wondered at that moment what Auntie Nadé was doing. Perhaps she exaggerated by fleeing. Auntie Nadé would not have done more harm than already done. Ney began to regret her escape, made on a whim without thinking. Why run away when you do not know where to go. She had never been alone, never knew what it was like to go out, and have no place or home to go back. And now she was lost somewhere while wishing to stay alive.

She was taken from her reverie by a sudden acceleration of the vehicle. Two men began to shout at someone called "Lori" that apparently was the driver in a language not mastered by Ney. Lori answered them bitterly, always in the same dialect. His statement was followed by an exchange of

invective words Ney did not understand. It was like an argument was occurring, and the tone was just rising. Then she heard louder noises. It seemed people were fighting. Blinded and unable to move, Ney could only relate to what she was listening to understand what was happening around her. She knew it was serious enough when the car turned abruptly on what appeared to be on the left side. The movement was so fast that the vehicle lost balance. Ney felt rolling to knock the other side of the car. This move had the effect of lowering her gag. But Ney did not see much. Yet, she felt that the van—because it was actually a van—was rolling on itself. It was projected in all directions, and the rear doors were open. There was no one with her. Maybe they all were at the driver's side. Strangely, they were all silent, or perhaps the rollover of the car had stunned them. Ney, too, wondered how she managed to remain conscious despite the blows she received in all directions because of the car's movement. At one point, she was thrown into the air in an unreal zero-gravity movement. It was like she was floating in the air. That seemed to last for minutes before she fell heavily.

Suddenly, a lot of water began to get in the van. Ney tried to sit up and realized that while she was thrown on all sides, her ties came off. She ached in every part of her body and wondered if she did not have some broken bones. But she had no time to think about her condition; the van was sinking, slowly but surely. She tried to stand with difficulty, given the tilted position that the vehicle had taken. It was awfully dark, and Ney happened to be guided only through the noise made by the water entering the van. Luckily the van was sinking obliquely to the side. This reduced the water flow coming in and allowed Ney to get out. She arrived at the edge of the trailer and tried to see where she was. But the

night was black with a cloudy sky. She could not see around her. She didn't know how to swim. She then could not escape if the van completely sank. The water came up to her waist and was rising fast. She tried to hold on to the roof of the van, but when she did, it unbalanced it. The car then was beginning to sink further into the water. She looked around, trying to accustom her eyes to the darkness. In daylight, it was difficult for her to see without her glasses; it was worse in the dark. Time was running; the van was almost engulfed. The water came up to her chest and began to put pressure on her lungs. Frightened, she climbed on the roof of the car with difficulty. She had to use the little strength she still had. Fortunately, the car didn't sink and had stabilized—a moment of respite. For how much longer? She sprawled on top of the slightly tilted van. Exhausted, resigned, not willing to overthink. She knew she could not stay there. Sooner or later, the car would undoubtedly be full of water. Yet she was exhausted and had heavy eyelids. Besides, she was starving. She allowed her mind and body to rest a little.

A slight splash awakened her. Something moved in the water to the right. Instinctively she went in the opposite direction. She opened as best she could her eyes to see the place from which the sound came. Obviously, something was moving underwater and was even moving the van. She let out a scream when a hand appeared to land on the roof of the van. The hand seemed to seek to hold onto something, then fell into the water in a big splash. A scared Ney was watching the scene as if she were out of this place. The hand reappeared and tried again to hang on but failed and plunged. Ney, frightened, approached the edge of the roof. She could not see anything, but she felt that the water was murky because someone was struggling to get out. She then remembered

that she was not alone in the car. There were also her captors. The man with the hoarse voice, the other who had threatened her and "Lori" the driver. She had completely forgotten them. She had unconsciously assumed they were out of the vehicle before its plunge. There was one who, obviously, had remained and struggled to bring out his body. The hand reappeared again, and this time accompanied by a second one, then a head got out of the water. Ney screamed. A young man was trying to catch his breath with difficulty while holding on as best he could to the roof of the van. But his hands slipped, and he fell in the water again. He came out breathlessly. His eyes moved in all directions and then landed on a stunned Ney. He had a movement of fear, as if he did not expect to see anyone. Then, a flash of understanding crossed his face; he realized who she was. They stared at each other for a while. Ney felt he wanted to speak but could not do it, or perhaps he did not want to. But obviously, the balance of power had changed. He needed her help, and even if he did not say so, his eyes seemed to beg. However, Ney remained motionless. Not that she did not want to help him, but she wondered what would happen if she did. If she saved him, she would be at his mercy. She still did not know why he had kidnapped her. She stared at him. He was much younger than her. He sank again in water and then reappeared, his hands and face pale. Ney did not think twice. She grabbed the right hand of the young man to pull him. The latter's eyes widened. He leaned his other hand even more firmly on the roof. The task was not easy. She was exhausted, ached, and the roof was made slippery by water. Also, the pressure they exerted on this side of the van made it more unbalanced. But slowly, the young man emerged, his neck, his chest, then his stomach. At this stage, Ney left him to go

to the other side. He, too, seemed too exhausted to move again. His arms, his head, and his chest were slumped on the roof while the rest of his body was still underwater. He coughed and seemed to suffocate. Ney did not know the care to be applied in cases of drowning. They did not teach that at school. She managed to be alive by herself. Her abductor should do the same. But apparently, he was too exhausted to move, or worse...

Ney turned her face away from him. Her gaze swept the body of water around. At first, it seemed to her that it was a lake. But now her eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness; it appeared that it was a river. On either side, she saw dark tree foliage moving slowly in a ghostly way due to the light breeze that was blowing. There were some branches close to the surface of the water. Ney had not immediately noticed them, due to darkness. But it seemed she could climb onto the shore if she managed to hold on to one of the branches. The idea reinvigorated her. She straightened to properly analyze the possibility. The nearest tree branch was on the left, but it was not long enough for her hand to reach it. However, a little further, about six feet away, was an advanced branch. Ney assessed the distance. She could not reach it just by raising her hands. Nevertheless, she could jump... But if she missed her target, she would drop into the water. And she did not know what was in that water; moreover, she could not swim. On the other side, if she did nothing, she might stay for a long time on the top of the van and, worse, sink with it. Her decision was made. Ney rose and approached the edge of the van. It began to sink a little more. Ney wondered if it was stable enough to support her jump. She threw out the thought with a wave of the hand. It was a make-or-break situation.

She had never been good at sports at school. Today she cursed the fact of not taking more time to apply to jumps in heights and lengths. She looked behind. Her abductor was still in the same position, sprawled on his stomach, the legs in the water. However, the slight downward movement of his back showed that he was aware but asleep. Ney sighed; she had no desire to wake him. She turned her attention to the branch. It was time. She rushed and jumped. She leaned too much on the van. It then unbalanced, and the side where she was, went under the water. However, she was able to catch the tip of the leaves of the tree branch. But the latter bent under her weight, making her plunge into the dark water. She was immersed at least 3 feet under the water and took a huge gulp. It was slightly salty. A sudden panic took her. She firmly gripped the branch while beating feet by reflex. In a natural physical movement, the tree branch straightened out while pulling Ney outward. Her head emerged and met the fresh air from outside. She continued to hold firmly to the tree branch, which was strongly curved and threatened to break under her weight. She used this branch as a compass to reach the shoreline, which looked like a vast shapeless shadow behind the foliage. She was moving slowly. Without support for her feet, she had to use all the strength of her muscles. She heard a crack. She got scared. If the branch broke, she would sink deeply into the water. She tried to hurry. She was afraid.

Underwater, her legs and feet were hit by millions of little things that seemed to be leaves (she hoped they were leaves). No bites or scratches, but the slightest touch made her heart leap. Soon her naked foot met a soft surface. By reflex, she let out a cry and tried to remove her foot to realize that it was the wet sand on the submerged bank side. She

was almost there. However, with a big crack, the branch gave way under her weight. She then plunged once more into the murky waters. But this time her foot touched the ground. The water was reaching her nose. She took her inspiration and started to run, rather tried to run, because her whole body was underwater. She did not know what kind of river it was. She feared that any creature or animal would injure her, and in the darkness, she was not reassured. Her foot got tangled in what seemed like a bramble. She stumbled but stood up quickly. Now water only reached her knee. She was out.

She was numb with cold and shivering. She sat on a mound of earth and tried to keep warm by rubbing. She was in the middle of nowhere, lost, not knowing where to go. She started crying, crying like a baby. She rolled over. She was tired, exhausted, hungry, with the body ached by thousands of lacerations on the foot and arm. She was hurt, more than a physical pain; it was a deep wound in the soul. What started as a promising day had turned into a real waking nightmare. The worst part was she could not see the end. What did she do wrong to deserve all this? Large hot tears wet her cheeks. She thought back to when she was a kid. She did not remember experiencing suffering. But it was a long time ago. She saw herself walking into a tiny dress and going into a toy store. She hated toy stores. She wanted to have all the toys but could not, and it made her sad. That is why she hated Christmas. At every street corner, there were playing items, just as exciting as each other. But she could not have them all. She would only have her little doll whose features were so different from hers. She loved her pig color doll. Where had she been? She did not remember. Yet she was sure to have hidden it under her pillow and...

Ney suddenly straightened up. She felt like she had been jostled, but not enough apparently to wake her. She was still sleepy. She had laid down in the grass. Her mind was exhausted, driven far from reality. Was it a dream or a memory? She only wanted to go back to continue this sweet dream, when a more vigorous shaking definitely woke her up this time. It was still dark, she was still cold, and her body was still aching everywhere. A face was standing a few centimeters from her. Ney let out a cry of terror. The being in front of her was awful. Ney took two steps back. Was it a human?

“Relax my daughter,” let out a hoarse voice of an old woman. “I will not hurt you.”

The humanoid gave Ney a smile which, despite the darkness, had missing and decayed teeth. It was an old lady. From what Ney could glimpse in the dark, she had a terrible appearance. She gave off a strong smell of wet grass. Who was she? And what was she doing in there in this darkness? As if she was reading Ney’s thoughts, the latter replied:

“I came to draw water from the river. My provisions are empty. I do not live far away; if you want, I can take you there. You can rest and warm-up.”

Ney did not move. Who comes to draw water into the night, and especially in that darkest night? If it were to satisfy a real need of drinking, why would a person come alone? Ney found it weird. She wondered if she should agree to follow the old lady. At the same time, she was not sure if she would meet other people. Also, the idea of leaving this freezing cold

to find the tranquility of a house did not displease her. However, the old lady scared her. Not only her appearance, but she gave off a kind of aura that made one shiver. She had a mysterious thing that made Ney uncomfortable. Without waiting for an answer to her question, the old lady turned to sink into the undergrowth. Ney started to follow her against her will. She had her legs numb, and she shuddered. But walking helped her to warm up.

They were plunged in darkness with a profound silence, which only aggravated Ney's feeling of insecurity. No noise, not a least grasshopper song, nor a rustling bird's wing. Nothing but her pounding heart and the sound of her feet, with those of the old lady. The latter advanced with disconcerting ease, considering they were no light or visible marker, while Ney was struggling. Yet the old lady did not follow an existing track. She occasionally had to step over tree trunks, bend leaves, sometimes retrace her steps. Ney wondered if the old lady knew where she was going. At one point, she was questioning the mental state of the lady. What if she was a crazy person? No sane person would have left her body in such a state. Then Ney remembered that she was in a pitiable condition too, and the walk make it worse. Her feet remained bare since her passage in the water. So, she was hurt and lacerated by all the pieces of wood, gravel, and tiny sharp stones that littered the ground. Besides, she was still shivering. Walking heated her a bit but had not decreased her exposure to the cold. At regular intervals, she asked the old lady if it was still far away, and the latter invariably answered: "yes, my daughter." Ney began to lose patience, but what could she do? She did not know where they were neither where they were going. She could not slip away from the old lady.

"Where are we?" Ney asked.

"In the forest," the old lady said with her hoarse voice without looking back.

"Yes, I know," Ney replied, having trouble hiding her annoyance. "But I mean where? Like where? Near a town?"

"You will know, one thing at a time. Do not talk too loud; trees got ears."

After that enigmatic answer, the old lady hurried up. Ney, panting, also accelerated. Soon loomed a dark hovel, made apparently with clay brick. It had wooden windows from which no light filtered. She was as gloomy as its owner. No more doubt, it was a madhouse for mad people, lost in the middle of the forest. How could someone live there?

The old lady opened the door of the building; it was dark, and Ney could see nothing. She let Ney at the front door and stepped into the darkness. A noise of rubbed matches sounded, and a light appeared into a rustic lamp that the old lady stood. She returned to Ney, told her to come in, and guided her to a mattress on the floor.

"Lay yourself down, my daughter," she said.

The latter went to bed, while the grandmother went to close the door, casting a fearful glance outside. She then turned to a corner of the room where there was a kitchen range and seemed to look after something. Ney deeply laid down on the mattress, which, contrary to her fears, proved extremely comfortable. She wanted to think about her situation, her

condition, but it was too much for her. Her mind refused to think. She let herself curl up in the mattress while peering around. She was in a circular household as often found in the hinterland. The walls had the color of the soil. The different parts of the house were not partitioned, there was only one room like in Mother Mahi's house. Thus, there was, left of the front door, three old sofas, including a two-seater, arranged in a semicircle. They were facing a wall that seemed to have once welcomed a bookcase. No table was placed between the seats, but a mat made of palm leaves braid. To the right was a large jar filled with water (she assumed) and currently a kitchen range where the old lady was. On Ney side, there was a closed padded bag, which seemed to contain clothes. The whole room was lit by the flickering flame of a rustic lamp. There, reigned a gentle air. For some reason, Ney felt good. She looked down at the old lady. By the light of the lamp, she perceived some of her traits that she had not seen in the moonlight. The old lady has transformed. The monster who frightened out Ney was gone. It was a beautiful old lady who was facing her. She had fine lines, small deep black eyes, marked by wrinkles at the corners. Her cheekbones were high. Her cheeks had slight dimples that racked when she sketched a smile, a smile with perfect teeth. Ney was sure, in a not-so-distant past, she was gorgeous. And the years, though ungrateful, did not low her luster. Her movements were slow, graceful, and captivating. She had opened a window. She was busy infusing leaves in a pot she had placed on the kitchen range. The fragrances of the herbs boiling into the water, exhaled by the steam, were filling the building. Ney felt so good that she was ready to indulge in sleep. The old lady approached and handed her a plastic cup containing a dark liquid.

“Come on, drink!” the old lady ordered her.

Her voice was not hoarse anymore; it was soft and sweet. Ney drank without hesitation. The liquid was hot and bitter. She almost spat, but the old lady firmly held the glass against her lips, so she swallowed everything. The effect of the hot liquid in her stomach gave her a sense of well-being mitigated by the bitter aftertaste remained in her tongue. She laid down again.

The old lady dipped a cloth in the pot and applied it on Ney’s scratches and wounds. She massaged her, plunging her into a state of semi-sleepiness.

“You’ll feel better,” the old lady said, smiling again.

The latter got up, peered out the window, and then went to her kitchen range. She took out of it a yam and started peeling it, taking a glance at the window. She boiled the yam. The steam filled the room and comforted Ney in her sense of well-being. She felt more than well. All her pain, physical and moral, had faded, drowned in the warm atmosphere of the room. The old lady turned, pulled a stool, took one last glance outside, and then came to sit near Ney.

“Are you OK, my daughter?” She asked in a soft, sweet voice.

She wore a print dress that seemed to be soaked in a floral scent. She had changed. Where was the wet grass smell?

“Yes!” Ney answered. “Is it you? You seem to have changed.”

The old lady chuckled.

“Yes, it’s me. Has one ever said that you should not rely on external appearances?” without waiting for an answer, she continued. “You’re safe here, for now... The night was not quite easy, wasn’t it? How did you fall into the river? A car accident?”

“Yes, kind of...” Ney answered. “There were other people, another person on the roof...”

Suddenly Ney realized she had forgotten the young man from the van. She felt a cold penetrate her being from the bottom of her back. She was so shaken by her crossing and frightened by the sight of the old woman that she had not even recalled her companion in misfortune. She had abandoned him...

“I should have helped him,” she complained. “He remained alone and...”

“Shh...” the old lady ordered quietly, a finger on the mouth. “Do not speak too fast. What had to happen happened. It is useless to think about it. We could not do anything for him.”

She smiled and looked Ney, a look that strangely reminded Mother Mahi’s.

“How did you manage to be in that car?” The old lady asked.

Something in the tone of her voice surprised Ney. It was as if she asked a question to which she already had an answer.

Ney was grateful she asked. She had not realized it yet, but she needed to talk. She had stored too many emotions, and all those feelings threatened to overflow. She felt the extreme need to confide, to be listened to. She did not know where to start, so she began with what she remembered. She talked about her delay at school. She spoke of 'Jo, what she felt for him. She omitted to mention the robbery but told the old lady about the meeting with John-Alexander. She spoke of Mary's stepfather and the battle. She related the exorcism episode. She talked about the escape to Mother Mahi's home. She described her revival in the car, the fall, her struggle to breathe, her jump into the water. She spoke of her suffering, her injuries, her pain. She spoke and kept talking. She left nothing unsaid. She let out all things that the tears which had flowed a few minutes earlier had failed to clear.

The old lady looked at her. She touched and stroked her hair.

"Are you feeling better now?" She asked.

"Yes," Ney replied calmly, fine drops of tears in the eyes.

"The day and night were long. I'm sorry for what happened to you. I am even more sorry that you cannot stay here and rest longer."

Ney widened her eyes in incomprehension. Was the old lady throwing her out? This speech reminded her of the words of Mother Mahi. The grandmother smiled again.

"Be ready; they're coming!" She warned, throwing one last look again out the window.

Ney did not need to ask what the old lady meant by “they’re coming.” She heard shouts from outside. Through the window, she saw many lights tear the surrounding darkness, from all directions. A roar filled with indistinct words, sounds of metal clashing, was heard, becoming louder. Almost as if the household were surrounded. Ney straightened. The old lady gave her an apologetic but resigned look. The clamor became closer, and Ney heard more distinctly the voices. They were shouting, “Witch! Witch!” They stopped at the door and struck several blows with such violence than Ney was sure they wanted to break the door.

“Witch, go out! You will pay for your crimes!”

Ney curled in on herself and looked at the old lady who had an impassive gaze. The latter stood up and opened the door. Through the opening, Ney could see a hundred people, with rustic lamps on hand for some, wooden sticks for others, and even machetes. They all had a rage in the face and such fury in the eyes. The heart of Ney jumped. Without a doubt, they were bloodthirsty. With her smooth voice, the old lady asked them:

“What do you want from me? Why come and disturb me so late at night?”

“You’re a witch!” One of the onlookers cried.

Shouts of approval followed his words. A tall young and more personable man came to stand before her. He gave her a look of contempt and disgust.

“We will not let you hurt us anymore. For so long, you have stolen the future of the youth of the region. That’s why we do not find jobs.”

Approval shouts followed his words. Strengthened by this support, the young man continued like a judge who was reading to a defendant his sentence.

“You did curse the region with a shortage. Despite all our efforts to take the fruits of the earth, nothing comes. Despite the abundance of rain, nothing grows (another burst of shouts). But you did not stop there! No, you have prevented our women from having children; you have caused deaths. But today is the straw that broke the camel. You dared to take the life of our chief. On his death bed, he said he saw you eating his soul. Witch, we will not let you ever hurt us anymore. Neither you nor your cronies,” he added, crossing the look of Ney.

Following this, he spat on the face of the old lady. Other members of the crowd rushed to her to take her with them. Several entered the house and were surprised at first to see Ney. But they fell on her and brought her with them while she screamed, struggled, and begged them. She was trying to make them understand that it was a mistake; she was there by coincidence; she and the old lady did not know each other. Nothing worked, they were determined. Some of them also spat at her. Others slapped her or beat her with sticks. And when she felt due to the shock, no one tried to raise her; they continued to drag her. They plunged again into the woods, followed by a great clamor. The torches were glittering all around her. Ney was not able to see the old lady. She did not

know where they were dragging her. But the electrified crowd knew where they were going. Some were shouting at her from time to time: "you'll see what we will do you, witch!" There were many young boys, teenagers, but also women and children. They seemed to enjoy this popular joust. Ney imagined a large pyre that awaited her, with a kind of judge who was reading to the crowd her misdeeds. The idea made her smile inwardly. Frankly, she would have seen it all this evening.

They came to a clearing with a big tree in the middle. They pushed Ney toward the tree. She saw that there was already the old lady. They made Ney sit beside her. They bound their hands and feet and tied them to the tree. The tie on the chest of Ney was so tight that she had trouble breathing.

The youth spokesman came to stand before them.

"Our custom forbids us to judge witches at night. We will return in the morning to tell you your sentence, *witches*."

He spat on them and then turned around. The whole crowd of onlookers did the same, adding some kicks. Then they all disappeared into the darkness of the forest, leaving Ney and the old lady, dripping with saliva.

Ney took a deep breath, a silent rage in the heart. She was angry against herself for having followed this old lady. She should have remained laid on the bank of the river rather than follow an unknown person with whom she had doubts, which proved to be true. Yes, the old lady was quite hospitable. Ney had to admit it. However, all of that was her fault. She even regretted having opened her heart to her. The grandmother moved, as if she came back to life, and turned

her face to her. Ney could not restrain a cry of surprise. The beautiful lady with the flower fragrance was gone. Ney was facing the same ugly old lady who had awakened her from her sleep on the riverbank. How was it possible?

"I apologize to have driven you in here," the old lady claimed with a hoarse voice. "You were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Although what should happen, just happened... And we cannot do anything about that," she sighed.

"Why did they come to look for you? Why did they say you're a witch?" Ney asked with an aggressive tone that startled the old lady. "It is fine to apologize, but I did not need that! No need at all!"

The old lady sighed again.

"I'm really sorry, sweetheart. I will answer your question. I was born a long time ago, you know. I was not as old as I am tonight (she giggled). My mother's sister was a healer. She knew almost innately the usefulness of each plant, and the type of disease they cured. She was famous in the region. She taught me everything. And when she left this world, I replaced her. I went from one village to another. Such a lifestyle did not allow me to build a family. Besides, it was forbidden. But I was enjoying helping others and curing their ailments. I was not alone; we were several who had this knowledge. We wanted gladly to pass on to who was persevering enough to want it.

"Then one day a man came. He said he was the only one to hold real science, true knowledge, and we were in the dark.

He was the light, and only what he said mattered. He claimed our knowledge was not based on anything except assumptions, superstitions, nothing rational. He, alone, had the right reasoning. He knew what was good and evil. He said that the only source of knowledge was a bark assembly created by his ancestors. He told us to bend to his will without any criticism, so we might also benefit from its light.

“Some of us followed him. Then, the knowledge we had, which was recognized by all, was maligned. This knowledge has been abandoned, but worse, hated and fought. If you had not been to the man’s education, with his leaves, then you were a wizard.

“My daughter, for those people, a single old lady without offspring, who heals through an unwritten ancestral knowledge, is a witch. Those people are disconnected from their history and lost in a mirage. For them, the source of their woes (misfortune, illness, or any climatic hazard) is a curse of the witch. People do not grow further reflection. They only want to see what they want to see, only what reinforces their points of view. It is so easy to blame others rather than acknowledge their own limitations.”

“It’s nasty,” let out Ney. “It’s the nastiness. They came; they judged me without listening to me. They decreed that because I was with you, I was like you. They judged me without knowing me. It’s mean.”

The old lady sneered. There was something quite scary in that laugh.

"You think their behavior was bad? No, I do not think so. Aren't you making the same mistake? You are judging them too, after seeing only one aspect of their lives. So, for you, their actions tonight made them bad people?"

"I do not know," Ney answered. "I guess..."

"Are you considering yourself as a good person?"

"I do not know; I never wondered about it."

"Were you a good person this morning when you stole the necklace or when you were helping your friend to rob passers?"

"I never told you about it!" Ney exclaimed, shocked, turning to look at her.

The old lady laughed.

"Maybe I'm actually a witch in the sense of those who tied us," she added with a wink. "Does it make me a bad person? Can a bad person help a stranger like I did to you tonight? Or is it that I am sometimes a good person and sometimes a bad person? Everything is relative. We cannot presuppose the good or evil. The approach of the good or evil just depends on our position and the situation.

"I knew a doctor, an excellent surgeon. He had no equal. He realized operations like no one and had helped to save many lives. Alas, a drunken night, a traffic accident, death, and boom! The whole world turned against him. He was a

murderer, no matter how many lives he had saved. What people kept in their mind was the one he had taken. My daughter, unfortunately in this world, the good and evil do not have the same weight, one wrong action and everyone forgets what you have done right. It's unfair, but that's life. Try to remember it.

"But again, this is not so simple. Let us imagine two nations are at war. Let us say Country A against country B. And a soldier from country A takes the life of one of the opposing camps. For the soldier's family, he's a hero. He saved the country; he annihilated the enemy. But for the second family, he is a deadly invader who deserves a punishment. Where is the good? Where's the evil? Which family is right?

"A thief used his money to treat and help his neighbors, pay for the education of his daughter, and help the poor around him. For them, this man is a saint, deserving paradise. Considering the law, he is a criminal whose place is in jail. Who is right, and who is wrong? Life is not black or white. There is sometimes gray, several shades of black, off-white. There are even red and yellow. It should not be limited to what we see."

Ney remained thoughtful for a moment.

"You know things," she murmured. "I do not understand something. You knew I had a car accident and I had fallen into the river. You were not looking for water. You did not have something to draw it from the river, and you still had water at your home."

It was more a statement than a question. The old lady smiled.

"You knew they were coming," Ney continued. "I saw you looking outside the window the whole time. You knew they would come to take you, to take us. Why did you not flee away? You've left them kidnap us and make us suffer like this!"

"That will be pointless," the old lady said, trying to shrug. "I have told you what had to happen, happened. There is nothing we could do."

"I do not understand. Did you wish they caught you? They caught us? What will they do to us? Do you know it? If I knew what was going to happen today, I would have never left the house."

Once again, the old lady sighed.

"Do you really think that to know or to have the feeling of knowing what will happen can prevent events from happening? No! We all have our destiny. We must accept it. But to accept, it is necessary to know it and understand. Many people wander into this world with an aftertaste of unfinished business, dissatisfaction, not finding their place in society, seeking the meaning of their lives. Simply because they do not know their role in this world, or if they know, they do not accept it. We all have a goal to achieve. We are all the work of the same hand, led to a purpose. We all have a role to play in this great comedy. I have played my part, I ended reading my text. The curtain is about to fall. Why should I go against the wind direction? I understand, and I

accept.”

Ney bit her lower lip.

“You’re lucky; you know your destiny. I will give everything to know where I’m going; to understand why all of this happened to me is happening to me. I do not know what role I play in this life,” Ney confessed.

“When I think about it, I feel like a waste. I feel useless. Other people are achieving things. And I’m here, following the herd, melting into the mass. I find my life tasteless and bland. I cannot reach my goals; I do not even have one. I am stagnating or stepping back, while others are moving forward. You know, robberies, thefts, I do not do it just for fun. Only there, someone needs me. This is where I feel useful. This is how I give meaning to my life. My days are repeat estates of boredom. I do not see the end. I long to do more, achieve something. But I do not know. I feel useless; I’m worthless...”

The old lady smiled.

“No, you’re not useless. Maybe you do not see the end because you are not paying attention to the present and the small actions you do. I’ll answer the question I asked you before. To me, you are a good person.

“Every Wednesday, an old lady goes shopping. She doesn’t like shopping. First of all, because the goods she has to buy are too heavy, so she has to move slowly and painfully. Besides, on her way home, she had to cross a road where

people drive crazily. She often asks for help, but by dint of being insulted, she stopped asking. Every Wednesday, she suffers in silence. And this morning, a young girl came spontaneously to help her cross the road. That girl even bore her stuff for her till her home. You thought you accomplished a simple action, but you have lit the day for this lady. You gave her hope in humanity. Do you still think it was useless? Not me. I guarantee you; she will remember that for long.

“Still today, a young man in love had no way to see her beloved. If you had not been there, he would not have been able to see her, help her, and succor her. It sounds random, but no, you were not obliged to respond favorably to his request. You did not have to fight with them, but you did. You allowed two souls to meet up again. Do you think they will forget it? No! It is forever marked in their minds. Was your action futile? Worthless? No!

“Finally, a bandit was supposed to kidnap a girl tonight. But he almost died drowned in the river. Guess who helped him get out of the water. The girl he captured. I do not know if there is a nobler act than this. I am also sure that it will haunt him forever. And who knows? Maybe that will change his life. This implies less trouble in this world. And why this future change? Because you have decided to help him. None of what you did this day was useless.

“People are often unhappy because they believe that to succeed or achieve their goals is to go from point A to point B instantly. While the success, fulfillment lies in the path. We have to understand that each step allows us to move forward, and the path is just the sum of many small steps. We

must learn to love these small steps. The miracles are not always remarkable. Good deeds that impact may not be the most visible. The simple fact of living is a miracle; simply smiling at someone is a good deed. Acknowledge it and enjoy.

“You helped people, and let me tell you, you still have a role to play in the lives of others. You are undoubtedly different, but you’re unique. You have the color of the moon. Do not forget that; it’s when the night is the darkest that we appreciate the selenite glow.”

When she completed her sentence, the ties that bound her with Ney let go and fell. Facing the misunderstood gaze of Ney, she showed her a razor blade.

“To answer your question, no, I’m not a witch,” she said, smiling.

“Witches, like most people hear it, do not exist. There are just people who have some knowledge—regardless of how they use it, and others who have decided to close their eyes to this knowledge. But go now, my daughter, your destiny is calling you!”

Ney got rid of her bonds and straightened. She ached and was still pensive. The words of the old lady were still ringing in her head. She wiped her face with her clothes to clean the saliva. She was free. Free to go wherever she wanted. But where exactly? She was lost in a forest she did not know. She wanted to go home. She would apologize to Auntie Nadé if she were still willing to see her again. She was exhausted. She wanted to leave this place quickly. And this time, she would not run away alone. She would not forget the grandmother

as she had done for the young man on the van. They would go together. Perhaps she would not have to return to Auntie Nadé. The old lady knew everything; she had to know other places where they would be saved. She turned to the old lady just to ask her opinion on the issue when she realized that she had not moved from her place. She was still in the same position, leaning on the tree.

"You're not coming?" Ney questioned.

"No, I've told you, we can do nothing against what is coming. We cannot do anything against our fate. You have to leave! This is my destiny, not yours."

"What will they do to you?" Ney asked, slightly worried.

The old lady smiled.

"Uh, you'll never know. Perhaps it's me who'll do them something," she added with a wink. "Hurry up and go! Look! To the right, you will find a path that will lead you to a city. Leave before they come back."

"Could I at least know what your name is?"

"I had a lot of names, but my mother called me Niannai."

Niannai, the name vaguely reminded her of something, but she could not remember.

"Goodbye, Grandma Niannai," Ney said.

She got up and once again and began to run in the direction indicated by the old lady. Once again, not knowing where to go, with more doubts than certainties, and more scared than ever.

Upside down

Horrible evening...

There are some nights we would rather forget. Today was one of them. It is noon, and I just got home. I could not sleep all night. Not because of insomnia, but I had to work. Thinking about the events of the early morning gives me chills. I still have shaky hands. We believe we are ready to endure everything, but no training prepares us to live and to feel the distress of people who were losing everything in a split second. I do not know if it is because of the heat, but I seem to see around me moving shadows, to hear cries and laments. Did I do well in my job? How many people did I save? How many did I not? How many lost everything and will have to start from scratch? How many broken and ruined lives? If only I had arrived earlier. If only "they" had let us arrive a little early... Late... It was too late... Too late. Yet we could have been there sooner. The city is not so great. But they delayed us, nay prevented us from doing so. I should not write it, but it was the bitter truth. We could have intervened at the first spark, but they told us that it was a minor incident. Two hours later, we finally were allowed to intervene. But it was too late. The human and material damage were too extensive.

Why the delay? My superiors did not give any explanation. But I knew the reason. The slum was in a strategic place, a land in the city center. Halfway between residential neighborhoods and the future business district. A promoter, who smelled a big deal there, wanted to build houses and a huge mall. But that would suppose move, compensate, and relocate all those people living in the slum. And those people were not easy to dislodge. While with such an incident, they had to leave the place now. They will surely receive some compensation. But it

would be more symbolic than helpful, and all at the expense of the taxpayer, of course. The promoter is the biggest winner here. A criminal act with complicity within the administration. How awful! I have a deep disgust of me. By not moving, by accepting orders not to intervene despite what I knew, I was an accomplice in this plot. I am just as responsible. God, forgive me...

It was an apocalyptic scene. The heat was terrible. The cries of mothers and their children would tear your soul. More than a thousand people became homeless and saw their lifetime labor flying in smoke. We, the Firefighters, were overwhelmed. Five firefighters to cover more than a hundred houses in flame with only our tanker as a water source. We were useless. The population had already organized to extinguish the fire and rescue people in distress with success. But the flames were insane. Chills still cover my body. I had never seen anything like that. Were it not for the sudden rain; the fire would undoubtedly have continued to spread until now. Our intervention was pointless. The plumes of smoke that rose in the morning proved it. I am disgusted. Why be called Angel, be a firefighter if you are unable to save lives?



The bush gave way to a path, sometimes obstructed by branches and tree trunks. But it was less dense than the forest. Thus, the race (because she obviously was not walking) was more comfortable. However, the night was profoundly dark. Heavy clouds hid a crescent moon struggling to pass up some rays. Ney saw nothing except a

faint glow that seemed to vibrate at the end of the road. She had to reach it.

She was exhausted. The night seemed endless. 24 hours earlier, she was asleep, dreaming of today's day. Even in her worst bad dream, she could not have imagined what she would face today. No, she will not think about it. Otherwise, she would once again start crying — one thing at a time. Get out of the forest first, then she will think about her life. Besides, the output was near. The small flickering light was slowly transformed into a true light. The path became a real way, much wider that was winding in the middle of a plantation. She hurried.

Ney finally got out of the grove to be on top of a slope. Further down, the urban streetlights shone a thousand lights. A fresh air touched her face and soothed her wounds. For a moment she remained motionless, taking advantage of this respite. A cold wind, heavy of droplets announcing thunderstorms, rose to her nostrils an appreciated smell of wet earth and kaolin. It was not raining yet, but it will be soon. She then went on her way.

A road ran along the plantation; she followed it to enter the city. The town had wide and empty streets. Homes were far distant from each other. There are also some gigantic buildings which seemed to be abandoned. The city looked like a ghost town. It appeared someone decided first to build it and was waiting for men to come to populate it, and they eventually failed to come.

Ney walked without knowing where to go. Indeed, she did not know where to go. She just wanted to walk because she had to. She remembered some words from the old lady about the fate. Right now, she feels called by such a force, or was it the fatigue? She was also followed by a flies horde

which were whirring around her. She was horribly smelly and certainly had a terrible look. But for the first time in her life, appearance did not matter to her. The days when she complained and felt sorry for herself, the days when she fantasized about a life, she never had, were all gone. It was part of the past when she was a little girl. Nothing mattered. She no longer expected much from living. This is what happened when you had lived, what she had experienced. She was still walking, and for some reason, she suddenly smiled, then laughed. Her laugh sounded echoing in the empty streets. It looked like a demented laughter of crazy. But she was not crazy. Ney was sane. She laughed because she fooled life. Ultimately, she was still there. Life wanted to break her, but she was still standing. No, she was not crazy. And she certainly deserved to laugh out loud, to be super happy. She celebrated her success against life. Success? Her mood suddenly fell. The old lady told her that what happened had to happen, and there is nothing we could do. In other words, life had wished what she went through and then gave her a break. She had no merit in her current peace; it was just that life had decided that it had tested her enough. Or was it a reprieve? Joy gave way to anger. A dull rage gripped Ney's gut. Why was she born if it was to suffer? There were people in this world who had not endured a quarter of what she had endured. Why was she not among those people? To say that the world is unfair would be redundant. Her wrath increases. She blamed everyone: Auntie Nadé, students in her class, Jo, John-Alexander and Mary, the government, everyone. Each of them took advantage of her, abused her. Each of them, thanks to her, had a bit of joy, but nobody had thought to ask her if she was OK. No one cared about her. Nobody! She blamed the world

for continuing to operate while she was suffering martyrdom. People were minding their own business, no matter what happened next to them.

Her walk led her next to a lake. The water was not smooth; in several places, ripples were breaking its surface. Perhaps there were animals inside. Fish, toads, or caymans? Ney remembered a dream she had a long time ago. She was walking alongside a river, and Crocodiles inside came out and began to applaud her... Maybe her dream was a premonition. The crocodiles did not necessarily applaud by admiration, but certainly to mock her. Were the animals down in the lake mocking her also? What if it was a trick of fate? All these events had happened, for toads and crocodiles to make fun of her at the end.

She did not believe in destiny. But that was all she had now: the hoarse old lady voice saying in her head that everything happened for a purpose. At this moment, that gave meaning to her life, meaning to her suffering. She knew it, deep in her heart. Everything was going to end there. She climbed on the railing in front of the lake and held out her hands. She felt light and free, finally the Master of her destiny. All was over. Or not...

She heard a cry followed by a huge din. Ney wondered how she had managed not to hear it since then. As brought back to earth, she went down the railing to realize that there were a lot of people out. But nobody paid attention to her. Everyone was going in all directions, somewhat bewildered. People were shouting and talking like in the market. Ney watched them moving back and forth, wondering what was happening. All seemed to leave or go to a place on the right where large plumes of smoke rose. It looked like a campfire. But it had to be a colossal campfire considering the smoke.

Why light up a campfire in the city? Ney felt very stupid. There had to be a blaze, a terrible one. She ran to the place, getting pushed around in all directions. She did not know why, but she felt drawn to the flames. As if, in the middle of all this chaos, she found her way.

The whole neighborhood was on fire. The heat that emanated made her suffocate. Everyone was going in all directions, some with buckets of water, others with personal belongings. Some people were carrying people that had been injured in safe areas. Most of the women and children were screaming, crying, and all this in an infernal din. Ney was in the middle of the crowd in turmoil like a child marveled at a carousel. The same feeling, she had in the market. She felt in her element among those people who were barely noticing her. She looked at them in fascination, with a smile. This may sound cynical, given the distress that was playing around, but no matter. She felt happy. For once, she was not the person who was suffering. Besides, she was there; she could be useful. She was where she should be. Her whole journey, all this crazy day, all of that had guided her here. Her fate... She smiled again and began to walk the streets.

A man had difficulties lifting a bucket, she came to his aid, and they put out flames from a shop. A woman had trouble walking, Ney helped her and sent her away from the fire and smoke, so she could rest and breathe correctly. To Families who wanted to remove their stuff to prevent it from burning, Ney proposed her arms. Where was she drawing that force when she was supposed to be more than exhausted? She loved what she was doing. Tonight, she was the queen of events. The fire had been lit for her to assert her abilities, fully realize her destiny. Nothing could stop her; everything was under her control.

She continued in inflamed streets, looking for someone to help when she heard cries of pain. They were extremely low. Ney wondered if they were voices in her head or if she had really heard a call for help. Moreover, virtually everyone was calling for support all around. But her instinct told her there was a person in need. She started listening insistently, turning on herself.

“There is somebody over there, I heard screaming,” she said to the onlookers who were passing.

Maybe that *someone* had understood that it was time to get noticed as a low but still audible “help!” came from the house behind her. One of the onlookers with incredible rapidity slipped through the front window, the flames had not yet reached this side of the house, but there was a lot of smoke. He got out a minute later, holding a girl’s waist. Other hands came out to help the girl. They carried her to a grouping area a little further. Ney did not follow them. She was sure to have heard screams, but from more than one person. There were other people in the house.

“There are others,” she told the onlookers. “There are other people in this house.”

But no one seemed to listen to her. She decided to bypass the house to the right. The front door was heavily burnt, the fire had spread through the electrical wires in the area which landed directly in the living room of the building. The neighborhood was covered by anarchic and fraudulent electric network that stretched like a spiderweb and had undoubtedly favored the extension of the fire. She continued

to the right and saw a wooden window closed but not burnt, a sign that the fire had not yet reached the room behind the window. Ney came near the room. The window was not in fire but was hot enough to deter anyone from getting closer. How did the young man who had saved the girl earlier managed to handle that heat?

Ney screamed and asked if there was anyone. She seemed to hear a response. Maybe it was in her head, maybe not. She had to get to check it out. She picked up from the ground, a dress and pants that had fallen from the hand of someone who was running. She put them around each hand and approached the window. She did not know exactly what she had to do. Unlike the previous room, those windows were closed and could be locked from the inside. She should break it. Will she strength enough to do it? Perhaps no, but she had to try. There were people behind who needed her. "Super Ney" will help.

She approached the window. The heat was terrible. She was already wet, but then it seemed that all the water in her body was evaporating. She banged on the window. Maybe a twist of fate or it was just defective, but the window fell into the room, plunged into total darkness. She lit on a torch borrowed earlier from a passer-by.

"Is there anyone?" she asked. The heat was terrible in the room.

She heard a shy "yes" almost choked. In an instant, like reflex, she grabbed the railing and jumped from the window in the room. Her landing was not exactly painless. The railing was hot and burnt down her knees. She landed on a table that

made her stumble and fall on the floor, bumping her head on a piece of furniture. But she was insensitive to pain tonight.

“Where are you?” she asked.

She turned on herself and saw that she was in a bedroom where were a man and a woman. The latter moved weakly. Maybe she was the one who called for help. Ney approached them.

“You have to get up, I’ll help you,” she said, shaking them.

They did not respond. It was like they were too sleepy or too weak to move. Yet it seemed that the smoke was not that much in the room. And now, with the open window, fresh air was trying somehow to make its way. She shook them again (especially the woman who seemed more awake). Despite the fresh air, the heat became more intense, and the door—the gateway to the room—was beginning to burn up.

Ney did not know what to do. They were not reacting, and the house was likely to fully ignite, trapping her inside. She could get out to get more hands to come and help, but it might be too late. But if she stayed longer, she would be the one who will need help. She decided to move closer to the window to call for help when part of the roof collapsed on the side of the same window with a loud crash. Ney’s heart fell. Her only way out just went away, and the flames from the front door had begun to gnaw the wooden roof over them. For a moment, she was petrified, not realizing yet what was happening around her. The couple on the bed did not move, too sleepy or worse...

She was alone again, in a much greater danger. And suddenly, she began to scream, to call for help, imploring heaven. Freaked out, she turned on herself, screaming to tear her throat. Someone will hear, inevitably someone will hear. They will create a passage. It could not end like that.

Sparks had fallen on the bed that was beginning to flare up with its occupants. The thick smoke that had no more exit out of the door was stored up in the room. There was less air. Ney's eyes, her skin, and her throat were burning a lot. Instinctively she lowered to the floor, which was a little cooler. There was not enough air for her to scream. She had no strength to move. She heard someone shouting, "Mom, Dad." She wanted to cry too, that she was there, but she could not. Either way, it would have been useless. No one could help her. Slowly the fire was burning in the room and was still advancing toward the non-inflamed oasis where she was lying.

Like a miracle, a high wind followed by heavy rain fell. The rain sensed since the end of the afternoon finally came. Large drops of water entered the building whose roof had been eaten away by flames. They extinguished the blaze inside, turning into smoke the fire. It smelled ash, wet earth, and kaolin. Fire sirens were heard. The residents were thanking God for this providential rain. It lasted until the early morning, dutifully turning off every spark or ember.

At sunrise, the district was only ruins, torn families, gutted houses. In the midst of it, a tormented soul found peace in a last chaotic jolt...