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I Can Speak For You

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I Can Speak For You

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of [the Arts or Languages and Literature or Science, Math, and
Computing, or
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of Bard College

by
Tchad Ross

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Acknowledgements

Over the course of writing this piece, I've learned rewriting memories is harder than creating fictional ones.

This novella is based on a combination of real life experiences as well as a personal fantasy of what life could be like if I was able to construct my own emotions and actions into a sensible plot. The characters are based on real people who have said some of the things quoted. I'd like to thank them for being true to who they are, even if on paper they don't always impress.

I'd also like to thank my project advisor, Masha Gessen, for forcing me to be direct with my writing. I needed to write this novella.

Renell and Nessa are having breakfast in a diner. Nessa notices something is off when Renell says, “Nessa what are we doing?” Renell expresses exasperation towards Nessa typically. She feels Nessa should anticipate when she will be in a bad mood. Nessa has stopped being alarmed by Renell’s disappointment. But this tone she uses today is more direct and strong. Nessa looks in Renell’s eyes. Renell looks calm like the still of an ocean before a storm. It’s uncharacteristic of her. Nessa can’t think of another time Renell’s face appears this expressionless. She racks her mind for anything that she’s done in the past twenty four hours that could possibly account for her girlfriend’s mood.

“You’re not gonna say anything?” Renell says.

Nessa takes a deep breath. “We’re..having lunch.”

Renell tilts her head sideways at Nessa and squints.

Nessa playing dumb is getting old with Renell.

Renell sighs, blinks slowly and finally says, “Nessa, I need more than this.”

“More than what?”

“I need to start my life, Vanessa. I want a relationship that’s going somewhere.”

“Going somewhere?...You mean marriage?”

“Yes, Nessa, I mean marriage.”

Nessa’s right leg begins to shake. Her back tenses up.

“You know, that's the last thing on my mind right now, Renell. And frankly, I don't even feel like our relationship is at the stage where we need to be thinking about that anyway. Like I get in your head we've been dating forever but in reality it's been nine months.”

“In my head?” Renell nods her head and smiles. “Yeah Nessa, I’m making up what’s going on between us all in my head.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Renell looks Nessa in the eyes.

“Yeah it is.”

They both look down for a couple moments.

“Nessa, I don’t think we should be together anymore.”

“Because I don’t want to move in with you? Jesus, Renell, fine, we can move in together. Didn’t realize you had to fuck me every night to validate our relationship.”

“You’re so immature, bro. See this is why I can’t do this anymore. I need someone who actually wants to build with me.”

“Build with you? You are so fucking corny, Renell. I've been your friend for eight years. What the hell do you think was happening then? Because we weren't having sex I didn't give a fuck about you? All those years we weren't building anything? Because I know for sure if I didn't know you this long I would have never dated you.”

“Oh word? Say less. You don't want me, I don't want you anymore. Let's end this now.” Renell stands up and takes her wallet out of her back pocket.

“Are you serious right now? That's what you got from what I just said? How the hell do you think you're ready for marriage and you can't even have a real conversation with me?”

“Nessa, I shouldn't have to explain to you how a real adult relationship should go. And I sure as hell don't have to defend why I don't want to finish this dumb ass conversation.”

It's interesting that water droplets behave so instinctually. They “know” to become one once they touch and explore the surface they sit on. Gravity does most of the work but the water does appear to act consciously. This is what Nessa thinks to herself as she watches the condensation on the untouched glass of water sitting in front of her.

“Miss, can I get you anything else?”

Nessa looks up to her right to see furrowed eyebrows that tell her the waitress saw what just happened.

“Can I have a green tea with lemon and honey?”

Nessa has a sour taste in her mouth that she needed to get rid of.

The waitress nods and walks away quickly.

She hadn't looked up from the water glass when Renell got up and walked out of the diner. She can't even remember what her girlfriend's last words were. She does remember hearing “I don't want someone like you in my life anymore.” Nessa isn't sure if Renell had even said the words “break up” but she got the picture.

In hindsight, if Nessa had been more comfortable speaking honestly with Renell they probably could have lasted longer.

“Are you not attracted to me?”

“What? Why would you ask that?” Nessa said.

“Because you don’t touch me like I touch you...”

“Renell, you know I’m not really the PDA type.”

“Yeah but I mean even when we’re alone it’s like I’m the one always initiating something. I kiss you, hug you, all that and you don’t really do that to me. Like you just receive it but you don’t give it. Do you not find me attractive?”

Nessa’s silence was one of her biggest regrets she had about the relationship. Truthfully, Nessa didn’t know why she wasn’t affectionate towards Renell. She just didn’t have the desire to be. Instead of saying that to Renell, Nessa said nothing. She moved her eyes left and right, seemingly searching for an answer. This was a tactic she used often. Nessa would pretend to be thinking in order to create just enough awkward silence so Renell would dismiss the conversation. Nessa knew Renell would prefer ending a conversation over hearing something that would bruise her ego.

“Forget it, Nessa. It’s whatever.” Renell said.

She sighed softly and they went back to watching TV.

Renell was the talkative one in their relationship. She would continuously make dumb jokes, break into corny dance moves and make fun of strangers on the street. At times, it was

embarrassing for Nessa but she appreciated that Renell wanted to put a smile on her face. On one of their first dates Nessa recalled Renell saying how intimidated she was by Nessa's facial expressions.

“You always look like you're thinking about something really sad. I figured you wouldn't want to go out with a clown like me.”

Nessa laughed it off in the moment but she thought about what Renell said for months after. She hadn't realized how obvious it was that she was unhappy.

Five months later, Nessa is sitting in their favorite diner trying to understand how she didn't see this breakup coming. How long did she really expect Renell to put up with her bullshit? Maybe as long as she put up with Renell's. Is that what she thinks of love? She isn't sure. The only close view of love she has is her own parents. They rarely display physical tenderness towards one another or exchange words of affection. They share a desire for marriage, children, and peace. It all seems contractual to Nessa. But Nessa wants more than that for herself. She knows real love doesn't always make you feel good. It's not what the movies idealize where the woman in love is no longer insecure about her looks or has this new found energy to excel at her job and go on runs every morning regardless of the shitty weather. She knows passionate love won't make her a new person. Still, Nessa wants a love she can hear and see. She saw and heard the extent to which Renell loved her and it made her feel special.

None of Nessa's ex-boyfriends ever made her feel that way. Brent was the closest she ever came to an adult relationship. They'd met at a summer festival and had a one night stand that turned into eight months of wasted time. They were both in it for the sex but felt obliged to pretend they had things in common outside of the bedroom because they decided they were too mature for meaningless sex. The problem was, Nessa didn't respect him. She said "cashmere" in his presence once and he called it an "SAT word". In his defense, he was simply an idiot and couldn't help it. But Nessa had finally had enough of horrible jokes and his incessant reminders that he understood the world at a fifth grade level. One morning Nessa turned over in bed and stared at the stranger she had let receive her purest form of intimacy. "Oh hey, you." His smile nauseated her. Nessa broke up with him that morning and never saw him again. Nessa prided herself in her ability to disconnect from people. She thought it made her unable to be taken advantage of. Unfortunately, Renell proved that wrong.

They were together for three months when Renell first asked Nessa what they would do about her parents.

"Ummm...I'm not sure. Didn't really think we would end up dating so I haven't thought that far ahead."

"Yeah I mean I get that but you're gonna tell them right? I can be there if you want me--"

"I don't think so."

“What? About me being there?”

“No, I don’t think I’ll tell them.”

Renell fixed her glasses and rested her chin in her left hand.

“You don’t think you’ll tell your family we’re dating?”

“I said to my parents but yeah.”

“Are you playing with me? Is this some sort of experiment for you?”

“You know I’m not even like that so don’t start.”

“I don’t know what else to say, Nessa. I’m not doing this again. I told you all about what happened with Crystal. You think I want to be hiding under someone’s bed again? I mean when I was younger the rush of it was kinda fun but I’m out to my family so-”

“You know that’s not the same thing Renell. No offense but your parents can’t live without you, mine can.”

“All the more reason to tell them! Let them leave!”

“You can’t make that decision for me.”

Renell looked up at the ceiling, bit her lip and held both of Nessa’s hands.

“Babe, I love you. And if your parents can’t love you too then you’re better off without them.”

“You love me?”

That was the first time Renell said she loved Nessa. Nessa found it endearing. They stumbled into the bedroom and forgot the conversation they were having. That’s how a lot of their tough conversations went.

Sex made it a lot harder for Nessa to decide between her parents and Renell. But she also never had to choose between important people in her life and felt uncomfortable that she was in that position in the first place. She didn’t see herself as someone who wanted a lot for her life and resented her parents for being the reason she couldn’t have everything she wanted.

Nessa hated dating a woman. She wouldn’t admit it to any of her friends who showered her in love and support over her queer identity. But there was no privacy in it. Everywhere she and Renell went, whether it was “Aww, you guys are so adorable together” or the side eyes typically given by older black folk, it all felt really public. Like the whole world was watching her take a shower. At first it felt good to be seen, to be recognized as a live being every time she walked

into a room with Renell. But it got old really quickly. Even on days when nothing special was happening and they were just out getting coffee Nessa felt on display. And what disturbed her even more was how much Renell loved it.

When Nessa went out on dates with men, people minded their business. There were no stares or smiles from across the room. Simple, straightforward greetings, regular polite expressions and no panicked looks from servers trying to decide if it's homophobic to ask two women clearly on a date if they were splitting the check. There weren't any prying questions about their plans for children one day or unwarranted stories about some stranger's cousin's daughter who was "also gay." When you were a woman with a man, everyone remembered to respect boundaries.

Renell was a stud. With certain haircuts, she would get called "sir" if she was seen from behind. As she would turn around and the stranger got a good look at her chest, their eyes would widen.

"Oh...Sorry, ma'am".

"It's cool."

Sometimes Nessa wished Renell had a flat chest. Every once in a while Renell expressed her excitement for the day she could get a breast reduction since her back often ached from her breast size. But she told Nessa many times that she enjoyed the ability to "pass" as a man occasionally. So the surgery would be serving multiple purposes. Nessa never wanted Renell to feel undesired physically so all she would say was, "I love your boobs."

Nessa looks up from her book and nudges Kevin with her left elbow.

“We’re landing soon, you gotta get up.”

“Huh? What the hell, I already heard her.”

“You looked deep in sleep but okay, sorry.”

Nessa shakes her head and puts her hands up in apology.

Kevin begins searching his pockets. He reaches for his backpack and rummages through it. He pulls out two photos, sets them on his lap and continues to rummage.

“Fffuuuuccceekkkk.”

He throws his backpack down to his feet and rolls his eyes. He runs his hands through his hair, causing his dreadlocks to flop all over his head.

“You look like Static Shock when you do that.” Nessa motions her chin to Kevin’s head and chuckles.

Kevin smiles smugly.

“Very funny.”

“Are you okay?”

“Nah, mom told me to bring the photos of grandma she had in her nightstand but I was rushing and I think I forgot one.”

“Damn. Let me see the ones you brought.”

Kevin hands over the photos.

“Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. We will be landing in Port of Spain airport in exactly twenty-four minutes. We want to thank you for flying with Caribbean Airlines. We ask that you take your seats and fasten your seatbelts until we have landed safely. We hope you enjoy your stay in Trinidad & Tobago.”

Nessa looks down at the photos of her grandmother Nicole. It looks like a drawing. Her grandmother’s black hair perfectly combed into a bun on the top of her head and her smile so white, even with the sepia look of the polaroid. Her checkered print dress without a wrinkle in sight except where it reaches her grandmother’s hips. Nicole sits on the arm of a couch looking

comfortable as ever. Nessa has seen this specific picture before but it looks almost fake now that her grandmother is dead.

Nessa thinks about the stories Helen would tell over and over again about growing up with Nicole. Nessa is always amazed by her mother's ability to recollect the smallest of details every single time. Nessa's mother, Helen, tells stories as if she hasn't aged a day since the event happened. When Helen is telling a new story Nessa likes to stare into her eyes, which are always fixed away from the person she is talking to, as if she is giving a play by play of the scene happening right in front of her.

Helen had a single mom who worked as an accountant full time. Helen told Nessa and Kevin a story of when she was nine years old and was ranked second in the entire fourth grade class. Her usual spot was third place. It had been that way since kindergarten. Second place was Natalie. Natalie also lived with her single mother, all the way on the other side of town, so they didn't get to have play dates often. Natalie was a sweet girl with a laugh that would make Helen forget what she was even laughing about. Natalie's mother, Patrice, was an attorney, so she drove a nice car. Patrice joked with Natalie and always asked for her opinion. Helen at first thought it was inappropriate, and that Natalie would grow into an entitled brat. But, over the years she stayed as pleasant and polite as she had always been. First place was Dominique. She and Helen never spoke, but Helen would watch her in class all the time. Her uniform was always pressed to perfection, Helen said it had to be because her mom did it for her. And she never had a hair out of place. "The girl was flawless," Helen would tell her children decades later.

When she was eight years old Helen began making breakfast for her mother. The week before Nicole had mumbled a comment about Helen needing to pull her weight in the household while they were having one of their mostly silent dinners. Nicole didn't say much, so when she did, Helen listened. Beginning that following Monday, Helen adjusted her alarm to go off forty-five minutes earlier. She figured forty-five minutes would be enough to prepare something not so good, scrap it before her mother found it, and then prepare something delicious. Helen got ready for school as normal. Showered, hair done, uniform ironed, lunch packed. When she was done, she journeyed to the kitchen, took out a pot, filled it with water and turned it on to boil. She used a chair to climb onto the counter and get oatmeal, a bowl, and brown sugar for her breakfast. Nicole was in the shower and Helen could hear the water running. Her hands trembled. Then she smelt something unfamiliar. Helen looked down to see her skirt ablaze. She tried to remain as quiet as she could, swatting at the fire with a damp dishrag. It went out quicker than she thought it would.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

The fire alarm. Helen climbed down from the countertop. Nicole's footsteps sounded like a drill sergeant's. Even, patient, menacing. Helen looked down at the charred cotton on her thigh. She hadn't noticed her thigh was burned. It was minor, but stung as she ran her index finger over it. She awaited her mother's scolding. But Nicole's footsteps changed direction. She was going to her room. For a minute, Helen decided her mother had overlooked her mistake. But when the footsteps returned, stronger and more determined, they were coupled with the sound of a metal

buckle smacking against thick leather. Helen's eyes closed and she tried to swallow but her throat was all of a sudden especially dry. Her legs began to shake. The only thing on her mind was being late to school.

When Helen was fifteen, she and Nicole decided Helen would go to college to become a doctor. Secretly, Helen had decided to become a doctor during one rare visit with her dad when she was twelve. But she didn't want her mother to know he had any influence on her. As far as Nicole was concerned, she did all the work of raising Helen.

When Helen was nineteen, she began her first biology lab in college.

The class was dissecting frogs.

Helen passed out.

She decided the medical field was not for her.

Nessa reaches into the overhead compartment to get her carry on and thinks about these stories she knows of Helen's life. How can a woman who has been treated coldly by her mother replicate this towards her own children? Especially a woman so aware of the ways in which her mother failed her.

She closes her eyes. Her mouth begins to quiver.

“Come on, we don’t have all day.”

Nessa looks back at the line behind her row. She removes her duffle bag and quickly walks towards the front of the plane to catch up with Kevin.

She relaxes her shoulders.

Before she was a person of her own, Nessa got along fine with her mother. In fact, she adored her. Nessa remembered, as a toddler, closely watching the angles of her mother’s face and body as Helen dressed her. Helen loved dressing Nessa and Nessa grew to love getting dressed. The frilly dresses and pink ribbons were Helen’s way of showing love to her little girl. Nessa thought her mother was the most perfect woman on earth.

Thinking back, Nessa figured most of her adolescent insecurities came from looking nothing like her mother. Nessa was slim framed with an athletic build, her light brown skin was covered in pimples and hyperpigmentation well into her late teens. This was a stark contrast to Helen’s smooth, dark skin that evenly caught the light to show off high cheekbones and a perfectly

chiseled jawline. Her mother's petite frame was only enhanced by the curves she claimed she gained after childbirth.

When Nessa got into her tween years loathing herself became exhausting. She began to do things her own way. She developed her own fashion sense. One morning she got ready for school in a long sleeved striped black and white top with a green and pink tank top layered over it. She had on patchwork denim jeans and Converse to complete the outfit. When she walked downstairs Helen said, "There's no way you're wearing that to school."

"What? Why? It's in dress code..."

"You look like a bag of skittles, Vanessa."

"Well I think I look cool."

"You look ridiculous. You're already black, please go put on something that makes you look like you have some sense."

"No!"

Helen stared at Nessa. This was the first time she had raised her voice at her mother in protest.

Riding the high of her exclamation, she picked up her backpack and walked out the door.

When she was fourteen Nessa joined the studio art program at her school. She spent hours after school working on projects while her teacher was grading work and organizing the art room. One specific piece took two months to complete.

“I don’t know why you have to stay so late at school to do this homework. You have all the materials we bought at the beginning of the year. Just bring it home so you’re not walking home in the dark,” Helen said at dinner one evening.

“I really need my art teacher’s help with it. It’s a big piece and she helps me with perspective and stuff.”

Truthfully, Nessa could have finished the piece at home. But then her mom would see it and force her to give up her new hobby. So, she kept her art life and home life separate. What Nessa hadn’t seen coming was getting nominated for the district art show.

“Isn’t this exciting? The show happens on two nights in case you and your family won’t be able to make one. It really starts at 7pm but they let the artists and their families come a bit earlier.

Here’s the flier you can give to your mom and dad. Congrats Nessa!” Mrs. Smith said.

At the show, Helen and Daniel, Nessa’s father, walked around a bit surveying the art with skeptical looks. They weren’t fans of children participating in art. They thought children should only be learning practical skills for work. At least that’s what they told Nessa when she showed them her course schedule for the year.

When they reached Nessa's piece they froze in shock.

"Nessa, what the hell is this?" Helen said. She spoke with her lips scrunched up to avoid making a scene.

On the canvas mounted and hung with Nessa's name under it was a painting of a dining room table with a wooden bowl on top of it. The bowl contained many peaches sliced in half with the insides painted to be vaginas. All night people walked by and gave surprised but entertained smiles and chuckles to Nessa's painting.

Helen was too embarrassed to reprimand Nessa in front of all the strangers at the show but when they got home she let Nessa know what was on her mind.

"How dare you make a mockery of this family with your-your sex art!"

Nessa tuned out the rest of the reprimanding. She regretted making the painting. Not because she found it shameful but because she realized she painted it because she knew her mother wouldn't like it, even though she had no intention of letting her see it. The laughs and amusement she received from the strangers viewing her work all night made her feel like her hard work went to waste. She didn't want her art to be a joke.

When Nessa turned sixteen Helen planned a birthday party for her. The plan was to have Nessa, Candace, Juliana and Megan watch movies and eat junk food all night. This was a big deal to Nessa since Helen wouldn't let her attend sleepovers at any of her friends' houses. Helen said she didn't trust "these American parents" and that they "let their children run them".

The night of the party everything went according to plan. After some supervision Helen went to bed and let the girls have their privacy during movietime. Quickly they got bored of the movies and went to Nessa's room. Looking for excitement, the girls called their friend James and dared him to sneak in. Nessa's room was on the ground floor so when James arrived twenty minutes later all they had to do was open the window and let him climb in. The five children were all too excited about the success of their plan to keep quiet, waking Helen. As soon as she set foot in the room and assessed what was going on everyone's parents were called and Nessa's friends were sent home.

"The blatant disrespect and ungratefulness to ruin a night your mother so kindly put together for you." said Daniel.

Nessa stayed silent.

"I don't know what has come over you Vanessa but you are not the daughter I raised you to be. You have shown me that you have no type of consideration for your father and I when you act. The stupidity that goes on in your mind is baffling."

“It really wasn’t that big a deal. Nobody got hurt, he just came in through the window.”

“Nobody got hurt? So you think you can just do whatever you want as long as nobody gets hurt?”

“No, I’m just saying that-”

“Enough! I don’t care what you have to say anymore.”

“But you’re overreacting to something that wasn’t even serious!”

“Vanessa!”

“It’s Nessa.”

“Your name is Vanessa and I will call you what I named you. I’ve had it with your need to think you’re so special and unique. The outfits, the behavior, it’s all disgusting.”

“Oh so I’m disgusting now?”

“Yes! You are.”

This was the first time Helen said anything this hurtful to Nessa but it wasn't the last. Their interactions shifted from this day. Nessa knew what her mother thought of her and couldn't get it out of her head in every conversation they had, no matter how miniscule.

When Helen asked, "How was your day?" Nessa responded, "Fine."

"Hey Vanessa, let's go to lunch together!"

"I'm busy."

Nessa's teenage years into young adulthood were spent avoiding advances from her mother. She thought, the more time she spent with her mother the more she would criticize and belittle her. Helen responded to Nessa's distance with more criticism.

"*This* is the college you want to go to? These students look like they could all use some showers."

"That's an...*interesting* outfit for a date."

"Nessa you have to do something with that hair. You look like you lost a fight with a monkey."

Nessa stopped talking back. She'd grown out of her fiery phase and didn't want to fight anymore. Helen grew tired of trying to talk to her daughter so their interactions became quiet.

The plane lands and Nessa's aunt Pearl drives Nessa and Kevin back to Nicole's house. Aunt Pearl's daughters are cooking breakfast while calypso plays on the radio. Everyone greets each other with kisses and hugs. Nessa and Kevin sit on the back porch looking out at the overgrown grass. The backyard was like a jungle when they were young children. Now it looks more like a swamp. It has been eleven years since their last visit to Trinidad.

Helen joins them with a mug of tea in her hand.

"How was the flight?"

"Pretty good." Kevin says and pulls his mother in for a hug.

"How do you know?" Nessa says to Kevin.

"He slept straight through it." Nessa directs at Helen.

Helen's eyes look sunken in and she's forcing her lips into a smile though the rest of her face is resting. Nessa tries not to react too surprised at her mother's physical condition.

"Kevin forgot one of the photos of grandma."

Helen combs her hair with her fingers and reties her robe.

“It’s okay, we have a lot here anyway.”

The plans for the day are to have family and people from the neighborhood come visit. Food will be prepared, the house will be cleaned and everyone will be sharing memories of Nicole.

Helen asks Kevin to prepare a slideshow for Nicole's wake. It will be projected onto a wall outside Nicole’s brother’s home. In Trinidadian culture, funerals aren’t meant to be sad. The respectful way to show reverence for a life is through laughter and joy. Trinidadians think of the dead as relocated souls. Nessa’s great Aunt Carol once said, “The living don’t ‘lose’ people, the dead just continue on their journey elsewhere. We sing the Lord’s music to help them find their way.”

In the early afternoon, people start showing up. Family members greet them with dishes of food.

Two years ago Helen sat down with Nessa and Kevin to explain Nicole’s condition. Nessa remembered Helen’s foot shaking as she spoke.

“The doctors say she has only gotten worse. Her kidneys are operating at ten percent.”

“Why didn’t she tell anyone?”

“None of this would be happening if she let you and Aunt Pearl know what was going on.”

Nicole lied to her husband and daughters about her sickness. The doctor told Nicole to remove red meats from her diet and quit drinking. Nicole didn’t. Her condition worsened quickly. She was instructed to receive dialysis treatments four times a week. She went a handful of times and stopped because she “didn’t like being around old, sick people”. It wasn’t long before she was having monthly stints in the hospital. Nicole wasn’t suicidal. She was selfish.

Nessa remembered the morning Helen got the call.

It was a Tuesday.

“Hey Darnell, yes I’m just here cooking a coconut bake and some saltfish. I know my cousin would be calling this morning after last night- Darnell?...ya still there?” Nessa recalls her mom saying before she fell silent.

Nessa couldn’t hear exactly what her uncle told Helen but she could see Helen staring at a spot on the tiled kitchen floor. Her body was still. She mumbled “thank you” and let the arm with her cell phone fall to the side of her hip.

To see her mother full of life in front of her family a little less than two weeks later seems strange to Nessa. This is the first time in years that she pays attention to Helen's emotions.

When they arrive at Lenora's house she is making cake. She isn't a good baker but she makes cakes to show love.

"Ya eat breakfast?" Lenora says.

"No, it took a while to travel here from my mom's house so we left early." Helen says.

"Mmmm oh okay."

Lenora walks to the dining table on the far side of the living room.

"Come, come, come." she says.

She gestures towards the table, pulling out three chairs.

"We have saltfish and bake here, Suzanne does make a good bake this morning."

Lenora lets out her soft chuckle she tagged at the end of almost every sentence. She doesn't make jokes often, so Nessa used to find it strange. But as she gets older, it feels very comforting to hear. Daniel also laughs at inappropriate moments. But it happens more when he is being asked about himself, which makes him feel especially uncomfortable. Nessa thinks about how much her Lenora and Daniel have in common. They share a lot of the same beliefs but Nessa always thought of Lenora as much more tenderhearted than Daniel is.

"Thanks, Lenora" Helen responds.

"Granny, what happened to Jack?" Kevin asks.

Jack was a stray dog Nessa and Kevin used to play with when they would visit as kids.

Nessa forgot all about that dog until this moment.

"Oh, he doh come round here. Mmm Mmm not since ya left back to America " She lets out another soft chuckle.

Kevin's face sinks.

Nessa looks around the living room. All the furniture looks much smaller than she remembers. And the exits of the house are a lot closer together. Running from the back porch, through the hall straight out the back door, around the side of the house and back would take almost a full minute when she was a kid. As she looks now, she could easily clear that distance in twenty

seconds. The smell of her grandmother's house reminds Nessa of when warmth radiates off of your skin on a spring day; the humidity makes you sweat although it isn't quite hot enough for you to smell. That's what her grandma's house smells like: spring, almost sweat.

"Helen, I does pray for you and de family. To lose a moddah. A great loss, yes?"

"Thank you, Lenora." Helen sighs.

"Yes, yes we are making it through. She fought a good fight but the Lord always has a plan, right?"

"Mmmm, yes so he does say"

"It was her time, a long one coming." Helen says.

Nessa admires the way Helen speaks to Lenora. They have such a respectful relationship that they appear as friends. And maybe after all these years they have developed a friendship.

"How ya coming along?"

"Uhhh, I am doing well. Pearl is the one who is a bit shaken up right now but I am okay."

“Mhmm. They does say when ya lose ya muddah ya must carry on she legacy. Mhmm, speak of she life and wisdom.”

Helen laughs.

“Lenora, my mom was not really the wise type.”

Lenora chuckles softly.

“Everybody does have some wisdom from a long life. We must look for de wisdom in de way dey does live.”

Lenora begins to humm.

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Nessa recognizes the song. It is an old espicopalian hymn.

Helen stares off into the distance.

“I remember every morning with Mom was chaos.”

Nessa looks at her mother in disbelief. When she speaks of her experiences with her mother it is usually within the privacy of their home. Never with anyone except Nessa and Kevin.

Lenora continues to hum. It's almost as if she hasn't heard Helen's words. But Nessa knows she has. Lenora is good at disconnecting. When she wants to be respectful of a situation she remains to herself, not wrapped up in the emotions being expressed.

**The strife is o'er, the battle done,
the victory of life is won;**

Helen continues.

“She would be frantically getting me and herself dressed. It was like every day was her first day being a mom. There wasn't a moment of peace in that house.”

The song of triumph has begun.

Alleluia!

Helen shifts her eyes towards Nessa and Kevin.

“Mom was never ready to be a parent...Or never wanted to be. I felt like a burden to her, always. If she had just a little more courage, maybe I wouldn't have been born.”

The powers of death have done their worst,

but Christ their legions hath dispersed:

let shout of holy joy outburst.

Alleluia!

Nessa's mouth falls open. She wants to respond but cannot find the words. She looks to her brother for guidance. His mouth is downturned and his eyes slowly move back and forth between the floor and the walls.

The three sad days are quickly sped,

he rises glorious from the dead:

all glory to our risen Head!

Alleluia!

“My mother struggled to provide the basics. That’s where her attention was at all times.

There was no way she even knew there was more to being a mother.”

**He closed the yawning gates of hell,
the bars from heaven's high portals fell;
let hymns of praise his triumphs tell!**

Alleluia!

“I’m still learning there's so much that I do that affects you guys. All this stuff wasn't thought about when I was growing up. There were good parents and parents who couldn't do it. I had a roof over my head and food in my belly.”

Helen shrugs.

“So my mom was a good parent.”

**Lord! by the stripes which wounded thee,
from death's dread sting thy servants free,
that we may live and sing to thee.**

Alleluia!

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Is her mother choosing to say all of this in this place she knows Nessa and Kevin love because she wants to gain sympathy from them? She wouldn't put it past her. Helen isn't intentionally manipulative, that's just how her mind works. Helen takes opportunities where she sees them. A survival strategy. Still, Lenora doesn't have to hear all of this... mess. Yes, that's exactly what it is, a mess.

Nessa doesn't recognize most of the people at her grandmother's funeral. They all look like randomized combinations of the features her mother has, but names and life stories don't pop up when she looks at them. All the great aunts show up with their respective immediate families. She remembers learning a couple years ago that these sisters are her maternal grandfather's and being completely shocked. Nessa thinks about the last time she's seen her grandfather. She remembers the family ran into him at a distant relative's wedding when she was fifteen but that doesn't count because he didn't even recognize her and only said hi because Helen forced Kevin and Nessa to come with her to greet him. For some reason, Nessa still feels embarrassed about that situation. She would realize years later that it's possible to carry the guilt of someone who does you wrong.

Helen always insists her father isn't a bad person.

“He did what a dad is supposed to do. He took me out for ice cream on his visits and paid off as much of my college debt as he could. What else did we want from the man?”

He called on Nessa’s sixteenth birthday, and her mom tried to get her to have a conversation with her grandfather. Nessa politely declined and Helen gave her an expression of shock.

“You didn’t have to be so rude. The man did nothing to you.”

“I didn’t say he did anything to me, I just don’t want to talk to a stranger and pretend like we know each other. Plus I’ll probably never see him again anyway.”

Helen looked at Nessa with her lips sucked in and her eyebrows raised. She makes that face when she’s wrong.

That was the last time they spoke of him.

Nessa’s grandfather is invited to the funeral but he doesn't show up.

“It's because of Sally. When I called she didn’t even let me speak to my father. She just gave her condolences and said she would pass along the message.” Helen says.

She rolls her eyes.

“You know she hated my mother because dad always loved her, even after they separated.”

From Nessa’s perspective, her grandfather feels no obligation to them and that’s probably why he isn’t at the funeral. She won’t ever tell Helen that though.

There are lots of things she won’t ever tell Helen. And even more things she wishes she never told Helen. Renell immediately comes to mind.

When Nessa finally worked up the courage to let out the words “I have a girlfriend.” Helen didn’t hesitate to say “End it.”

Nessa and Helen had completed a day of Christmas shopping. All day Nessa had mentally run through all the possible ways she could ease her mother into the conversation. She’d finally decided on doing it in the car as they were leaving the mall. It was public enough that Helen wouldn’t feel comfortable saying anything too harsh but private enough that nobody would hear the words Nessa uttered.

Nessa fell silent. She pulled her chest upwards and cocked her chin to the side. She sat up in her seat. She wasn’t sure if she’d heard correctly.

“What are you going to do? Live together? Adopt kids?”

Helen’s sarcastic tone didn’t stop Nessa from mentally picturing that life with Renell.

She wanted to respond “Yeah, that sounds great actually.”

But instead she said nothing.

“A man acting like a damn woman.” Daniel would scoff and shake his head.

“It’s unnatural and unholy. God made man to be one way and woman to be another. When people mess with the way God set up the world they’re saying they’re God. God is God.”

When her father would go off on his evangelical tirades, Nessa would do her best to stay quiet. He believed being gay was a sin as matter of factly as he believed death was inevitable. But he was also a man of much patience and empathy. So when she witnessed him angry and adamant she no longer recognized him. And she thought if he found out she was a part of the community of people he was convinced were “playing God” then he would look at her as if she were a stranger.

After Nessa told Helen about Renell, Daniel treated her the same but never acknowledged Nessa was in a relationship. He avoided the subject of her love life entirely.

“I was going to come over last weekend like I said I would but Renell’s cousin had a baby shower so we ended up going.”

“..mhmm.”

That was the closest he came to a discussion about it.

Nessa wishes Daniel came to the funeral. He would at least know how to handle Helen’s emotions.

He isn’t necessarily a warm person but he is a man stern in his beliefs. Ironically, it was this quality Nessa respected most about him.

Helen is more flexible. Helen freely speaks about the different lives she’d lived.

As Nessa recounts this information she can’t believe it’s taken her this long to realize it. Helen enforces the rules Daniel creates for their family. All these years she thought of her mother as someone who hated her.

Nessa looks towards her mother who is checking over notes for the eulogy she is about to give.

What if she isn't vindictive and controlling?

She stares at Helen a bit more intently. Something is off. Normally her mother's changes in mood, although noticeable, don't bother Nessa enough to inquire about but after their visit to grandma Lenora's house Nessa is intrigued by Helen.

She feels a lump in her throat start to form as the words she wants to say try to find their way out. After a deep swallow she opens her mouth.

"Are you okay?"

Helen is uncharacteristically nervous. Usually her nerves show up as low energy but her eyes are wide open and she's shaking.

"If you're not feeling up to it, I can speak for you."

Helen looks at Nessa with her eyebrows raised. She stares into her eyes longer than Nessa is comfortable with. Is her mother seeing what's about to happen?

"Really?"

"Yeah...if you're fine with it."

Helen stares Nessa in the eyes for what feels like a whole minute.

Helen looks down at the microphone in her hand and shakes her head.

Avoiding looking Nessa in the eyes again, Helen walks up to the podium.

“My mother...my mother Nicole was a strong woman. She was an even stronger mother. Many of you knew her as a woman with beautiful energy who would light up a room when she had a beer with you. Over the course of this week I’ve heard people tell stories about how she gave great advice and was always there when they needed someone to vent to. I just want you all to know this from her own daughter...”

Helen hesitates.

“She was even more warm and caring towards us.”

She gestures towards Pearl, whose head tilts in confusion.

“I remember when I was in primary school and one morning wanted to make breakfast for us.

I’m a small woman now so you can imagine how much smaller I must have been back then.”

Helen chuckles.

“We didn’t have a stool in the kitchen but I managed to climb up on the counter and get down all on my own. Anyway, I was reaching way high for the good sugar for the oatmeal. You know how you have sugar that’s almost finished and sometimes it crusts up and you have to finish it because you can’t waste money. But this morning I said to myself, I’m making fresh oatmeal so I need the good sugar. So I have the water boiling and I’m reaching up onto the top shelf of the cabinet and my school skirt catches fire. It took me a little bit to get up on the counter but now my skirt is on fire so it takes me two seconds to come down. I hear my mother rushing to the kitchen and when she sees the skirt on fire immediately grabs me and runs to the sink! How quick she was! I remember I was still in shock and not even crying but my leg was burned and bleeding. My mother sat me down at the table and carefully bandaged up my burn. At this point I snap back into it and I’m saying “mummy I was trying to make oatmeal and-” but she just said “It’s okay, it’s okay and took care of my leg.” No screaming, no anger. That’s the type of mother she was.

Nessa scoffs and looks away.

“Up until the end of her life...my mother had character -”

Nessa has had enough of her mother’s lies. Helen proves she will be just like Nicole, a selfish liar.

Helen catches the movement in her peripheral vision and stops speaking to the crowd. As Nessa reaches for the microphone in her hands, Helen freezes and holds her grip.

“Let go!” Nessa says, looking Helen in the eyes.

Helen releases her grip on the mic. She turns her head away from the crowd and quickly walks behind the stage.

Nessa watches her mother walk away before turning back to the crowd.

“I’m sorry but this is all bullshit! Nicole was selfish and cold. I only knew her for my life and I’m sure all of you knew her much longer but she was anything but warm and caring and whatever other lies my mother is giving y’all. She didn’t think about anybody else like that, especially not at the end of her life!”

“Wait a second Nessa, this is getting out of hand!” Pearl says.

Nessa continues.

“She-she was wicked and spiteful and cared only about her own comfort. That’s why she lied about when she found out she was sick and that’s why she died in the hospital by herself!”

The audience is silent for what feels like minutes to Nessa. She can’t believe the words she’s just spoken. She pans over the faces of the crowd and sees her aunt Pearl with tears streaming down her face.

As she walks off the stage with her head held high she thinks of the embarrassment Helen must feel.

“That was...crazy.” Kevin runs his hands through his hair.

“I know, and I mean I was definitely surprised, especially after everything she told us about grandma Nicole but for her to alter that story! And just spew this lie for a woman who's not even alive to hear it? That's just so...gross, right?” Nessa says.

“I guess yeah it was a bit weird but her mom died, Nessa.”

“Yeah and we lost our grandma. Of course, it's not the same but let's be honest, grandma Nicole was horrible.” Nessa says.

“That's still her mom though...You don't know how that's affecting her right now.”

“That's your excuse for her?”

“Excuse? I don't know if you realize what you just said out there, in front of everyone. If anyone needs an excuse it's you!”

“All I did was tell the truth! Everyone deserves to know-”

“That's not your decision Nessa! You don't get to walk around choosing who should know what!

How do you not get that?!”

Nessa's mouth hangs open. She stares at her brother.

The rage in his eyes makes him look like a stranger to Nessa. Why is Kevin upset with her?

Hadn't he heard what Helen said?

Kevin breaks eye contact with Nessa and adjusts his jacket.

“Listen, me and Jen have been thinking for a while and decided we're moving.”

“You're moving? Why would you move?”

Kevin shakes his head while he looks down.

“This isn't healthy. Whatever is going on between you and mom, these fights, the stress of this family. We actually want a life of our own without all this...drama.”

“I didn't realize our issues were drama to you.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about, Nessa. Everything is so much more complicated than it should be with this family. We love you guys but we just want a calm life.”

Nessa is surprised by this news.

“Aren’t you mad?” Nessa asks.

Kevin gives Nessa a blank look.

“I’m not sure what you mean. Angry about what you did to mom?”

“No mad at mom...and dad.”

Kevin sighs. He looked up as if he was searching for words.

“So you’ve thought about it before?” Nessa’s eyes lit up.

“Yeah Nessa, I’ve thought about it before. But I’m not... as attached to mom and dad as you are. I get who they are and I’m really not looking for some miraculous change from them. I’m just doing me you know? That’s all I can do I guess.”

Kevin shrugs.

Nessa turns away from him and rubs her head. This is all so confusing. Why did Helen lie about Nicole? And why is Kevin fine with it? Is Nessa in the wrong for telling her family the truth? Don't they deserve that at least? Those people came to honor a woman who they don't even truly know. Nicole was horrible. She was the opposite of a good mother and didn't even attempt to be a good grandmother. That's why Helen is so fucked up! That's why they all are!

She looks back at Kevin who is giving her a look of uncertainty. How long was she standing there not saying a word?

“You good?” Kevin asks.

“I...I don't know. I feel like I don't know anything about this family anymore.”

Nessa sits down on her couch and listens to the wind blow through the home. Since she's returned from Trinidad, the apartment sounds a lot more spacious than it used to. She reaches for her cell phone and checks her text messages. No new notifications. She goes into her contacts and enters a heart emoji into the search bar. She selects the first contact, presses “delete contact”.

Nessa hasn't thought about Renell since she has been away but now she fantasizes about calling her up, apologizing and moving in with her. What would her life be like if she just chose Renell? Would she feel content and happy about her life? Would Helen's view of her matter?

Would she have gone to her grandma's funeral? Would Nicole have even died?

Nessa types "K-E" into the search bar. She puts her phone down. Kevin wouldn't mind talking to her. But after their fallout, she felt bad calling him to distract herself from her own thoughts.

Thinking about the look he gave her after her outburst during the funeral made her feel ill.

Nessa lays back and remembers the eyes of her family members as she told them what Nicole was really like. She smiles at the thought that Nicole didn't get away with being horrible.