

A Rivulet of Running Dominoes

The truth was, Yvonne sometimes forgot she had a family. The silence between them swelled often, pushing days into weeks into months. It didn't bother her as much as it used to. In many ways, it was inevitable, there was always going to be some distance between her and them. She eventually came to compare the relationship to like charges. Joined by nature, but unable to be closer without either of them exerting a repulsive force.

Yvonne knew solitude like the creased spine of her favourite book. Which was why she thought visiting home with her father for the first time was going to be painfully awkward. When she and Roose had picked him up somewhere near Aldersbrook Road in East London, she'd expected a slight pause in his rising hand. A timid shuffle toward them. Perhaps an occasional comment about the rain. Instead, Vernon had belly-laughed his way into the car and greeted his children with the ease of a few hours' distance between them.

Yvonne had tried to ignore the irritation prickling across her nape when he leaned forward and started chatting to Roose about the chances some West Ham player had to cap his debut performance with a goal. She toyed with the idea of saying something to shatter this happy illusion Vernon was concocting. Before he had gotten in contact with them, it had been eight years since they'd seen each other last. The journey they were about to embark on was significant and they should at least acknowledge that,

not contain the conversation within shallow waters. But she had finally agreed to go on this trip with him, and promised herself it wouldn't be to fight.

Yvonne had eyed the rear-view mirror, scanning for anything her father might have thought to bring for his own party. 'Where's your suitcase?' she'd asked him. 'We're not gonna be back for another three weeks.'

Trust Vernon to come unprepared. Meanwhile, she and Roose had spent hours agonising over what to take, what was appropriate for their father's homecoming celebration. Roose bought gifts for their cousin's children, who had apparently begged for toys that couldn't be found anywhere else. They packed occasion wear, though Luan said they didn't really need to, that people would just be wearing casual clothing. But this was going to be their first time visiting their extended family, and both of them just felt odd not wearing something to make a good first impression.

'Ah.' Vernon had waved a hand like he was clearing a pungent scent. 'There's no sense in me carrying big heavy luggage around. Whatever I need, I'll buy when I'm home.'

Yvonne had shaken her head. It was this attitude that she both loved and hated most about her father. The ability to treat everything in his life as transient, too burdensome to warrant a second thought.

Now, thirty-five thousand miles high, she wondered how Vernon could spend the majority of the journey belting Duran Duran's greatest hits without any shame or extrospective awareness. When he got to "Ordinary World," Roose's patience frayed.

‘Dad, please,’ he said. He pulled his headphones back to cast Vernon a desperate look. “Posthumous Forgiveness” leaked through the earpieces and Yvonne’s brows shot up in pleasant surprise that her brother, of all people, was listening to Tame Impala. ‘It’s an eleven-hour flight. People are tired.’

‘And that’s my concern how? These lot will have all the time in the world to rest up when they’re at the beach. We here for *my* party, let me celebrate however *I* want.’

Vernon kissed his teeth with a sharpness that felt like lacerations to the skin. His voice had gradually risen while speaking, causing Roose to instinctively lean away, curl into himself. Yvonne watched her brother increase the volume on his phone and rest his head against the window again. She briefly thought about telling Vernon to watch his tone. But that would only make him shout.

Vernon reached for his can of beer, pouring it into the plastic cup. After downing it in one go, he patted Yvonne’s arm.

‘Ask the lady for another one, will you, little horror?’ he said and rattled the ice cubes inside.

Yvonne sighed, her curly fringe billowing. He’d already drained four beers before they even boarded the flight. Which she and Roose had paid for, of course. Plus, she’d been ordering more than a few for herself. She didn’t want to annoy the flight attendant.

‘Can’t you get it yourself?’

Her father looked at her pointedly. ‘You know she ain’t gonna listen to me.’ He rattled the cup again.

'Dad —'

'Come on, it's free, isn't it?'

'That's not the point. They're probably keeping an eye on us. I don't wanna get kicked off the flight.'

Her father rose slightly. 'They're too busy gossiping to notice us. Come, now, liven up a little! When's the next time we'll be able to have a trip like this?'

Yvonne took it begrudgingly. He was right about that. Though rather than pure sentiment, it was more her own guilt, a sense she owed her father something, that propelled her to take the cup.

She bent sideways and peered down the aisle. The flight attendants were chatting to each other, checking the aisles every so often. One attendant turned and Yvonne took the moment to flag her down. The woman quickly finished her conversation and started ambling down the aisle. Dimples pocketed her cheeks when she smiled and, for just a flash, it was Abidemi walking toward her. Yvonne's heart constricted. She'd temporarily taken her engagement ring off, kept it on a chain around her neck until she found the right moment to tell her father. All the while she ached for Abi's presence now that she was actually on the plane. Now that this journey was real.

'Good evening, ma'am,' the flight attendant said. She wasn't the one who'd been serving her drinks. Yvonne glanced at her name badge. Lucy. 'How can I help you?'

'Can I get another drink? This one's for my dad again – promise.' She laughed, expecting Lucy to return it. Lucy only paused. She took in Vernon and Roose, a slight crease in her eyebrows.

'I'm sorry, ma'am, I'm afraid I'm going to have to refuse this time,' she said, her smile returning. 'I've been noticing you order quite a few now and, for your own well-being, I think it's best you stop.'

Vernon's head pitched sideways. Yvonne could see tension clenched in his jaw from the corner of her eye, and groaned inwardly.

'Stop for what? We're not bothering anyone.' He searched the aisle exaggeratedly. 'I wonder if you're telling anyone else how to handle their drink.'

'Dad, just leave it.'

'Leave what?' Vernon's look was abrasive. 'I'm just asking her a question.'

Yvonne cast her eyes heavenward. 'Jesus Christ...' She turned to Lucy. 'I'm sorry. It's fine. We won't order anymore.'

Lucy pressed her lips together and nodded. She glanced at Vernon, then back to Yvonne, hesitating slightly before speaking.

'Are you okay?'

Yvonne stilled, slacklining between defensiveness and embarrassment. Lucy clearly meant her father and his behaviour. Wondered if he was a risk to Yvonne, Roose, and, by extension, the rest of the passengers. Moments like this reminded her how abnormal she was. She was okay, of course she was okay. Only because she was used to her father by now.

Yvonne smiled widely, made sure to look Lucy directly in her eyes. 'Yeah, of course.' She gestured her head at Vernon, who was still slinging daggers at the flight attendant. 'I'm sorry about him. We won't bother you again.'

Lucy didn't seem sure. Still, she stood, patting Yvonne's headrest before turning to leave. Vernon kissed his teeth at her departing back, muttering curses under his breath. Roose, who'd obviously been listening to the conversation, leaned over to nudge Yvonne with the heel of his trainer. A worried look travelled to her, passing unseen by Vernon sitting between them. She understood Roose's concern. Their father was a bolt of lightning, and it was anyone's guess when and where he would strike.

'You know, if you want us to spend this trip with you,' she muttered to Vernon, 'you need to stop sabotaging it before it's even bloody begun.'

Vernon grumbled indistinctively, but didn't challenge her. He remained relatively composed for the rest of the journey, though Lucy noticed it took until after the layover for Roose's shoulders to lower in repose. When they finally landed, Yvonne stopped short for a moment, humidity blanketing her. She let the throngs of passengers amble past with their suitcases. They made it. This was the beginning of a trip that would change her; she needed a moment to take that in.

They waited outside the tiny airport, its peach and blue hues looking more like the entrance of a swimming pool resort than an airport, until Luan arrived to pick them up. He hollered when he rolled the window down, his face breaking out into a toothy grin. It was frightening how much their cousin was the spitting image of his father, who in turn was an iteration of Vernon. Luan came out to greet everyone with a warmth that blurred all the years they hadn't met.

'Sa ka fete? Yuh lucky I came to pick you up, you noh,' he said, then chuckled. 'Chofè taksi tay ka demandez double si li tay tande aksan.'

Luan kept up his easy humour all the way back home. Looking back, Yvonne would realise that the drive to their cousin's house was the happiest moment of the whole trip. It was full of possibilities, options. Their holiday wasn't just for Vernon, but a moment for her and her family to come together for the first time, to stitch back forgotten threads. As the mountains fled by, she hoped that could be done without the dread of organising Vernon's long homecoming party. Later that evening, when Auntie Claire-Marie asked them to take care of the cooking for the second and third night of the party, it seemed unlikely. The celebration began in three days' time, and it would be wise for her and Roose to start preparing some of the food the day before. However, if she wanted time with her family to be properly peaceful, she would have to come another time. There was something she and her brother needed to do.

'Actually,' Yvonne said in response, 'me and Roose were thinking of doing Libation Walk on Sunday.'

'Ke sar?'

Auntie Claire-Marie had a ladle full of rice when she shot her gaze to Yvonne. She stopped halfway, some rice spilling onto the table. Yvonne felt instantaneously rude. It was her father's party after all, and both she and Roose should be doing their part in preparing for it. But they also needed to do this walk. As well as the party celebration, this is what they came here for.

Yvonne glanced at Roose, but he stiffened, mistaking Auntie Claire-Marie's bold manner for confrontation. Irritation wormed its way into her chest at her brother's constant diffidence. She quelled it and took the lead again.

'It's something we've been wanting to do since we booked the ticket,' said Yvonne.

'We can help you with the food when we come back.'

Jérôme, Luan's son, perked up, his face twisting. 'Yuh can't go all by yuhselfes! It's dangerous during monsoon season.'

Luan nodded and scooped a portion of roasted manicou into his mouth. 'He's right,' Luan said after chewing. 'Sar kay pon trois neditan. Yuh goin' mash up yuhselfes before you even reach the waterfall.'

'Why yuh want to tek yuhself up Libation Walk, anyway, doudou?' Auntie Claire-Marie added. 'Is the party not enough? And what about church?'

Yvonne wanted to say that it wasn't necessarily about that. Vernon's party was going to have enough dancing, food, and rum to last over a week. But it was going to be Vernon's week. Yvonne and her brother needed to do something just for them.

'It is...' Yolanda drifted off. She turned to Roose hoping he would help with an explanation.

He rubbed the back of his head. 'We just need something for ourselves,' he said. 'Before the party starts and there's no time. We'll go after church.'

'At least let me come with you, man,' said Luan. 'Ou pa sipohzae sotae par cou. Se say binten la famie.'

Yvonne agreed, but still remained quiet, not wanting to outright refuse his offer. When Luan could see there was no budging, he sighed deeply into his plate, muttering something else in Kwéyòl.

'Well,' Luan spoke again. 'Chembay forte. Aben shemen movay. I hope you're all ready.'

Yvonne, Roose, and their father stood at the bottom of the trail. She was ready when she went to sleep last night. And when she left church after a lengthy service, driving Luan's car to the small parking lot within Haute Corps National Park. Now that they were here, fear roped Yvonne's ankles. She wasn't sure if she could start. She sought out Vernon, who jerked his head at the gradual incline carving the natural path.

'You're supposed to go first,' he said.

Slowly, Yvonne put one foot forward, then another, Roose and Vernon following. She could do this, get to her destination. Neither her or Roose spoke at first while they quietly learned the language of this new terrain. The ground sung beneath Yvonne's feet. She was sure it was alive, contemplating her and her brother. They placed themselves at the island's counsel, coming here. Only the island could tell them how to go on after this.

Vernon cleared his throat, looking ahead of him while he spoke. 'So, what have you both been up to since I left?'

Yvonne tensed slightly. It was the first time since he started visiting them that he asked that question. Yvonne knew why he avoided it, why they all did. The question was a hammer and answering it meant smashing the barrier her and Roose had spent eight years building. But, Yvonne supposed, that is what they were here to do.

'A lot of things,' Yvonne began. Mud caked the lining of her boots with every step. 'I graduated from university. Got my MA. I work as a commissioning editor now.' She paused. 'And I'm getting married.'

'Ah!' Vernon yelped, then burst into happy laughter. He slapped Yvonne across the shoulder, shook it. 'That's great! I'm proud of you, girl. Who's the lucky man?'

'It's not actually a man, Dad...it's a woman.'

Vernon's hand slipped from Yvonne's shoulder. 'What d'you mean?'

'I'm getting married to a woman.'

'What for?'

'What d'you mean what for? Because I love her.'

A chill replaced her father's hand. It wasn't the way Yvonne planned on telling Vernon the news, though at this point there was nothing he could do about it, anyway.

'I don't believe it.' Vernon shook his head. She didn't care for his approval, but the denial still hurt – Yvonne could feel her heart wring, a pain sore and tender. 'Did I mess you up that bad?' He turned to Roose. 'What about you, you gonna tell me you're funny too?'

'No.'

'So, wise the word?'

'I'm...doing an internship for Microsoft.'

When Vernon's eyebrows crinkled with scepticism, Roose continued, defensive.

'What?'

'Nothing. I just never saw thought of you in that industry. But good for you. I'm glad.'

Vernon didn't notice his son's expression. He had been presented with a drawing, and Vernon's only response was to barely glance at it before leaving it to collect dust in a drawer. They came to the next section of wooden steps, taking them higher up the mountain. The atmosphere clung to them possessively, sodden moisture that made Yvonne's lungs feel like damp pillows.

Vernon breathed in like he was coming up for air. 'You smell that, kids? That's life. Your mum's missing out, boy. Dunno why she didn't come.'

'Well, can you blame her?' said Yvonne.

Vernon shrugged, holding his hands up in surrender. 'It's up to her if wants to come or not. Would have been a nice change. She could've met your West Indian family.'

'Seriously, Dad?' Roose stopped in the middle of a steady incline. 'Like, why would she want to come here? With *you*?'

'I didn't say she had to come here with me. I'm just saying it would've been good for her to realise there's more to life than the four corners of Europe.'

Yvonne suspected this would happen. Suspected her father would purposely act dense, turn any conversation about their mother into a game of deflection. He did it all the time when Yvonne and Roose were young. It was tedious now.

Roose's jaw started to pulsate. 'Fuck it.' He turned around. 'I'm not doing this.'

'Roose, wait!' Yvonne called out.

'No. This was a mistake. I should've known he was gonna be like this. We're wasting our time.'

Yvonne caught up to him. 'He's doing it 'cause he doesn't know how else to be.' She placed a hand on her brother's shoulder. 'Look, you don't have to jump in the lake if you don't want to. But I think you should at least do the walk. You're gonna regret it for the rest of your life if you don't.'

Roose crossed his arms, lowering his voice to a hiss. 'I dunno, man. This walk's supposed to be...spiritual. Like, we should be coming to terms with stuff and letting it go, y'know? Yet, the only ones prepared to do that so far is us.'

'I know, but we've only just started. There's gonna be setbacks. Besides, it's only the second day. Dad's party officially starts tomorrow. If we do this now, we can spend the next nine nights celebrating.'

She didn't want to admit it verbally, but Yvonne was doing her best not to slip. Not to succumb to destructive habits that ended with her alienating her friends and pushing her family to the back of her mind. She was sure this land was testing them. That's what this was about. An examination to see whether or not they were ready to heal. Conflict rose in the contours of Roose's face. He bit his lip, and the uncertain pensiveness that eclipsed his features exacerbated Yvonne's worry. She needed her brother with her on this hike. She didn't want to do this alone.

Eventually, Roose looked up and nodded once. 'Fine. Let's go.'

Yvonne released a caged breath. They went back up the incline; their father was waiting for them, his hands resting on his hips. He said nothing, walked a few steps

ahead of them. For a while, the forest immersed them, carrying Yvonne and Roose's low panting away in its veins. The shrill chitters of sisserou parrots accompanied them frequently, goading them forward whenever they weren't sure they could continue. It provided little comfort to Yvonne. She wanted the forest's voice to be a welcoming call to her, wanted to feel aligned to it. All it did was cause her eyes to scan for any sign of danger. Score caustic grooves into her skin. She wasn't as bad as Roose, but loud voices still made her want to duck and cover.

Vernon slowed his pace until he matched Roose's steps. 'Look, forget I said anything about your mum. We didn't get along and we never will. I don't want this trip to be soured by that.'

Didn't get along. Instinctively, Yvonne's thumb went to the palm of her right hand. The scar along it had faded now, no more than a puckered gash. It was a memory etched into her skin, from a time when she had tried to protect her mother and failed. Yvonne's lips quirked. She had to laugh.

Roose looked down at his muddy boots. 'Whatever. It's fine. I was more angry at needing to do this walk in the first place, anyway.' He paused, clearly uncomfortable with being so open. 'And at having to come here at all.'

'It would've been better if we could've come without the stress of planning the party,' Yvonne agreed.

Roose batted an overhanging branch out of the way. 'This is my fault,' he said lowly. 'If I'd just said yes to you sooner, we could've been enjoying it properly.'

'No point blaming yourself, man.' Yvonne placed a hand on a tree, balancing herself.

Roose turned to her, palms outward. 'Who can I blame then? Dad tried to get us here for ages and I didn't listen. The only person stopping me was myself.'

Yvonne empathised with that. For two years after he first showed up in their lives again, Vernon had tried to plan a trip home with them, have a grand celebration to make up for the time he hadn't been there. At first, Yvonne thought it was selfish. After everything he'd done, how dare he think they'd even want to see him? But he was persistent, and would show up where they expected it least: when Yvonne stepped out of Vauxhall station on her way to work, inside Roose's university halls. To the point where Yvonne regretted not doing it before he even asked.

She shook herself. It was too late to think about that now. She was here and she would have to finish this journey no matter what. Everyone Yvonne spoke to said Libation Walk would be hard. You were meant to struggle in the hike up to Bienvenue Lake because the purpose was to spend the time addressing whatever obstacle that was keeping you from moving forward in life. Unlike her brother, Yvonne didn't mind it so much. She was eager to finally stamp out the guilt that snaked toward her every time Vernon had shown up unannounced and unwelcome. She relied on the fact that the lake was waiting to cleanse her. It meant that those two years she'd spent ignoring his invitation wouldn't be for nothing. That there was an end to all of this.

'Yvonne's right. You need to leave it to the Lord God,' Vernon chimed. He pointed a finger at the sky. 'He's the one who's leading you on this journey and only He can

bring us closer together again. If you show that you're willing to put your trust in Him, He'll guide you into the path of righteousness.'

Vernon made a sound of agreement to himself, as if God had imparted this piece of wisdom face-to-face. Yvonne felt her lips curl involuntarily.

'You never gave God the time of day when we were kids,' she scoffed. 'Now all of a sudden you're pious? How convenient for you.'

Her father looked at her, saw the resentment in her gaze. At least he had the shame to look away.

'Things change, little horror,' he said eventually. 'I changed. That's why I got in contact with you. It was time to make amends.'

Vernon was purposely avoiding her glare. Whatever bargain he had struck with God, Yvonne could see it had not yet been reached. She knew her father well enough to know that joining them on this hike was probably him simply clinging onto a thread of hope that they'd forget all his wrongdoings. He could sweet-talk her with all her childhood pet names, Yvonne still didn't believe him. By now, burying his lies in her gut had become second nature. It had become easier to do that than to consider her father, however he had loved her, didn't love her enough to change.

It ached. So much. But coming home was about learning to accept that.

From this height, the footpath they were heading toward looked like it had been gutted. Familiar forest ground transmuted to a desolate landscape, ribboned with steaming rivers. Yvonne and Roose scrunched up their noses. The rotting stench of

sulphur emanating from the streams penetrated their nostrils violently and caused their eyes to water. Blinking tears away, Yvonne squinted at the sign that marked the beginning of the third, and last, part of Libation Walk. *Welcome to The Shadow of Death Valley*, it said. *Beware the soft earth*. Suitable name for this terrain, Yvonne thought. As they all descended a steep flight of makeshift steps, Vernon held out a rod he had picked up, indicating for them to take it slow.

‘Be careful down here, you two,’ he warned, feet crunching against the colourful volcanic rock. ‘Stay away from any muddy or thin patches if you don’t wanna burn your skin off.’

When they reached the bottom of the steps, Roose was instantly hypervigilant, his gaze darting wildly before deciding which next step to take. The valley constricted into a narrow path. He was still contemplating when Yvonne bounded past him. Each bold step was an adrenaline shot into her veins. She knew it was dangerous, this game of roulette she was playing. Any wrong move could plunge her foot into a hot, ebullient pit. It only made Yvonne walk with more reckless abandon.

Risks, for her, were a novelty that quickly wore off. It was never the same after the first time, and Yvonne often spent years chasing the exact hit with varying degrees of success. She liked rewards, reasons to feel as though she could do what others couldn’t. Yvonne wanted to think that was why she was daring her fate now, tossing it to pure chance. The thrilling rush could coat the rest of this hike in gossamer. It could make her forget they were coming close to their journey’s end.

'This isn't minesweeper, you know,' Yvonne called out to her brother. 'You can keep walking normally.'

'Go walk normally into the stream then, since you're so keen.'

Vernon turned around and speared his rod into the ground. He placed one hand on his hip, squinting up at Roose. As Yvonne walked past, he held out the hand.

'Wait for him.'

Yvonne rolled her eyes. The six-year gap between her and Roose stretched further in moments like this. What was wrong with him that he could never complete a simple task without being coddled through it?

'He's fine. He's a big man now, he can come down himself.'

'I said, *wait*.'

Roose took his time getting to them. His leisurely pace peeled layers off Yvonne's patience, and she felt sure he was doing this on purpose just to get their father's attention. When he reached them, Yvonne watched him unearth his flask and take painstakingly slow gulps of water.

'Feeling better?'

'Er, yeah?'

'Child,' she muttered. She kissed her teeth and walked off.

It was late afternoon now and the humid air was glued to every crevice of Yvonne's body. She wanted so desperately to shed her skin of this muggy, dense cloud they'd been walking through ever since they touched down – the more she couldn't, the more suffocated she felt.

'Yvonne! Watch yourself.'

She ignored Vernon's command, pacing faster across the rocky valley. As she dodged small pools of bubbling water, Yvonne thought back to how many times, after Roose was born, Vernon had made everyone stop and wait for her. How many times her mother had, for that matter. Though she'd always been closer to Vernon, neither of her parents would bend over backwards for her like they did with Roose. What did it matter to her father, then, how incautiously Yvonne was walking?

Crunches of gravel she thought were her own grew louder, until she felt a grip on her shoulder. Vernon twisted her around.

'What's the matter with you, girl?'

'Nothing!'

The word was a sonic boom, crashing into the mountains surrounding them. Hot springs stung the corners of Yvonne's eyes suddenly. She scrubbed them away, hated that she was even crying at her big age.

Vernon's gaze softened. 'Why are you crying?' He reached out to place a hand on her shoulder again. She smacked it away.

'Get off me. Go back to Roose, he probably needs more help than I do.'

'The both of you need help. That's why I'm here. You think you'd be able to trek this by yourselves?'

'I don't care about this hike,' said Yvonne. A lump was expanding in her throat, making it hard to talk. She power-walked to a mound of hard earth. As soon as she

sat, tears poured from her in steady streams. The pressure to keep going was too much to contain. 'I don't wanna do this anymore.'

Two sets of footsteps neared her – one's gait was timid, the other concerned. With Yvonne's head cradled in her hands, fingers digging into her scalp, she could only see Vernon's feet as he bent in front of her.

'Why not?'

'Because...' Releasing her tears wasn't helping. The lump kept growing and growing, threatening to tear Yvonne's throat. 'Because I'm not ready for this to end. I'm not ready to go back.'

The relationship between her and Vernon would change after this. She would have to let go of the fact that it was too late for him to be everything Yvonne wanted him to be. Which meant forgiving him. Yvonne's limbs were heavy, and she was sinking with the weight of them. She couldn't do this. Couldn't keep pretending the jump into the lake was going to be a simple spiritual cleansing for the three of them. She just wanted to keep walking. If she kept walking, she wouldn't arrive at the lake. She wouldn't have to jump.

This time, Roose came to kneel down in front of her and Vernon stood up. He checked Vernon wasn't as near, then spoke so only they could hear. 'We shouldn't have to do this. It's not fair. But Dad got in contact with us again for a reason. We're doing this walk for us, to forgive ourselves *and* the shit he's done. Doesn't mean we're okay with it. But we deserve peace.'

'I know that.' Yvonne sniffed. 'I don't wanna let go of this. I'm not...it's fine here. We get to be here together. It's not gonna be the same when we go back.'

Understanding touched Roose's expression immediately. 'You can't sacrifice your happiness on what could have been, Von.'

Roose stood up with a grunt. He held out his hand. Yvonne looked at her brother, at the smile lending support to her, willing her to stand. She took his hand, not meeting his gaze when he pulled her up.

'I'm sorry,' said Yvonne, dusting the dirt off her bum. 'For calling you a child.'

Roose's shrug only made her feel worse. He held out his hand again, the unspoken invitation of a secret handshake they invented as kids laid out on his palm.

With Vernon leading the way, they continued walking over the curves and cracks of the valley. The landscape only grew harsher as they trekked the last half hour to the waterfall. When they got to Domino Falls, just a few kilometres from Bienvenue Lake, everyone but Vernon had to pause. Swirling steam clouds rose from the lake, shrouding Yvonne while she caught her breath. Despite its arduousness, she loved hiking. Yvonne was twenty-six when she discovered that her great-grandmother liked to hike for miles as a form of exercise. It had warmed her to know that she was carrying her ancestor's legacy with her across continents.

When they finally arrived at the high waterfall, the neighbouring island embedded in the ocean like a green jewel in the distance, with nothing except themselves and the body of water waiting to welcome them, a deep sense of righteousness overcame her.

Vernon placed his hands atop his hips, nodding to himself emphatically as he drank in the view. Not a drop of sweat was stuck to him.

'This island is stubborn. Not everyone can survive it,' Vernon mused. A smile danced across his lips. 'It's what kept them beke out of here for so long, until the Kalinagos were the last ones in the Caribbean standing.' He turned to his children, eyes softening. 'I knew you two could do it. The resilience our island is founded on runs through your veins too. It's what kept you going this far, what'll protect you after you jump.'

'Are you gonna jump with us?' asked Roose. Hope tinted his voice. Vernon shook his head.

'This part's for you alone.'

This was it. Roose stayed stationary, hands gripped onto his backpack straps. His gaze was stitched to the sea. There was little breeze, though Yvonne could see he was blinking rapidly. Slowly, she dropped her own backpack, rid herself of her shoes, socks, until only the swimming costume she wore underneath remained.

Yet, she still did not walk to the cliff's edge.

'What's wrong?'

She hesitated, turned to her father. 'I just...want to know why.'

'Why what?'

'Why you were never there for us before. Why you only showed up after you—'

'You could've come to me too, you know.' Vernon crossed his arms. 'I had cancer. I was waiting for one of you to show up and neither of you came.'

Yvonne spoke above Roose's exasperated sigh. 'I didn't come because I was...' Say it, thought Yvonne. 'I was punishing you for never being there the way we needed you to be.'

That was the truth, one she would have to live with for the rest of her life. She had known he was dying. One of her cousins had said Vernon wanted to see her and Roose. Instead, she let the cancer ravage his organs, knowing how much it would've meant to her father if he could only see his children for just one time. Could she have saved him if she visited? Slowed down the cancer and made it disappear? It didn't matter now. Ironic, really, sentencing Vernon like that. In the end, he still got his way. In the end, it was her who got punished.

Vernon nodded solemnly. He understood, at least. He didn't blame her. 'And you?' He gestured at Roose, who shifted away.

'You...never made me feel like I could.'

Vernon's lips puffed out as he sighed. He let his arms fall to his sides, taking a few beats to absorb the ocean view before he spoke again.

'I was an angry man,' he began slowly. 'Angry at the world, and my place in it. When I was alive, it was easy to blame other people. And, truth be told, I was scared to try hard in case I failed. If I had taken that responsibility, then it would mean I didn't have the world to blame anymore. Just myself.'

Roose's eyes were tethered to the ground. 'And you didn't want to handle the guilt of your failure.' He was speaking to himself as much as he was to his father. Vernon said nothing.

'This is too little too late.'

'I know.'

Yvonne walked to the cliff's edge, stopping when her father called out her name.

She turned.

'For what it's worth,' he said, 'I am sorry.'

Yvonne nodded. 'I forgive you.'

She meant that. There was nothing to be done about everything that had passed now. Despite all his failings, she still loved her father. Loved him for everything he could have been, had he tried hard enough.

'Are you coming?' she asked Roose.

'You go first.' He sat down. His eyes were red raw. 'I need a minute.'

Yvonne nodded, closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. In every step she took backwards, she was leaving the worst of the pain behind. She knew this wasn't fully over. But she was ready to heal, accept her new reality, close the distance she had set with all her family. Yvonne broke into a stride, the ground kissing her feet until it let her go. The wind carried her as she flew to meet the lake's open arms. It was waiting, and she was ready to be birthed anew.

by cora dessalines

by cora dessalines

by cora dessalines