BY THE LIGHT OF THE FIREFLIES

MARJORIE FLORESTAL

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In 1980s Brooklyn, a 10-year-old Haitian girl is the only witness to an unspeakable crime. She must find the courage to testify in a case that could tear her family and community apart.

The summer after my mother died, I snuck out of our apartment every day to spend hours at the library reading romance novels. My father would not have approved. He brought home *educational* books so I could build my vocabulary, ace the SATs, and get into an Ivy League college. Like all smart Haitian girls, I was expected to go to medical school one day. I was 10. I liked Bazooka Joe bubble gum (mostly for the jokes) and happily-ever-after.

On the day everything changed—or changed *again*—I was late getting to the library. Papa had been up all night, and I began to worry

he wasn't going to work. I made his coffee just the way he liked it, strong and black, and I waited. The clock in our kitchen ticked 8:30 a.m. before he finally stumbled out of his room, bleary-eyed, struggling to wrap his tie around his neck.

"Let your brother sleep today, Farah," Papa said as he leaned down to kiss my cheek. "He had it rough last night."

A cloud of Listerine and Old Spice enveloped me, then Papa rushed out the door with a cup of coffee in his hand. I waited, tapping my foot on the linoleum tile.

One. Three. Five. Seven minutes later, I raced out of the apartment and covered the six blocks to the library in record time, dodging shattered glass, and skipping over cracks in the sidewalk. *Step on a crack break your mother's back*.

I ran past the boys on their bikes riding aimlessly up and down the street, and the old men on their stoops drinking from their covered bottles, smoking weed and talking shit. Brooklyn Style.

I ran past the laundromat where Maître Moïse waged his one-man protest because Ms. Kwon had put his change on the counter and not in his outstretched hand.

He stood in front of her shop and shouted, "No Justice? No Peace!"

She stood behind bulletproof glass and shouted back, "I don't want *no* trouble!"

I ran through the subway underpass, pausing only long enough to wave at Crazy Eddy, the homeless guy who slept in one corner of the station and peed in the other with fastidious precision.

By the time I saw the redbrick building rising from the ash of neglected homes with peeling paint and broken windows, I was breathless. But not from running.

On the outside, our library wasn't very impressive: two stories wedged between what used to be an orthodox Jewish high school, and an abandoned field surrounded by a chainlink fence. But inside, the library was whole worlds pressed into sheets of paper that smelled of adventure, of unknown or forbidden places. You could go from Paris to Port-au-Prince in a single afternoon.

I skipped past the field, my hand smacking against the chainlink fence. It rattled with a metallic clang so loud, I almost didn't hear the

mewling. I paused, my ear tuned to the sound of distress. There it was again, a mournful cry only a kitten could make. It was coming from the field.

The spit in my mouth turned gluey. The field was where the bogeyman lived. Every kid in the neighborhood had a story about him. Sometimes, he appeared as a ghostly apparition hovering above the fence. Sometimes, he carried a satchel that hissed and shook with the death rattle of lost souls. Sometimes, he came out under a full moon and howled long into the night. The baying wolf of Brooklyn.

No one ever caught the bogeyman, but each new sighting brought a new hole in the fence. The adults said it was crack addicts using the field as a drug den. They sent a handyman out with bolt cutters and plywood until the fence was a patchwork of wood interlaced with metal. No matter how hard the adults tried to cover it up, we kids knew the truth. The field was haunted.

The kitten mewled again, fear and pain wrapped in a single, plaintive note. What if it was dying? I couldn't bear the thought of one more thing that used to be alive but wasn't anymore.

I jogged back until I found a hole in the chain link and squeezed through it. The air on this side of the fence was thicker, more humid. Sweat broke out on my body as I climbed over a mountain of trash and discarded furniture. Where grass once grew was now dirt littered with syringes, tin foil, old straws, small metal spoons with burn marks in the center, and the kind of stubborn, leafy things that grew up out of cracks in the sidewalk.

From the corner of my eye, I caught a flash of movement. I dove behind a smelly old couch, my heart pounding against my ribcage. I counted *one, two, three,* and did it again before I was brave enough to peek over the edge of the couch. Did I see what I thought I saw?

It was the bogeyman.

He was as white as any ghoul and twice as big. He moved with the speed of a cheetah, scrambling up, over, and down the fence before disappearing into thin air.

The kitten mewled again. I followed the sound with my eyes and saw a Hefty garbage bag squirming and wiggling on the ground a few

feet away. It was so big, there had to be more than one kitten trapped inside.

What was I supposed to do with all those hurt kittens?

I crouch ran to the bag, keeping low in case the bogeyman returned. The mewls were more frantic now. I dug my fingers in the bag and ripped it open.

There was no kitten—or two or three. It was a girl.

She was naked, her brown skin caked with dirt and blood, her hair a matted, sticky 'fro. On her forehead, someone had written the word SLUT in black magic marker.

The smell of doodoo hit me just as I recognized the girl. Nadège stared up at me. Her lips moved, the words *help me* a faint whisper that faded into a sob from which no sound escaped.

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The 66th precinct was nothing like I'd imagined. Not that I'd imagined many police stations, but my brother liked to watch *Hill Street Blues.* Sometimes, I'd watch with him and describe what was happening on the screen. TV police stations were full of colorful people who said or did the funniest things. Real life was boring. In real life, you sat in a small gray room and answered the same questions over and over.

The officer who was taking my statement (that's what they call it) sat hunched over his typewriter. He pecked out the letters of my name, silently mouthing each one. F-A-R-A-H-E-M-M-A-N-U-E-L. Every third letter, he'd curse, hit the backspace key, and use a tiny brush to white out what he'd typed. The room smelled like chemical pickles.

He stopped pecking to glare at me. "How do you know the alleged victim?"

"We're in the same class."

"She's 13." His voice rose to an a-*HA!* crescendo, as if he'd caught me in a lie.

I offered him an apologetic smile. "I got skipped a couple of times." Three to be exact. I never had to do kindergarten, third or sixth grade.

He eyed me suspiciously. "You were gonna meet your friend at the library?"

"No, sir." Nadège was not my friend. We were the only two Haitian girls in our class—that's all we had in common.

"So what were you doin' over there?"

"I went to borrow some books."

"It's June," he said in that I-cracked-the-case voice he liked to use. "Lemme get this straight: You were goin' to the library on a hot summer day when you happened to land in the biggest drug den this side of Brooklyn. You saw a fat white guy dump a garbage bag, which happened to have your friend in it. Then this fat white guy—who's some kinda bogeyman—leaped over the fence like a cheetah. Am I gettin' all that?"

I never said the bogeyman was fat, just big, but I didn't think the officer would care about the difference. "Yes, sir," I said, after a moment's hesitation.

"I need a minute." He stood up. "You want somethin'? A soda? Chips?"

I shook my head, unsure what to do once he'd left the room and closed the door behind him. What if he forgot about me? Who would even know I was there? One of the other officers had taken my phone number when I'd first gotten to the precinct. He said he'd call my house, but my brother was the only one home. Samuel wouldn't know what to do.

I looked at my Swatch watch. It was after 12 pm, which meant Papa would have left his job at the hospital already. He'd be driving his cab now. Sometimes, he called us right before his shift started, and other times he wouldn't get a break or find an open pay phone for hours. We couldn't reach him when he was driving because he refused to carry a beeper. He said only doctors and drug dealers had beepers, and he was neither one of those things in this country.

I was starting to sweat when I finally heard the officer's voice outside the door. "I'm tellin' you, this girl and the alleged victim are in it together. They probably missed curfew or somethin' and came up with this crazy story to get out of trouble with their parents."

"I appreciate your assessment, detective," a woman's voice replied,

"but the Brooklyn DA's office will make its own determination on prosecution."

"You wanna waste your time, little lady, you go right ahead. I got real police work to do."

"*FARAH!*"

I jumped at the sound of Papa's voice echoing through the precinct. Was I imagining it?

"Farah? Where's my daughter?" My father's deep voice cut through all confusion. I wasn't imagining it. He was here.

"Papa?" I rushed out the door only to crash into the typewriter pecker. He reached for me, but I wiggled free of his grasp. "Papa?"

My father came charging at us. He swung me in his arms and held on so tight, I almost couldn't breathe. I didn't mind.

"Why is my daughter here without the presence or consent of her guardian?" When Papa was stressed, his Haitian accent became more pronounced, and his speech slowed. It was like he was processing his words in all the four languages he spoke fluently.

"Who are you?" the officer said.

The woman stepped forward. She was African-American and at least a head shorter and 50 pounds lighter than the police officer, but he seemed small compared to her.

"Mr. Emmanuel? I'm Ida Barnett with the Brooklyn DA's office. Could we go in here to talk?"

Papa spared a glance at the sad little office I had just escaped. "There is nothing to talk about."

"Sir, a terrible thing happened today. We need your daughter's help to bring the perpetrator to justice."

Papa's arms tightened around me. "My daughter has nothing to do with your crime. I'm sorry, but we cannot help you."

WE RODE HOME IN SILENCE. IT WASN'T A GOOD SIGN. WHEN PAPA was mad, he lectured me about being a descendant of Toussaint L'Overture and Jean Jacques Dessalines. If they could free Haiti from slavery, he would say, then I could get straight A's on my report card.

When Papa was *really* mad, he was silent. It was the kind of silence that made my brother and me tiptoe around the apartment.

Papa parked his cab in front of our building. "Get upstairs. Lock the door, and don't open it for anybody," were the first words he spoke since we'd left the police station.

I got out of the car, my fingers trailing along the door handle. "I'm sorry, Papa," I said, though I wasn't sure exactly why.

"I'll be home soon." He glanced at me, and in his eyes was not anger but fear.

I ran up to the apartment. Samuel was waiting in the entryway. He was older than me, almost fifteen, but I could see over the top of his head easily. I was tall for my age, and he was short for his. He was also skinny—*too* skinny—which made him look frailer.

"What happened?" His fingers fluttered over my face, arms, and legs, hovering more than touching, as though searching for broken bones or a broken spirit.

"Why'd you tell Papa for?" I demanded, letting him hear the hurt and accusation in my voice. For a moment, I almost forgot how happy I'd been to see Papa at the precinct.

"You were arrested," Samuel said.

"I wasn't arrested. I had to go to the police station cause—"

"The *cops* had you!"

I started crying, which surprised us both. "She was hurt," I blubbered, "She was hurt and bleeding *down there*." I could no longer bear alone the weight of all I'd seen. I had to tell somebody.

Samuel was not the right somebody. I should have known better.

A look of anguish crossed his face, then he doubled over and clutched his head. "No," he muttered, rocking back and forth on his heels. "No. No. No."

I grabbed his shoulders. "*Kalme-ou*," I said in the soft, soothing tone I had heard Manman use in moments like this. "Stay calm. Everything will be all right."

Each time Samuel had one of his attacks, it was different, unpredictable. Some were like a summer rain, powerful and scary but over quickly. Others were more like a long, cold winter.

The first time I witnessed one of Samuel's attacks was on the day

he came to us three years ago. He stepped off the plane, took one look at Manman, and had an attack that made him lose his sight. Papa and Manman took him to lots of doctors, and they all said the same thing—there was nothing physically wrong with him. They finally took him to a psychologist. Samuel had something called *hysterical blindness,* a mental disease caused by stress and trauma.

I only know all this because I heard Manman and Papa talking. It's wrong to eavesdrop, but if I didn't I wouldn't know anything.

Papa said Samuel was having problems because everything was so new. My brother hadn't seen our parents since he was four years old. They had to leave Haiti without him. And Samuel had never met me before. I was born in New York.

Papa said we shouldn't worry. Things would get better. But they got much worse before they got better—and now they were worse again.

"Let me go," Samuel said a few minutes later.

I stepped back and let him stand on his own. "You want some lunch?" It was always better to get back to normal quickly.

Samuel shrugged, but he followed me into the kitchen, his fingers grazing the walls as he made his way alone. He belonged to a church group that helped him develop blindness skills.

"Stop staring at me," my brother said. He was right. I *was* staring at him. It always surprised me the way Samuel knew things he shouldn't know.

I went to work fixing our lunch. We sat down to a meal that tasted like a bad imitation of the ones Manman used to make.

I was washing the dishes when Papa came home with Maître Moïse. We called him *Maître*—master not mister—because he had been a lawyer in Haiti. President Jean Claude Duvalier sent him to prison after he started a protest movement against Duvalier's dictatorship. Maître Moïse ended up in the same prison as Papa, and they became good friends.

Maître Moïse always called Papa *Doctor Emmanuel*. He said it was good to remember who they used to be.

"S'ak pase?" Maître Moïse asked as he kissed my cheek and patted Samuel on the back.

"N'ap boule," we said in unison. The only acceptable response to the question: What's happening? We're burning.

"Tim Tim." Maître Moïse spoke the words every Haitian speaks when he wants to share a good riddle. "Who's the captain under your bed?"

I thought for a minute. "Bois seiche," I said, admitting defeat. I hadn't come up with an answer—only dried wood.

Samuel's frown suddenly disappeared. "A bedpan!"

"That's right, *ti garçon*." Maître Moïse laughed and thumped Samuel on the back. "You are a true Haitian. These American kids grow up with indoor plumbing—they don't know anything about bedpans!"

Papa sent us to our room so he could talk to Maître Moïse in private. I waited a few minutes then tiptoed back to the living room and hid behind a bookcase.

"—can they force Farah to testify?" I heard Papa ask.

"Dr. Emmanuel, this is America. We have rights. They can't force your daughter to do anything."

Papa breathed a sigh of relief. "That is good because I still have not received Samuel's Green Card."

"You can't be too careful, my friend." Maître Moïse said. "These days, the INS tries to find any excuse to keep us out of the country. They say all Haitians have AIDS."

I leaned forward to hear better, and a book slipped off the shelf. It landed on the floor with a loud thud.

"Farah," Papa said, "go back to your room and read something educational."

On Tuesdays, Papa spends the whole day at the hospital. He liked working with patients, even if it was just to mop the floor and empty their bedpans. He said it reminded him of a part of his life that slipped away before he knew how precious it was.

Samuel spent his Tuesdays with his church group, and I hung out with my friend Sue. I waited for her in front of the laundromat, and she came tearing out of the backroom.

"Where are you going?" Ms. Kwon shouted from behind bullet-proof glass, though it was the same answer every Tuesday.

"The library, Mama," Sue shouted over her shoulder.

"Be back in an hour, Sue-jin. There's work to do."

We ran to the Bodega to stock up on Cheese Doodles and Bazooka Joe bubble gum. Sue had a Walkman. We took turns with the headphones, skipping down the block, trying to do the Moonwalk while listening to Michael Jackson's *Thriller*.

We fell to the ground, laughing at our terrible efforts. When the laughter stopped, I told Sue everything. I cried a little.

We turned the corner, and the library came into view. People were *everywhere*. They were so loud, I expected the librarian, Mrs. Percy, to come storming out to shush them.

"This is Helen Macera with WCBS coming to you live from a blighted Brooklyn neighborhood ravaged by AIDS and the crack epidemic. Today, there is another tragedy residents here must contend with."

"I'm Troy Palmer of NBC News. Our story today is about Nadège Pierre, a young Haitian immigrant who was allegedly raped just steps from this public library."

"I'm Casey Lang with 1010 WINS. A girl raped? A community divided? Some are claiming the alleged rape of Nadège Pierre is no more than a hoax. The girl is believed to have made up the story to avoid punishment for breaking curfew."

Someone shouted, "There she is!" and the crowd suddenly descended on me, pointing their microphones.

"Are you Farah Emmanuel?"

"Are you the witness?"

"Can we get a statement, Ms. Emmanuel?"

Sue mouthed a single word: *Run!*

I did.

I went flying back the way we'd come. Arms and legs pumping. Heart pounding.

In the subway underpass, I paused, searching frantically for escape —or a place to hide. Crazy Eddy met my gaze.

"I gotcha, sis," he said with a jerk of his head, urging me to keep moving.

I did. Arms and legs pumping. Heart pounding.

I turned back for a quick look, and I saw a tumbling line of reporters knocked down by Crazy Eddy's long, thin legs. But they were already getting back up, and the ones behind them were surging forward.

Move. Move. Move. Move. Move!

I ran past the Bodega, the laundromat, the young boys on their bikes, the old men on their stoops, up the block and into my building. I slammed the front entrance door behind me.

They were only a few feet away.

Up the stairs, three, four at a time. Up. Up. Up!

I ran into my apartment, hitting the deadbolt, and the second lock, sliding the chain into place.

Only then did I let myself fall to the ground. Arms and legs spent. Heart pounding a loud *Boom-BOOM! Boom-BOOM!*

It took a moment for me to realize that wasn't my heart. Someone was knocking at the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Ida Barnett, Farah. We met yesterday at the precinct. Please open the door."

I didn't want to, but all those years as a good girl who obeyed adults was a hard habit to break.

When I opened the door, I saw there was not just one adult but two. Ms. Barnett had brought Nadège's mother with her.

Ms. Barnett said, "Please call your father, Farah. Tell him we'd like to talk to him."

I called the hospital and left a message for Papa. By then, the two women had seated themselves in the living room. There was nothing I could do but join them.

Nadège's mother didn't say a word, but Ms. Barnett tried to make small talk about music, my favorite TV shows, school.

"What school did you go to?" I finally asked.

"NYU undergrad. Columbia law."

So she was smart. Why hadn't she gone to medical school instead? I asked as much.

She smiled. "Because I wanted to help people."

"Doctors help people," I pointed out. My father helped people. He used to run a big clinic in Haiti, but then he made the government mad and they threw him in jail. He and Manman had to run away before they hurt him.

"I help people the way a doctor can't," Ms. Barnett said. "I make sure they get justice under the law."

A key turned in the lock. A moment later, Papa walked in the room. "What are you—" He saw Nadège's mother and paused. "Madan Pierre, I heard what happened to your daughter. I am sorry."

Nadège's mother spoke for the first time. "*Meci.* I hope you are sorry enough that you will help me send the man who did this to jail."

Papa shook his head. "I cannot involve my family."

"We would not have chosen it this way, but this is the way it happened. Your daughter was there. We need her help."

"I can't help you. *She* can't help you."

"Dr. Emmanuel, I don't know you personally, but I do know of your family—of the sacrifices you have made. You saved many in Haiti. Please, help me save my daughter."

"I told you, I can't."

"Your wife—"

"Don't." Papa uttered the single command. "Do not bring my wife into this. I have told you, I cannot help. Please leave."

When the door closed behind the two women, the apartment was filled with silence.

THE REPORTERS WOULD NOT LEAVE. THEY CROWDED IN FRONT OF our building thrusting their microphones and their questions at anyone who passed by.

"How long have you known Farah? Is there anything about her our readers might find *interesting*?

"We understand Nadège dated a lot of guys from this neighborhood. Do you believe she was *really* raped?

"The Department of Justice estimates only one-fifth of all rapes are ever reported to the police. Why do so many girls choose to remain silent after being sexually assaulted?"

The building felt heavy with fear. Tenants who didn't have their papers scurried into their apartments, locked the doors, and pulled down the shades—though temperatures soared into the 90s. They feared all this attention would bring the INS to their door.

When the reporters were still in front of our building the next day, people were forced out of their apartments to go to work. They hid their faces behind baseball caps and old newspapers and slunk past the TV cameras. They looked like the perps on *Hill Street Blues*.

Everyone in the building was talking about Nadège. I was sick of all the gossip. On the third day, I went down to the basement for some peace and quiet—hardly anyone did the laundry on a weekday. But there was Madan Jean-Baptiste and Madan Alexi, gossiping away.

"This girl say she was raped by a white man. What did she do for this man to notice her? That's what I want to know," Madan Jean-Baptiste said. "Girls today are always looking for trouble. They wear their skirts so *short!* Mini-skirts. I tell my daughters, no mini-skirts. Uh uh. No way. They say, *Oh, Manman, everyone is wearing them.* I tell them, if everyone go kill their mother, you go kill your mother too?"

"Voisine, that is because you are a real Haitian mother," Madan Alexi said. "I don't understand Haitian mothers these days—they raise their kids like little Americans. I tell my kids they came out of my *boubou'n*. The only American thing about them is the birth certificate. They are 100% Haitian, and they will be raised that way."

Papa, Samuel, and I didn't leave the building for a week. It was fun, at first. We played dominos, and Papa told us stories about him and Manman and how they met in medical school.

"Your manman was the smartest person in the room," Papa said. "I told myself this is a woman I could learn from. So I pestered her until she took pity on me and let me study with her. After that, forget it! I put a wedding ring on her finger so fast." Papa laughed. It was a sound I hadn't heard in months.

On the second week of the siege, Papa returned to work, and Samuel spent most of his time with his church group. I walked around the apartment like a hungry ghost, searching for something that was always just out of reach.

When I got so bored I wanted to cry, I went into my closet and pulled out a box of romance novels. They had belonged to Manman. She *loved* romance novels. When she got so thin because the sores on her throat made it difficult to swallow, and she couldn't walk and could hardly breathe, she still loved her romance novels. Papa would bring new ones to the hospital every day, and when she was too sick to do it herself, he would read them to her.

There was only one romance novel I ever saw Manman hate. She threw it across her hospital room so hard it bounced off the wall. That book was lying on top of the box I had pulled from my closet. I hadn't wanted to throw any of Manman's books away after she died. I tried to read it now, but I couldn't finish. It was a silly book about a woman so beautiful every man tried to rape her. Her husband raped her—that's how he became her husband—and brought her to his southern plantation. They had lots of happy slaves and lived happily ever after.

On the third week of the siege, Ms. Kwon sent Sue to live with her cousin in Queens. She said this neighborhood was hell on girls. Sue snuck past the reporters the day before she moved to give me a final hug and a pocket full of Bazooka Joe bubble gum.

We laughed and cried and promised to keep in touch because Queens was just a subway ride away. But since neither of us was allowed on the subway by herself, Queens might as well have been Timbuktu—or Seoul.

Now, my only companions were the fireflies. I collected them in glass jars for scientific research. I needed to understand how they lit up from the inside so that I could do it too.

"Inside all of us—inside you and inside me, there is a light that can never be destroyed," Manman said. "If you ever find yourself in darkness, turn it on."

I tried. Sometimes, I'd think I felt a faint sputter, like the noise the stove makes when you first turn on the gas. But then I'd realize it was only indigestion.

Fireflies know how to turn on the light. *Bioluminescence,* that's what it's called. I looked it up in our encyclopedia. *Luciferin* is the scientific name for the compound that helps them light up. It comes from the Latin word *Lucifer*, which means *light-bearing.* With the exception of millipedes, those nasty bugs with hundreds of legs, fireflies are the only terrestrial creatures that know the secret of bioluminescence.

None of this helped me turn on the light, so I searched out the myths and stories. The Aztecs used the word firefly as a metaphor—a spark of knowledge in a world of ignorance or darkness. There's a Japanese legend that says fireflies are actually the souls of the dead. The Victorians believed if a firefly got into your house, it meant someone close to you was going to die soon.

None of this helped. How does anyone survive the darkness?

On the fourth week of the siege, the reporters finally surrendered. They left, and we all went back to our regular lives.

Then Nadège swallowed a bottle of Clorox.

THE NEXT DAY, I MADE PAPA'S COFFEE JUST THE WAY HE LIKED IT, strong and black, and I waited. The clock in our kitchen ticked 8:30 a.m. before he finally straggled out of his bedroom, his steps heavy on the linoleum tile. After Papa left for work, and Samuel's church group had taken him away, I pulled my baseball cap low and left the apartment. The reporters had gone, but there were plenty of curious eyes around. I wanted to be invisible.

I headed toward the library but veered off about a block away —*before* the chain link fence. I entered one of those houses with peeling paint and broken windows, and I climbed down the stairs to a basement apartment. Madan Pierre opened the door before I could knock, as if she had been waiting for me.

Their apartment was a tiny studio with a table, four chairs, and two cots. Nadège lay on one of those cots, motionless, a sheet drawn up over her body, her cat planted on her chest, its tail twitching.

We took a seat at the table. The Clorox bottle was still there, though it was empty. It was small, even cute—a 3 oz sample that came

in the mail with a coupon for 50 cents off the manufacturer's suggested retail price. It was also lethal.

"She would have died," Madan Pierre said. "If I had not been home, she would have died. I came out of the bathroom, and she had the bottle *in her mouth* drinking like it was water."

The 911 operator patched Madan Pierre to poison control. They walked her through the steps of forcing a pint of milk down her 13-year-old daughter's throat until she vomited up her insides.

I didn't know what to say, so I sat in the silence. The sun moved overhead, occasionally bouncing a faint ray off the grimy windows. Every hour or so, Madan Pierre would check on her daughter, and I would help. We changed the sheets when Nadège threw up, offered her water and tea, combed her hair. Mostly, we sat in silence.

When the knock came around 6 pm, we were both expecting it. Papa stood there with his arms around Samuel. They looked tired. We were all so tired.

"Madan Pierre, I am not here to make trouble for you. I only want to take my daughter home."

"Come in, Dr. Emmanuel. I need you to see what they did to *my* daughter."

I knew Papa didn't want to come in, but he couldn't leave without me—and I wasn't going anywhere.

Papa and Samuel walked in together, their faces a mirror. Papa gave Nadège a doctor's examination, but his pain was that of a man's.

"It's all right," he murmured. "Everything will be all right."

"Papa," I said, "I need to tell the judge what I saw."

He shook his head. "We can't. We have to protect our own family."

"How can you not help me?" Madan Pierre demanded. "You know my daughter's pain. Your *wife* knew my daughter's pain."

"I told you to leave my wife out—"

Samuel wailed. The sound reverberated in the room like echoes in a dark cave. "I saw them, Papa. I *saw* them hurt Manman."

"No," Papa said, shaking his head. "You were too young. It's not possible.

"I *saw* them! The Tonton Macoute—Duvalier's bogeymen. They came looking for you at the house after you escaped prison. When

they couldn't find you, they took Manman. They hurt her really bad. I *saw* them."

Papa fell back in a chair, his head in his hands. "It's my fault. I was young and ignorant and prideful. I offended the powerful by providing care to those they considered their enemies. So I became their enemy. Those men hurt my wife in ways I can't imagine. They gave her AIDS, that terrible disease. And *still,* she loved me."

Papa shook with the force of tears he couldn't shed. "You're doing the right thing, Farah. Your manman would be proud of you."

I reached for him, hugging his neck. I felt Samuel do the same. "It's all right, Papa," I said. "Everything will be all right."

3

Everyone was there: Papa, Samuel, Maître Moïse, Madan Pierre, the reporters—even Crazy Eddy was in the pews all cleaned up. The courtroom was packed.

Ms. Barnett sat at one table, looking severe in her tailored black suit and shoulder pads; defense counsel (that's what you call him) sat at the other, a bearded man with a scowl. The judge was at the front of the room, and the jury against the wall—nine men, three women, all of them white.

Everyone was there except Nadège. She had been questioned already, but I was not allowed to see her. The bogeyman was there, but I was not allowed to see him either. He sat behind a glowing white screen.

After I was sworn in and seated on the witness stand, defense counsel said, "your Honor, I renew my objection to the use of this screen. It violates my client's Sixth Amendment right to confront his accuser face-to-face. It also violates his due process rights. By placing the screen between him and the witness, you are implying to this jury that my client is guilty before he has been properly tried. He is innocent, your Honor."

Ms. Barnett spoke, her voice filling the courtroom. "Your Honor,

these rights that counsel claims on behalf of his client are not absolute. They must be balanced against the potential harm to a traumatized child who bears witness to his evil deeds.

"The defendant's rights are protected. He can see and hear everything. The child must be protected as well."

The judge, a man in a black flowing robe, said, "While a face-to-face confrontation may, unfortunately, upset the minor witness, it may also confound and undo the false accuser, or reveal the child coached by a malevolent adult.

"The defendant has rights. Where, as here, the witness is not the alleged traumatized victim, I find that the defendant's constitutional rights outweigh any potential harm to the witness."

The judge said some more words I couldn't understand, then the bailiff removed the screen.

I stared into the eyes of the bogeyman. He wasn't nearly as big as I remembered.

Ms. Barnett began with her questions. I answered in the way we had talked about—honestly, but without the words *bogeyman* or *cheetah*. Afterward, it was defense counsel's turn.

"Did you see my client rape Nadège Pierre?"

"Did you see my client *attempt* to rape Nadège Pierre?"

"What was Ms. Pierre wearing on the day in question—prior to the alleged rape?"

"To your knowledge, how many boyfriends has Ms. Pierre had?"

No. No. I don't know. I don't know.

When it was over, Crazy Eddy jumped out of his seat, clapping. The judge told him to sit down and be quiet or he would be removed posthaste.

I walked off the stand. Papa was there and so was Madan Pierre. They took my hand, and we walked out of the courtroom together.

THE JURY SAID THE BOGEYMAN WAS NOT GUILTY. I DON'T KNOW why. Ms. Barnett came to our apartment to explain the verdict, but I still don't understand. Maybe I don't have to.

Ms. Barnett said I was a *star witness.* That's what she called me—her star witness. She said I would make an excellent attorney one day. Papa laughed and said I would make an even better doctor. We all hugged, and Papa cried and cried.

In the weeks before school started, Nadège and I went to the library every day. She doesn't like romance novels, but she reads a lot of Nancy Drew. I don't read romance novels anymore either. I guess I'm looking for a different kind of happily-ever-after—one that lasts beyond death.

I asked Manman once what happens when we die. Does everything about us just disappear, as if we had never existed? Manman said that people died, but the love they put into the world never did. I found an answer like that in a book I'm reading, the Mourner's Kaddish, a Jewish prayer. It says:

When I die give what's left of me away
to children and old men that wait to die.
And if you need to cry, cry for your brother
walking the street beside you.
And when you need me, put your arms
around anyone and give them
what you need to give me

SAMUEL AND I WERE WATCHING *HILL STREET BLUES* ONE DAY WHEN the closest thing to a miracle happened. With a flicker of light so small it could have been the wink of a firefly, Samuel could see again.

And so could I.