

Acknowledgments

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Love, respect, blessings to my mother, Freda, and brother Keïta for their boundless support and enthusiasm.

UNIVERSAL ACCLAIM FOR AN AMAZING NEW TALENT

NALO HOPKINSON

Winner of the Aspect First Novel Contest

Finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award

MIDNIGHT ROBBER

“It’s been many a day since I’ve read anything so bursting with robust, inventive energy and singing language . . . a wonderful job.”

—**Suzy McKee Charnas, author of *Walk to the End of the World***

“A lovely novel and a rousing adventure, with a unique setting and complex, intriguing characters.”

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“Transports you not only to a different world, but to a different way of looking at the world. This is what SF is supposed to be and so often isn’t: provocative, intelligent, original.”

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“In rich and vibrant language, Hopkinson tells a universal tale of a young woman’s struggle to reclaim her life from dark forces.”

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BROWN GIRL IN THE RING

“An impressive debut precisely because of Hopkinson’s fresh viewpoint.”

—***Washington Post Book World***

“Simply triumphant.”

—**Dorothy Allison, author of *Bastard Out of Carolina***

“Fusing Afro-Caribbean soul and speech in an intriguing landscape of spirits . . . a terrifying battle between good and evil.”

—***Black Issues Book Review***

“A wonderful sense of narrative and a finely tuned ear for dialogue . . . balances a well-crafted and imaginative story with incisive social critique and a vivid sense of place.”

—***Emerge***

“A parable of black feminist self-reliance, couched in poetic language and the structural conventions of classic SF.”

—***Village Voice***

“Splendid. . . Superbly plotted and redolent of the rhythms of Afro-Caribbean speech.”

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NALO
HOPKINSON

ASPECT



“Unique . . . elements of SF, fantasy, and horror blended into a story as hot as a pot of Pickapeppa sauce.”

—*Halifax Daily News*

“Stunning novel . . . gets into the nitty-gritty of some tough urban issues.”

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Stolen

I stole the torturer's tongue

it's the first side of me some see

the first line you hear

first line of defense when I say

“See this long tongue illicitly acquired—doesn't it suit me well?

hear these long words assiduously applied—

don't I wield them well?

wouldn't you be foolish if you tried to tackle me in anything so complex as a kiss or a conversation?”

I stole the torturer's tongue!

hear this long tongue!

feel this long tongue!

this tongue sometimes my only tool not mine entirely but what is?

I was raised protectively of/as/by other peoples' property—I got over that
this tongue is yours too if you can take it

I stole the torturer's tongue!

man wouldn't recognize this dancing, twining, retrained flesh if it slapped
upside the empty space in him head—

it will, it has; he'll pay for the pleasure;

watch him try an' claim as his own this long, strong old tongue's

new-remembered rhythms. . . .

hear this long tongue!

fear this long tongue!

know this tall tale to be mine too, and I'll live or die by it.

I stole the torturer's tongue!

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Tan-Tan and the Rolling Calf

One time, Tan-Tan was on the run again, oui, barely ahead of the bounty hunters. She did just done kill a man; a pimp who used to specialize in young young girls, and a pusher too besides.

Truth to tell, nobody on New Half-Way Tree was sorry he dead, but murder was murder, and Tan-Tan had to pay. So she run. She bind up she locks so nobody could recognise she, and she head for the bush, like always when she in trouble. She hike for hours, until she was far, far from home, and tired. Night was coming on, but Resurrection Town

was just over the next mountain. It had a woman there named Pearl who would feed she and hide she for the night. So Tan-Tan head up the mountain path, dragging she feet with tiredness, but keeping she eyes open for trouble.

It had a nice evening breeze blowing soft through the trees beside the path. Is the same song the breeze used to sing in the trees on Toussaint planet, when Tan-Tan was a little gal pickney.

Walking along, she almost forget she was a exile on New Half-Way Tree with a curse on she head from the douens-them: every time she take from somebody, she had was to give back twice as much to a next somebody. But she couldn't really forget the curse, nuh? All like how she just take a life, she was going to have to save two more, just to even up. Tan-Tan could hear the whispering of the douens starting up in she head again:

It ain't have no magic in do-for-do,

If you take one, you must give back two.

Tan-Tan sigh and keep walking. Up ahead, she spy a form in the dark, someone hurrying to get home; a woman in long skirts. The woman was walking fast-fast, she shoulders all scrunch up together. She looking from side to side into the bush every minute, as though she could see trouble before it reach, oui? A tree frog shout "Breck-eck!" into the night, and the woman jump like jumbie on she tail, and start to make haste even faster. Tan-Tan see a chance to do somebody good, and quiet down some of the whispering in she head. She shout:

"Evening, sister: is home you going?" The woman cry out, "Lawd ha' mercy!" and whip round to see who coming up behind she.

Tan-Tan say, "Don't frighten, lady, don't frighten. I just going over the mountain, past Resurrection Town to Juncanoo. I going to spend some time with my old grannie; she ain't too strong any more, oui."

As Tan-Tan get closer, she could see the woman shoulders relax, but she voice still tremble when she reply, “Thanks God, you is a honest woman. Bounty hunters tell we Tan-Tan round the place, and I frighten to walk this lonely road by myself so late at night. I stay too late in the market. I ’fraid Tan-Tan hold me and cut me throat like hog!”

Tan-Tan smile to hear somebody call she a honest woman. “Is alright, lady, I could walk a little way with you to keep you company. Is where you going?”

Sadie was going to Basse-Terre, a village beside Resurrection Town. Tan-Tan agree to walk with she until the path fork at the bottom of the hill. As they walk, they talk about things: how ackee dear in the market now with the drought; and what a sad thing it was for a woman to turn outlaw and have she heart so hard like the Robber Queen Tan-Tan; and what a way pickney-child wouldn’t mind their elders nowadays. Little-little, Sadie start to laugh and joke with she like them was old friend. It was hard work for Tan-Tan; long time since she just make

old-talk. Sadie almost catch she out when she ask, “And what about you, my dear? You think your nen-nen going to get well again?”

Which nen-nen? Tan-Tan almost answer, but she remember she story in time: “I ain’t know.

She old now, you see. Every time she get sick like this, she never come back as strong as before.” Tan-Tan bow she head to shake it in pretend sadness over she pretend nen-nen. That is when she see a shadow shifting right where Sadie was about to step. Tan-Tan yell out, “Mind you foot!” but too late: Sadie step down hard; the shadow yelp; Sadie scream “Oh God oh God!” and jump back behind Tan-Tan. Tan-Tan make haste and pull out she machète, but when she look good at the shadow, she only start one set of laughing. It ain’t nothing but a small beast, cringing on the ground in front of the two women, growling a baby growl and waving a tiny tail back and forth in the dust on the path. Tan-Tan re-sheathe she machète and bend down to pick up the beast. She show it to Sadie:

“Don’t ’fraid, Sadie; is just a rolling calf baby. See, the tail spikes too small to have any poison yet. It can’t hurt you.”

“Jeezam,” Sadie say, coming closer to get a better look, “you ain’t frighten it bite you?”

“Nah, man. Is only the big ones you have to watch out for. Them miserable, will mash you just for so. This one going to be big like a bull calf for true, and the four legs going to have some wicked claws. And you see these tiny scales all over the body? They going to get thick and hard, like leather armour. Let we leave it right here. It will find itself back home when it ready.” She put the baby back down on the path, and the two women start to walk again.

Well, doux-doux, Sadie couldn’t get over what just happen; she start to chat like she mouth is a pot with no kibber. “Lord, anybody see my crosses? I just walking down the road, minding my own business, when one wild beast nuh try to bite off my foot? I tell you, missis, I don’t know what I woulda do if you wasn’t here to help me! Jeezam!” Tan-Tan try to tell she rolling calf does only eat bush, but Sadie carry on so till Tan-Tan couldn’t take the noise no more. She start to walk a little ahead, trying to leave some of the jibber-jabber. And Sadie scream again.

Tan-Tan turn round, just in time to see one big mako something rush at Sadie and slam she to the ground. Rolling calf! Big one this time! *The mother come to protect she baby*, Tan-Tan think as she fetch out she machète again and run to help Sadie. The rattle of the rolling calf tail remind she that she shouldn’t get too close; the spikes in the tail could kill she easy. Tan-Tan jump back; the massive tail just miss she. In the dark, she could barely make out Sadie, twisting round under the beast, trying to get away from the snapping jaws.

“Sadie! I coming, gal!” Tan-Tan fetch one blow to the rolling calf tail with she machète. The spikes went flying off. The beast scream and left Sadie to come after Tan-Tan. She couldn’t see it good in the night, but she could smell it. Yeasty breath, like bread dough a-spoil. Rolling calf-them does have they snout full of grinding plates, and sharp eyes, for

the half-way tree jungle dark like the Blackheart man soul. Them have hard scales all over the body. When them move fast, the scales and the tail spikes does rattle. That is why the first colonists did name the animal “rolling calf”; the rattling noise remind them of the scary anansi stories they grannies tell about the Rolling Calf, a jumbie bull calf all wrap up in chains, with eyes of fire, that does chase people travelling alone at night.

The rolling calf lunge and snap at Tan-Tan. It catch she by she sleeve, and she had was to tear it free. “Ai!” She leave some of the flesh of she arm in the rolling calf jaws. Tan-Tan could hear Sadie sobbing on the ground, and praying steady steady, but she couldn’t mind that; the beast swipe she with it injured tail and send she slamming down. The fall knock out all she wind. She try to roll away, but the rolling calf grab she foot. She feel the bite of it grinding plates scraping down she leg nearly to the bone. She scream and she jerk the foot away, but she shoe leave behind in the rolling calf mouth. *Don’t tell me I go dead right here tonight*, Tan-Tan think. She had was to move fast; the way to kill a rolling calf was to stab up through the brain, but she only had one chance. If she miss and it trample she, she would dead anyway. The rolling calf haul back to lunge again; Tan-Tan roll to she knees under the snapping jaws. With two hands, she

drive the machète upwards, praying she hit brain. She feel the machète shudder. Rolling calf blood start to spray from the wound, all over she hands, and the beast crash down right on top of she. The blow almost knock she senseless. She couldn’t move. She hear Sadie cry out,

“Lady, you alright? Oh God, lady, don’t dead!”

“I ain’t dead, Sadie. Help me, nuh?”

Sadie limp over and drag Tan-Tan out, crying the whole time, and calling on God to save they life. Tan-Tan didn’t mind. She let Sadie rip up she kerchief to wipe off the rolling calf blood and bind up she foot. It feel nice to have somebody fretting over she. Sadie had was to help Tan-Tan stand up, for she still bassourdie from the blows she catch, but they couldn’t stay there. Tan-Tan drag she machète out of the carcass, and

use it to pry out she shoe from the jaws. The shoe was slimy when she put it back on. Tan-Tan give Sadie a shaky smile:

“But look at the two of we, eh? My foot chew up, your bodice rip, both of we cover in bruises, and is where the hell your market basket gone to?” They find where the basket did drop when the rolling calf attack. Most of the goods was still inside, though all but three of the eggs break.

They start walking again, with Tan-Tan leaning on Sadie shoulder to ease the pain in she foot (when was the last time she trust anybody so?) Sadie only carrying on about how they almost dead, but Tan-Tan let she talk; it was the voice of a friend.

By now, they was heading downhill, and them reach a fork in the path. On the right hand was the lights of Resurrection Town. On the left hand, Tan-Tan could see Basse-Terre. Tan-Tan stop and stand up by sheself, but Sadie didn't want she to go.

“Lady,” she say, **“words alone can't thank you; you save my life this night! My home not far; you want to come? You could spend tonight with we.”**

Tan-Tan was dog-tired. She couldn't make Sadie know who she was. All she want was to be in Resurrection Town, where she could speak she name and be welcome, and rest she head for one night. **“No, thank you, darling. My grannie waiting in Juncanoo, and I don't want to leave she alone tonight.”**

“Alright, I understand, but I will come and visit you while you there. Lemme give you a little something to go with, nuh? I still have some nice naseberry from the market.” Sadie reach into she basket to give Tan-Tan the fruit, but Tan-Tan decide to end the masquerade right there.

She couldn't make Sadie come looking for she. She reach up and dash she scarf from she head, and the dreadlocks tumble down she shoulders, black like eels in river water. Sadie gasp and drop the two

naseberry-them. Them split open on the path. The black seeds remind Tan-Tan of the eyes of the douens; all dark with no centre. She say to Sadie:

“You could stop calling me ‘lady’: I name Tan-Tan! Go your ways in peace, darling, and let me go mine. Tell the people in Basse-Terre that is Tan-Tan save your life this night.”

“Oh, God, oh God: I going! Don’t hurt me, nice lady, Devil Lady, do . . .” Sadie turn and run off down the hill, looking back every minute to make sure Tan-Tan wasn’t following. Tan-Tan watch she run. She feel a sadness weighing she down; she alone in the night again. She turn down the fork towards Resurrection Town, but before she get far, the whispering start in she head again:

No obeah there in do-for-do,

If you take one, you must give back two.

“Oh, God, oonuh leave me alone, nuh? I already save one life tonight, and I tired! Let me rest a little? Please?” But the voices in she head only saying, *not one, but two . . .* Tan-Tan drop to she knees on the path, sobbing with fatigue. *Two . . . two . . . two . . .* Finally, she get up again, and limp back along the path. As she reach the carcass of the dead rolling calf, she hear something whimpering in the dark. The rolling calf baby was huddling against the mother dead body, crying for she. When it see Tan-Tan, it start to hiss and snarl.

“Oho,” Tan-Tan say to the baby, **“if I leave you here, mongoose bound to eat you before morning come.”** She pick up the baby. It try to snap at she, and the tail swipe she in she face.

“You little bit, but you tallawah,” Tan-Tan say with a smile. She tuck the baby under she arm,

where the tail couldn’t do no harm, and start off again, humming a tune to calm the rolling calf baby. It kick and fight and scratch up Tan-Tan two arms-them, but it was company. Finally, it get tired and fall

asleep, just as they reach Resurrection Town. It was almost 'fore-day morning. Tan-Tan was the only one out on the streets. She make she way towards Pearl house, with the rolling calf baby getting heavy in she tired arms. The douen voices in she head was quiet for now, but how the ass to convince Pearl to let she keep a wild animal in she clean house for the night?

• • •

A rumbling noise woke Tan-Tan. Exhausted, she peeked out from sleep, blew one of Tefa's breast feathers out of her face. The piteous rumbling came again. Tan-Tan struggled to her knees, leaned over the side of the nest. Yes, the rolling calf pup had overnight eaten every leaf in a six-metre circle round where her leash was tethered, and was demanding breakfast. In the weeks since Tan-Tan and Tefa had been looking after the pup, she had grown quickly, now stood nearly as high as Tan-Tan's hip. The chain that held her was stretched taut. She was leaning towards a patch of shoots that was just out of reach, mouthing her flexible beak at it and crying for help.

*** Time to let she go soon.***

“You think so?”

She nearly big enough to fend for sheself now.

Tefa distrusted the rolling calf pup, had tried to convince Tan-Tan to release her into the bush as soon as her teeth plates had come in. But she cost them nothing to keep, beyond the initial cost of her chain. Is only leaves she wanted. They had plenty of those, oui. Hard to believe that something that looked so able to hunt and kill for its supper was a folivore, harmful only if you frightened it or threatened it. Or got in its unmindful way. Tan-Tan's foot was still sore from where the beast had stepped on it yesterday.

The pup grumbled again.

“Yes, I coming just now, hold your horses, nuh?” She clambered awkwardly out of the nest, sat straddling the branch while she got her breath. Her centre of gravity shifted almost daily as her belly grew. She'd lost track,

was it seven months? Seven and a half? More, maybe? Her back hurt all the time, she couldn't get a restful sleep. Damned baby. And like it had heard her, it kicked. Ai. Vicious brute's legs were getting stronger. She swung heavily out of the tree, wincing as the impact of landing made her belly pull at her crotch tendons. The rolling calf pup hurried over to her, making a noise like three grown men with bellyaches. It tried to lean against her leg; she stepped away. "No, you too big, you have to stop that now!" Its armour-plate skin had hardened as it had grown. It could scrape her skin raw. It swiped its spiked tail back and forth, making a thumb-deep groove in the dirt. She slid the choke chain loose from its neck. It shook its blocky tricornered head and lumbered off in search of greenery. One day she knew it wouldn't come back. Tefa was right, it was old enough. She no longer needed to keep it near so she could watch over it at night. But she didn't want to set it free. It was the first thing whose life she'd really managed to save so far, the first step in lifting the douen curse from her head. If she let it go and it died, would she have to start all over again?

Tefa had fluttered down from the nest, was giving herself a dust bath to stifle mites. She was kicking up an opaque cloud. Tan-Tan coughed and stepped back, fanning dust away from her face.

Tefa was another one who didn't have to be leashed to her any longer. There were other daddy tree communities about. Abitefa had made a point of searching them out and warning them not to lay down obvious trails to tallpeople settlements. Humans were curious animals and now that they had really begun to wonder about how douens lived, some brave ones were venturing farther and farther into the bush.

Janisette's posse had made it the farthest so far, but they had become a laughing stock. Almost no-one believed their tale about a tree as big as a mountain that had shrunk to a sapling overnight. Tefa had refused to stay with any of the other douen communities because Tan-Tan refused to join her, or to try and live with tallpeople. Was only a matter of time before Janisette caught up with her. She didn't want to bring her fate on anyone else. Abitefa should leave her too, in this shadow place between two peoples.

And then where would Tan-Tan be? And what about when the devil baby got born?

Circles, her mind was forever going in circles lately and always came back to this. “Tefa,” she shouted, “I

going into the settlement it have over there so.”

The dustcloud stopped its dance. Abitefa peeked out. ***Why?***

“I need new blouses—the belly poking out again.” Which was only partly true. The last set of clothing she’d got would fit until she delivered. She was just restless, wanted to see people going about their lives round her. She hadn’t checked out this particular settlement yet. She puffed her way back up into the tree—soon she’d have to nest on the ground, and what would she do then? Later, think about it later.

From higher up she marked the path of the sun, then jumped back down to the ground. “I go come back by nightfall, all right?”

Seen. Walk good.

Tan-Tan marked her way as she went; notching a tree here, building a small pyramid of boulderstones there. Aside from the discomfort of her baby belly, it felt good to exercise her body. Adult exiles to New Half-Way Tree often never came into the full satisfaction of feeling their muscles work to move the world around them.

It took her about two hours to start to see the middle bush that signalled a settlement. She hid her lantern in a shrub at the border of the bush. She thrust her face out of the bush. About a metre sunward was a wisdom weed field. It would hide her entrance and exit from the settlement. Staying in the bush, she worked her way round to it.

There were people who had been working the field this morning. She could see them in a hut nearby, taking shade from the noonday heat and eating their lunch. One of them was holding court with a Tan-Tan story, the one about Kabo Tano and the evergiving tree. Tan-Tan smiled wryly to herself.

It was a simple thing to sneak past them through an uncut section of the field.

What a thing those Tan-Tan stories had become, oui! Canto and cariso, crick-crack Anansi back; they had grown out of her and had become more than her. Seemed like every time she heard the stories they had become more elaborate. Anansi the Trickster himself couldn't have woven webs of lies so fine. She kept trying to discern truths about herself in the Tan-Tan tales, she couldn't help it. People loved them so, there must be something to them, ain't? Something hard, solid thing other people could see in her; something she could hear and know about herself and hold in her heart. *Know you is a no-good waste of space.*

She found the road and asked a passer-by if there was a tailor. There was. She followed the man's directions through the streets. One or two people looked at her curiously. Some nodded a greeting. She had almost forgotten what the gesture meant. She'd been walking a few minutes when she realised what was odd about this settlement—it was clean. No smell of sewage in the streets. No open middens.

Pickney-them only as frowsty as diligent parents would allow.

And this must be the tailor shop here, right where the man had said it would be. The door of the small hut was open. She walked inside. The tailor looked up from his ancient treadle sewing machine. "Good afternoon, Compère. How I could help you today?"

Tan-Tan goggled at him, tipped her sombrero down so its shadow hid her face. "Is okay," she said in a voice she made deep, and rushed out of the shop.

"What . . . ?"

She didn't answer, kept moving. What settlement was this? She must have asked it out loud. A young boy replied, "Sweet Pone, Compère." She hurried by him without thanking him. Her heart was triphammering, the weight in her belly dragging her down. Hurry!

She turned down a side street, found herself in a market. Hurry! Her cape dragged a gutted foot snake down off someone's counter. She heard its liver wetness smack against the ground. The vendor shouted.

"Pardon, beg pardon," Tan-Tan apologised. "No time."

She was half running now, as much as the monster baby would let her. She got her legs tangled in a goat's leash, overturned a heaped pyramid of halwa fruit. The vendors were shouting at her to take care, the noise was calling attention to her. She ran smack into a little girl child, knocked her bawling onto her behind. "Lady, what the rass wrong with you?" the little girl's mother demanded to know. She bent to her child.

The girl's lip was cut, Tan-Tan could see the blood. She stopped. "Oh. I didn't mean to hurt she . . ."

"Why you can't watch where you going?" said the woman. And to the child, "Don't mind, doux-doux. Is just a stupid lady."

She was hunting for something to wipe the girl's mouth with. Tan-Tan bent, used a corner of her cape.

"Sorry, sorry."

Running footsteps. A shadow fell over her. "Compère?"

No running from it any longer. Tan-Tan looked up into Melonhead's face.

• • •

"Take off that cape and hat, nuh? I could see you sweating under there."

"No thanks, me all right."

Melonhead shrugged doubtfully. Tan-Tan remembered that expression, the one he got when he didn't believe her but wasn't going to push the point. To be looking at his face, so dear to her! She kept imagining brushing it with her fingers. She reached for her glass of wet sugar tree water instead,

concentrated on drinking one swallow at a time. She felt nervous, sitting still in a rum shop like this.

Keeping on the move was survival. But her camouflage drab worked. People were ignoring her.

“I thought you did dead in the bush,” Melonhead said softly.

“No.” He had been with One-Eye and the dogs that were hunting her down. What was he up to?

Even softer he said, “I thought if maybe you didn’t dead, you would try and meet me up here in Sweet Pone, like you did promise.”

“No.” Covertly she scanned the place, plotting her escape route. The exit on her left led to the main street, busy enough to disappear in, if no-one was really looking for her. She shouldn’t have come here in broad daylight. *Stupid girl. You go dead of stupid.*

“Why you won’t talk to me, Tan-Tan?”

What he really think this is any at all? What he trying to trap her into?

“Nothing to say. You not going back to work?”

“You have a next partner?” he asked.

Enough. “Is what it have with you, eh? All you could think about is partner this and partner that? You and me story never start, now it finish. It finish when you come with dogs to hunt me.”

The hurt and shock on his face wrenched at her. “Me? Hunt you? Tan-Tan, I follow One-Eye to try and make sure he ain’t do away with you right there!”

Horse dead and cow fat. She wasn’t going to believe no anansi story.

Melonhead must have seen the doubt on her face. “Is true! Me and Daddy come back later that night to try and find you. I come back next morning,

and the morning after that. For a week I went back to that same place, hoping to find you. Then I think say you dead.”

An old grief saddened his face. No, not so old; it had only been seven months, eight? since she’d seen him last. To her it felt like years.

“You don’t believe?”

She sighed. She had no business with regret. “Seen, I believe you.”

“So what make you ain’t come to find me?”

“Janisette hunting me down.”

“What?”

“I can’t rest any one place, seem like she have people in every settlement who she pay to look out for me. She think I kill Daddy in cold blood.”

“Rahtid. Nobody in Junjuh think that. Everybody know say him been beating you like dog from since.”

They all had known? “Worse than that.”

“Worse how?”

Shit. That had slipped out. “Never mind. You not going back to work?”

But he wouldn’t leave her, wouldn’t be distracted. He pressed her for details of what had happened that night, how she’d survived in the bush this long. She wove half-truths, trying frantically to keep her own story straight. She’d thought Antonio was going to kill her with blows, had lashed out blindly with her new knife. She’d run away into the bush, had climbed a tree to throw the dogs off the scent. She’d made her way to other settlements somehow, had begged and borrowed and stolen and had been settling

down when Janisette had found her.

Nothing about the rape. Certainly nothing about Chichibud and Benta, or about the daddy tree. She had drunk tree frog blood; drunk douen people's secrets with it. She owed them her silence.

Melonhead bought her lunch. They laughed and talked over a meal like they hadn't done in so long.

Quamina had been well when Melonhead left Junjuh, though she would still cry with missing Tan-Tan.

Aislin too. Glorianna had given birth to twin girls, fathered by Rick. "Two pickney pretty for so, you see?"

I help Daddy sew the nine night-gowns for them, from lace Quamina make."

Shooting the breeze with Melonhead was sweet. Tan-Tan realised that she didn't want to leave his company, didn't want to go back to her cold nest in the bush with no humans for company. Guilt flared at that thought. Abitefa was her friend.

"Oh! Let me tell you this one, Tan-Tan! You go like it, for it have your name in it. Long time, Tan-Tan the Robber Queen used to live on the moon . . ."

The thing in Tan-Tan's belly kicked and rolled like Jour Ouvert morning. "Nah man, pretend story that.

Tell me, tell me . . . how people here does cook foot snake meat. After it so rank." He obliged. She breathed again.

The shopkeeper brought them mug after mug of sugar tree water, bowls of salted dry-fried channa peas.

Other patrons of the rum shop smiled indulgently at them as they sat with their heads together. She and Melonhead talked and talked, her spinning lies, him caught in their web.

The sun was beginning its descent down the bowl of the sky. If she wasn't back at the nest by daylean, Abitefa would be frantic. So would the rolling calf pup. "Come Melonhead, make I walk you back to the shop. Must be time for you to lock up and go home."

"Is right there so I live."

But the shop she'd seen was one room with a narrow pallet bed rolled up in the corner. "What, you not keeping house with nobody?"

His face crumpled. "Tan-Tan, like you don't understand. I been grieving."

So had she, for so many things. "Come, I walk you back." He looked at her, sighed, shook his head, lips pressed hard together as though he were keeping words in. He got to his feet.

She stood. Felt like the blasted duppy pickney had grown in the few hours she'd been sitting there. She stretched out her legs, did her best to affect the walk of someone who wasn't pregnant. She would be an easy target if people thought her ability to move was hampered. They walked along the main street. She saw new deportees, identifiable by the softness of people unaccustomed to physical work and by the distant, frantic look of the newly headblind. But for the most part people looked content; thin and wiry from manual labour, but healthy. The basics were there: running water nearby, a market, and the tradespeople—healer, carpenter, blacksmith, Melonhead the tailor. Runner people skills flourished in Sweet Pone. People greeted Melonhead happily, called him Compère Charlie. So is that was his name.

He kept stopping to introduce her to people, till she had to take him aside and explain how she couldn't afford to have people start to recognise her. His face fell, but he said nothing. They kept walking. "You like living here?" Tan-Tan asked him.

"Yes, man. These people working hard to build a new life, you know? We nearly finish putting up a Palaver House where we Mocambo could meet people and talk. We even have a little library! Nearly a hundred books! Them solar-powered texts could run forever if we care them right."

Books, manuals. So many they had! No wonder people could develop skills here, they had books to teach them. Tan-Tan noted how Melonhead said “we.”

They were at his home. A neat pile of folded clothing lay on his pallet. He shook the pieces open. They were tiny, a child’s clothing made from unbleached fabric. “Rehan must be bring these while I wasn’t here. Is his little boy pants these, I recognise the tear I mend from when he fall down and bust he little knee open on a rockstone. Look, the bloodstain never come out. Is my stitches these.”

Proudly, he showed her the small pair of pants, the neat, well-made stitches that darned the torn edges of fabric back together. “Nothing ain’t wrong with them, so the pickney must be just outgrow them again. I have to let out the hems for he.” Tan-Tan had a brief flash of a girl with her face, dancing and laughing in the sunlight. She used to be a pickney too, who would tear out the knees of her pants while playing. She

shut the vision out, moved to look round the rest of the hut. There was nothing much to see beyond Melonhead’s orderly tools: needles, awls, thimbles, scissors, a small spinning wheel.

Melonhead inspected the rest of the clothing, noting a rip here, a missing button there. He folded the clothing, unfolded it again, draped it over a chair. He looked uncomfortable. “Um, you want to stay little bit?”

“No thanks, I have to go.” Did he look relieved?

“Where you staying?”

She sighed. “Don’t ask me, Melonhead, I done tell you I have to live in secret, I don’t settle anywhere for long. I will come and visit you again, seen?” She turned to leave.

“I could come with you?” he asked quietly. At her look he blustered, “Not to stay or nothing, not to give you grief, just to walk you back to your home, talk to you little more. Then I leave you alone, promise.

So long I ain't see you, girl."

Home. He thought she had a home. This was breaking her heart, this longing. "You could hike in the bush?" she said, before she could have time to think about what she was offering.

"Nanny save we, is bush you living?"

She couldn't stand the pity on his face. "Bush today yes, a different place next week, maybe bush again the week after that. Is so I does live, take it or leave it."

"Nah, I ain't mean nothing by it." He was searching through his room. "Let me just find my good boots."

"We taking the side routes, so you know. Can't make anybody see where I go."

He straightened up from tying his laces. She'd forgotten his short, sweet, bandy legs. "All this secrecy really necessary, girl?"

Panic fluttered in her throat. "Yes! And if you can't honour that, tell me now and let me go my ways."

"I never break word with you yet, Tan-Tan."

But she'd broken hers to him. "Make we go." She tipped her sombrero low on her head.

He followed her uncomplainingly, dipping into side streets, taking the least observed routes. He followed her through the cover of the eveningtime cornfields, through the middle bush to where she'd stashed her lantern. He just raised an eyebrow at how quickly she found it. It would be dark before she got back, Abitefa would be worried. She shouldn't have stayed this long. How would she let Tefa know she was bringing company? How would Melonhead react to the hint? To the rolling calf pup? She didn't know what she was doing, or why. "We have to go quick."

"Seen."

He hiked along quietly with her for almost an hour, a soothing presence by her side. He held the lantern for her while she lit it, handed it back to her, said, “You making baby, ain’t it?”

“You could tell!” she stuttered, too shocked to dissemble.

“Not at first, no. That cape does hide plenty. But it start to show in your walk once you get out of Sweet Pone.”

“Huh.” She strode off, leaving him to keep up.

Another half hour of silence, not calming this time. Tan-Tan’s brain was seething over, too fast for sense.

She was aware of every step Melonhead took, every inclination of his head. She nearly jumped out of her skin when he took a preparatory breath in. He was going to speak. He said, “Tan-Tan, don’t vex at the question: is Antonio baby?”

“Why you would ask me something like that!” She stomped on ahead of him, horrified herself with the fleeting thought that she could abandon him here in bush, like in the douen stories. She had let him get too close.

He caught up to her, gazed at her, waiting. Fucking man, always waiting, waiting for her to say what was on her mind. She said, “I can’t talk about it, don’t ask me.”

He nodded. “Seen.” They kept walking. In a few more minutes, he reached slowly for her hand. She took it and held on, tight-tight like creeper vine.

“Is really your home your taking me to, Tan-Tan?”

“My camp, yes.”

“It dark out here like backra soul, oui. You not frighten in this bush come nightfall?”

She felt pleased with herself. “Not any more.”

In another hour they were approaching the place where she and Tefa had made camp. Tefa had left pork-knacker signs, bush prospector signs, to tell her that she'd made that night's nest in another nearby tree. They did that every night; it gave the rolling calf pup somewhere new to graze. Tefa was probably already hearing two sets of feet tramping through the bush, was wondering is what a-go on. "Tefa!" she skreeked. Her hinte talk was getting better. "A tallpeople with me! No danger!" Tefa carolled back that she was prepared.

Melonhead had jumped when she began calling. He halted dead where he stood. "What you make that noise for?" he asked.

"I have a packbird with me," she said. The story she and Tefa had prepared if they were to need it. She hoped they could pull it off. "Just letting she . . . it know I coming." Now she could see through the trees the flicker of the campfire. "Melonhead I have, ah, a pet."

"You mean the bird?"

It took her a second to understand that he was calling Abitefa a pet. "No, a next beast. Don't 'fraid when you see she."

By the lamplight she could see him smiling. "You got what, a hunting dog or something?"

"No, more like a ankylosaur."

"How you mean?"

"She getting big, all right? And she scary looking, but she won't mean you no harm. Just don't get where she could step on your foot."

They stepped into the campsite. Snuffling with joy, the rolling calf pup rushed Tan-Tan, narrowly missing her with one of its horns. Melonhead shouted and froze. "What the bloodcloth . . . !" Inquisitive, the pup went to sniff at him. Melonhead put out warding hands, his face grey with alarm. The pup sampled a bit of his sleeve.

“Stop that!” Tan-Tan scolded her, pulling on her horns. “Sorry Melonhead, she growing; she is nothing but appetite.”

“She going to get *bigger*?” The pup chewed meditatively, spat out a button.

“Little bit, yes. Watch out for she tail there. She mother reached to my shoulder. I killed she, the mother I mean, but is my fault. I frighten she and she attack. I couldn’t abandon the pup after that.”

Some of the fear had gone from Melonhead’s face. Carefully he reached out a hand and stroked one of the pup’s horns. “In all my born days, I never.”

Abitefa fluttered down from the nest. Melonhead straightened, smiled. “Now, here something I more familiar with. Coo-coo, bird-oi.” He made dove noises at Abitefa, holding out his hand. She looked to Tan-Tan for guidance.

“Ahm, she not used to strangers. She won’t come to you.”

He dropped the hand, pulled it out of reach of the pup’s nibbling mouth. In her beak Abitefa picked up a log of the wood she had gathered to stoke the fire. She must have thought better of it, for she dropped it again and stood looking at Melonhead. She didn’t get to see plenty tallpeople.

Melonhead glanced round the campsite. “Nanny bless, Tan-Tan; is here you staying? And all because of Janisette?”

“I like it here,” she lied. “You hungry?”

That was a long night; long in good and bad ways. There was the moment when Tan-Tan realised she couldn’t really expect Melonhead to make his way back home through the bush in the dark. He was going to have to stay there with them. How come she hadn’t thought of that before? It pleased her and frightened her to have him stay. She showed him how to climb up into the nest and he praised her ingenuity at training her bird to build it for her. Abitefa’s neck feathers had bristled. Tan-Tan had told him how she slept snuggled next to Abitefa for warmth and he’d said sweetly, “You don’t have to do that tonight, sweetheart. I here.” Tan-Tan had gaped at him, looked

helplessly at Tefa, who just gazed back, puzzled. Finally Tan-Tan had had to ask her in awkward hint to please sleep somewhere else for the night. Abitefa had made a peculiar noise and climbed up higher in the tree. Leaves and twigs had rained down on her and Melonhead for a while as Tefa had woven herself a new nest.

Yes, a long, long night alone in a confined space with Melonhead, which she had managed by pretending to fall asleep almost instantly. Melonhead had called her name softly a few times, then sighed and curled himself round her. She'd lain like that for hours, feeling the slow beat of his heart against her spine, his arm curled round her belly.

Come morning time Abitefa didn't show up. Trying not to worry, Tan-Tan had shared with Melonhead her breakfast of smoked tree frog and dried halwa fruit. Things were awkward between them, shaped by the silences she insisted on. He said he had to get back to his shop. She walked him to the edge of the bush, made clumsy small talk the whole way. Before stepping back out into Sweet Pone he took her hand and said, "You going to be moving on soon?"

"Yes. Nuh must?"

"I not convinced, but if is so you want it. Come and see me before you go?"

"I promise."

"Don't promise, just do it."

True, her promises were no good. Sadly she watched him thread his way through the corn. She had disappointed him again.

When she got back to the camp, Abitefa was waiting. ***You partnering with that tallpeople now?***

No, she wasn't. But she found herself back in Sweet Pone two days later, looking for excuses to keep passing and repassing the front of Melonhead's shop, too jittery to just walk in. She stared wistfully at the people who did: the old man in the anachronistic suit; the bongo toughy little girl who was

clutching a rubber ball in one hand and holding the torn seat of her dungarees closed with the other; the preoccupied-looking young woman who had a bag full of either cloth or mending. She was pretty, that one—fat and firm with a high, round behind. She stayed in Melonhead's shop too long for Tan-Tan's taste, left with too big a smile on her face.

And who was she Tan-Tan to care? Standing there in patched-up, leaf-stained clothes; no pot to piss in, no roof over her head. Who was she to be scrutinizing who Melonhead was entertaining?

She was preoccupied, that's why he caught her. Another day and she would have zipped into the shadows as soon as he set foot out of his shop. Damned baby was slowing her down, yes.

"Tan-Tan!" he called, waving. She gasped. He was coming over, face alight with joy. "You come to see me!"

"Ahm, yes, I suppose so." She couldn't meet his eyes for long. She felt dirty, plain.

He looked glum. "Is 'cause you moving on?"

"Soon, yes. Not right now. I come, I come . . . because I want you make me some clothes," she continued, happy to have thought of something that would make her feel less homely. "I need a new outfit that would hide this belly."

This time his smile had some mischief in it. She knew that smile well. That smile had got her behind warmed for her one time when she had gone along with his suggestion that they knot all Compère Ramdass's yellowed singlets together as they flapped on the clothes line behind his cottage. "If I going to sew for you, I have to measure you," Melonhead said.

Her ears were burning. She just nodded. "Let we start then, nuh?"

She followed him into the shop. Pity that having clothes made would slow her down, waiting for him to finish them. She'd have to delay moving camp.

Melonhead closed the door. “You could take off the cape, people know not to come in while I measuring.”

Thankfully she shucked the heavy unbleached fabric she wore all the time now if she was among tall people. She should wash it soon; it was smeared with leaf and road stains. She rolled her shoulders luxuriously, stretched her neck.

Melonhead sat at his workspace and started pulling things out of a press beside his sewing machine: a tape measure, a pencil, some scraps of paper. “Why you want to hide that you making baby, Tan-Tan?”

Begging your pardon, but who go care?”

“I can’t make nobody . . .” she started, then stopped. No words to speak about Tan-Tan the Robber Queen. That was another self, another dimension. “I alone on the road. If people know say I pregnant

them might try to take advantage.”

He looked disturbed at that. “True thing. Maybe you could stop here little bit till the baby born. I don’t think Janisette will find you. Come, stand over here.” He draped the tape measure over his neck and stood to face her. His hair smelt of sweet oil. Cheeks flaming, she let him take her measurements and write them down. She looked round the room to distract herself.

To stop in one place. Sweet Pone was nice. With a start of surprise, Tan-Tan realised that she hadn’t played Robber Queen on the Sweet Pone people yet.

There was more fabric in Melonhead’s shop than there had been the last time. Plenty more, and bright bright colours too besides. Her sister Quamina would have loved it in here, all the shiny needles and gorgeous cloths. “Like somebody give you a big job, eh?”

He laughed. “Sweetness, you been in the bush so long you ain’t even know what time of year this is?”

She did. Time for the mako jumbies to migrate to the poles. Time for the foot snakes to moult. She was trying to work out a way to tan the shed hides they left behind. Maybe she could make wallets with them to sell. She frowned. What did tallpeople do this time of year?

He took her by the shoulders, turned her to face him. “Tan-Tan, Carnival is three weeks from now. What you going to wear?”

• • •

Tan-Tan stopped for a minute behind the new Sweet Pone Palaver House before turning the corner into the town square. The Robber Queen cape felt good on her shoulders, a comforting weight. Melonhead was a genius, oui? He’d pieced together precious ends of black velvet, made style by outlining the joins with iridescent shell buttons. The cape was edged with brightly coloured ribbons, ends left long and fluttering. It fastened in front with ornate brass frog closures, had two long slits through which she could thrust her arms. The round jutting collar had a support under it that also served to hold the cape away from her belly. Her soon-to-be baby was well-hidden.

And there was more. Melonhead had made her a fine Robber hat from goat wool felt that he’d dyed black and blocked into shape. There was a belt, extra-large to extend round her belly, with two holsters and sheathes for her knife and machète. He’d even found cap guns and caps! She did an experimental turn. The cape flared out satisfyingly. She wished Melonhead were there to see, but he’d stayed at his shop to make some last-minute adjustments to costumes. He’d said: “I catch up with you later, doux-doux. In the square, all right? Girl, you looking fine too bad!”

She’d leaned over her baby belly and kissed his mouth, gratified at the pleased look of surprise on his face before their lips touched. “Later, yes.” She’d waved happily and left, her body tingling from the contact of his skin. She stopped, stood knowledge-struck in the street. Touching Melonhead made her feel good, an unalloyed pleasure untainted by fear or anger. So different than she’d ever felt before.

But the feeling of well-being deserted her quickly. She didn’t belong here, amongst people like this. As she approached the square she could hear the

music. A steel pan band was playing what should have been a sweet, sweet road march. The bass pans—them were beating out their deep, low notes like heartbeats: *Boom, boom-boom-boom-boom*. How come it sounded to her like “doom”? Over the beats, the tenor pans were working the melody hard: pure, tinny notes dancing up into the sky—a tune to make you want to wind your behind, shuffle in time, and take a swig out of the flask of red rum in your back pocket— *Ting ting, ting te-ting ting ting*. And all Tan-Tan could hear in the music was “*Tan-Tan; doom, doom-doom-doom-doom.*”

The square was full up with people. Even with the music she could hear the shuffling feet, the laughter, and every now and again, a joyous voice shouting out, “Koo fête, Papa! Wind your waist!” Melonhead had been busy these past few weeks, making costumes for those who couldn’t make their own. She saw Jab-Jab devils cracking whips, sporting horns on their heads; the Fancy Indians jumping up in their soft moccasins, hanging on to their feather headdresses so they wouldn’t fly off; the bats, silent and scary in skin-tight brown and black, waving their huge ratbat wings to and fro through the crowd; even the occasional Midnight Robber wearing a velvet sombrero, brim a metre wide, trimmed with pom-poms and papier-mâché skulls all round; leather chaps with plenty fringe; a noisemaker and fake guns. The Robbers carried sacks to hold the Carnival pounds and pennies people would throw them if they

speechified well. Some of them were even pretending to be Tan-Tan, New Half-Way Tree’s Robber Queen. She was hiding in the best possible way, masquerading as herself! The smile that cracked onto her face was nearly a foreign thing, a half-forgotten thing. *Just join the fête, stupid gal. When last you have a good time?*

Still, something was holding her back. Months of living in the bush with Abitefa had made her sensitive to the slightest sounds. Too much noise in a town. Underneath all the shouting and the pan playing there was a sursurus: maybe a tiny cross-breeze, a little warmer than the rest of the air, skittering past her shins; there was a low thrumming that didn’t seem to be coming from the steel band. There was a barely audible staccato tattoo that wasn’t noisemakers. What was wrong?

Truth to tell though, nothing could be completely right about Carnival in this shadow land of New Half-Way Tree. Everyone here was an exile; this could only be a phantom of the celebration they would have had on Toussaint.

Cho! She couldn't hang back like this all day. Time for fête, yes!

Tan-Tan took a deep breath and stepped round the corner of the new Palaver House, into Carnival in Sweet Pone.

Mama, if you see Masque!

The steel pan band was on a stage in the middle of the square, a whole side of about thirty pan men and women, beating the tune out of the steel drums with sticks wrapped in rubber. And dancing! The pan people-self couldn't help stamping their feet to the music they were making. The whole stage was only jerking up and down to the beat.

Tout monde in Sweet Pone and the surrounding settlements must have been in the town square jumping-up to the music. Carnival was bringing people together on New Half-Way Tree. Tan-Tan revelled in the finery of the Bats and Jab-Jabs and Fancy Indians. It even had a few small bands, oui? A Pissenlit band inna Old Masque stylee: one set of hard-back men dressed off in women's white petticoats, twisting and jutting their hips to show off the red stains painted on their panties; a Sailor band, every man and woman wearing navy and white naval uniforms with bell-bottom pants, and swaying from side to side like drunken sailors; a tiny Burroquite band, just two people—the King in satin and rhinestones, wearing a papier-mâché horse round his waist to look like he was riding it. Beside him came the Queen in her sari, passing round the brass plate to collect money. To the tune of the steel band the two of them were chanting:

Raja, Raja Hindako

Dhal bhat, dhal bhat Hindako

Soo, Mary, Soo Danka.

Midnight Robbers were holding up people to make their speeches. People were laughing at the verbal garbage and handing over booty: calabashes of liquor; silver jewelry; taking off their good leather shoes even and giving them to the robbers.

The people who didn't have on costumes had dressed for show anyway: their tightest bodices, their brightest bandanas. And plenty of people were beating bottle and spoon in time to the music.

“Oi-yo-yoi! Oi-yo-yoi!” chorussed two men in front of Tan-Tan, winding down each other, belly to behind. The man in front had on the tiniest pair of shorts Tan-Tan had ever seen. His brown skin was glistening from sweat and the gold glitter he had dusted all over his body. The cords in his thighs were like steel cable winching him low. He gyrated his hips against his dance partner's crotch. The man in back was wearing a loincloth and nothing else but a pair of alpagat slippers. His hair was chopped off at the sides. He waved round a wooden tomahawk as he danced. His round belly rolled and jumped in time.

Tan-Tan smiled to see the two of them.

“Lower! Match me, come on!” Clustered in a circle, four people were having a contest to see who could wind down nearest to the ground without falling over. They spread their knees wide apart, worked their twisting hips lower. Squealing and giggling, three of them toppled into the dust. The one left on her feet was a woman wearing a halter top with an eye painted on over each bubby. She stood from her crouch, did a little victory dance, hands sketching curlicues in the air. The three rivals laughed, got up, brushed themselves off. One of them squirted a drink into the winner's mouth from a leather bottle. Arm in arm,

the four of them danced off to the middle of the square. Mama, this is Masque! Today, tout monde forget all their troubles. Music too sweet, oui!

Tan-Tan cocked her hips to one side, then the other. They felt rusty. How could she have forgotten how to *dance*?

The rhythm soon caught her up in it, though. Swaying to the music, she worked her way past the two men, right into the comess of Carnival. She swung her sack over her shoulder and just lost herself in the music for a while. Was that Melonhead over there? No. She'd probably buck him up soon.

Time to try to earn her coppers this Carnival day. She moved to the outskirts of the square, chipped along until she spied a likely target for her first speech; an old man dancing at the edge of the crowd. She unholstered her cap gun, presented herself in front of him, and shot off *plai! plai!* into the air.

“Papa-oi! Stand and hear my tribulation.”

The old man grinned and folded his arms, waiting to judge if her speech would be good enough for him to drop some coppers into her sack.

“Stand and deliver up your tears and your pounds,” said the Robber Queen, “else your tears and your life for my grievous and sad accounting!”

Her voice swelled with power as the Robber Queen persona came upon her. She spun him the tale, about being born a princess among men. “My father, Lord Raja, was the King of Kings, nemesis of the mighty. He command the engines of the earth, and they obey him. My mother, Queen Niobe, cause the stars to fall out the sky at her beauty and the wind to sigh at she nimble body as she dance. How I could not be joyful? How I could not be blissful?” She wove her deft weave about being kidnapped and stolen away. About fleeing her captors, stealing to survive, helping those worse off than herself. “A mere snap of my fingers jook terror into the hearts of the dastardly!”

A small crowd of people had gathered to hear the speech. A few of them flipped coins of copper and brass into her sack. Finally the old man tossed her two coppers too. A good first take. They honoured her as they should. The Midnight Robber bowed graciously, accepting their beneficence. Her small audience clapped, dispersed. Tan-Tan blinked to find herself just a woman in a costume once more.

She went on a little farther, performed her piece a few more times, gathered more coin and gifts. Was going to be hard taking all this back to Abitefa, and her back was hurting her today. Maybe Melonhead would help. She danced some more, but the underlying hum it seemed only she could hear was throwing her off. She wasn't going to let it get in the way of her first fête in years. She worked her way to the front, right up close to where the band was playing. Music so loud it danced in her blood like her very own heartbeat. Yes, like so. She put her hands on the stage, her behind in the air, and gyrated to the rhythm.

“Put your hand in the air!” she shouted with the chorus. Yes, allyou; watch the Robber Queen dance.

A loud tone blatted out over the square. The tenor pans stopped first. People in the crowd started to complain. Then the bass pans fell quiet. The trumpet cut out with a rude noise. What wrong with them?

Tan-Tan looked up at the stage. All the musicians were staring open-mouthed behind her. The crowd was silent. There was a controlled purring noise coming from behind her back, a slight hiss. Tan-Tan turned round.

The bullet-shaped tank was sleek as a cat. Its metal body had been buffed to a reflective shine. Rivets made a stylish punctuation along its sides. Nothing on all of New Half-Way Tree looked like it. It advanced slowly on her, thrumming low in its belly, oiled treads whispering over the dust of the town square. Sunlight bounced needles of light off its mirrored hide. Its headlights tracked back and forth as they searched, searched for her. Its horn brayed again. Her fate had found her. Petrified, Tan-Tan could only watch it come.

The crowd backed away. Tan-Tan could hear the band members abandoning the stage. She dropped her sack. The tank stopped inches away from her in a menacing crouch. Its top opened.

Janisette jumped out, sleek in a tight red one-piece with black boots, her hair slicked back from her forehead and confined in a black bandana. “Oho! Koo the two-faced devil there, the woman that kill my husband.”

“It was self-defense . . .” Tan-Tan whispered. Her voice had no strength. Her belly was dragging her to the ground.

Janisette stalked over to her. “You come from Junjuh, is Junjuh justice you must face. You coming back with me.” She reached for Tan-Tan’s wrist, snapped one half of a pair of handcuffs shut over it. The ring of metal had the strength of Antonio’s fingers. *Yes, is this you good for. You must get punished.*

Numbly, she reached out her other wrist for the cuffs. “Yes,” cooed Janisette, fingers stretching for her.

“Is the right thing to do. Tin box for you.”

A movement caught Tan-Tan’s eye. She looked up to see her reflection in the tank’s grinning face. A bedraggled woman in a jokey, wilting hat and a silly cape of motley. The image made her short and made her middle bulge. Tan-Tan remembered the baby-to-be hidden under her cape. *Not just one life, but two.*

She jerked her chained wrist out of Janisette’s hand, flicked the handcuffs. Janisette had to duck.

“Fucking bitch!” she spat at Tan-Tan.

“Mind your mouth!” Tan-Tan hollered. She twisted free of Janisette’s grasp, kept dancing backwards away from her clutching hands. She opened her mouth again, and Bad Tan-Tan let the harangue tumble from them: “You not shame, you reddened trollop, to stanch this fête and jubilation with your scurrilous calumniation?”

“When I catch you, you leggobeast!”

Power coursed through Tan-Tan, the Robber Queen’s power—the power of words: “I you will never catch, for I is more than a match; I will duck your base canards; I will flee and fly to flee again.” Nanny, sweet Nanny, yes. Tan-Tan bad inna Robber Queen stylee.

“You going to come with me, woman!” Janisette lunged for her, caught the brim of her hat. Tan-Tan zigzagged out of reach.

“Not wo-man; I name Tan-Tan, a ‘T’ and a ‘AN’; I is the AN-acaona, Taino redeemer; the AN-nie Christmas, keel boat steamer; the Yaa As-AN-tewa; Ashanti warrior queen; the N-AN-ny, Maroon Granny; meaning Nana, mother, caretaker to a nation. You won’t confound these people with your massive fib-ulation!” And Tan-Tan the Midnight Robber stood tall, guns crossed at her chest. Let her opponent match that.

Someone in the crowd blew a whistle in approval. “Kaiso! Tell it make we hear, Tan-Tan!”

Tell it? The Robber Queen opened her mouth to gift the populace with more word science. A man’s voice shouted, “Is pappyshow! Tan-Tan is old-time story, not real!”

No, not real. He right. Just a pregnant bitch in a costume. The glamour faded like a dream. She was only Tan-Tan. “I real as you,” she croaked. Her voice shredded in the air. She was trying, trying to tell the real story, but she was tiring, Janisette was only steps away. Too much baby, too much guilt weighing her down. Janisette leapt. Missed. Tan-Tan flipped away, dropped the guns, launched into a heavy jog round the square that felt as though it would tear her groin tendons loose. The handcuffs clanked at her wrist.

No way to get through the press of people. Where would she run to, anyway?

Janisette kissed her teeth, ran and clambered up into the tank. It roared to life, headed straight for Tan-Tan. *She going to run me down!* Tan-Tan took two desperate steps, stumbled to her knees. Death rushed to crush her.

The tank was upon her. She rolled in the dirt, feeling her weapons in their scabbards scrape against her flesh. Her cape snagged under the tank’s treads. It dragged her for a few agonizing metres before the button at her neck gave way, leaving her gasping, her side scraped raw. Janisette was turning for another pass. The baby in Tan-Tan pounded to get out. *When*

you take one, you must give back two. She had two lives to save; hers and the pickney's. She struggled to her feet, belly pushing out big for all to see.

Someone screamed, "Nanny save us, she making baby!" The tank was bearing down on her again, its headlights full on her. Nothing to do. She stroked her belly, waited. The headlights blinded her.

The tank's brakes screeched. Janisette stopped centimetres from Tan-Tan's navel. Tan-Tan concentrated on sucking in air sweet as life could sometimes be. Her side burned. Her lower back pulsed with pain. She waited, calm as a queen.

Janisette opened the hatch to the tank, stuck her upper body outside. "Is who pickney that filling up your belly, murderess?"

Whose? She'd carried the monster all this way. The damned pickney was hers. Tan-Tan took another

breath, rubbed her belly again. "Is love that get the Robber Queen born," someone said softly out of her mouth, "love so sweet it hot." Janisette frowned. The crowd pulled in closer to hear. Someone in Tan-Tan's body took a breath, filled Tan-Tan's lungs with singing air, spoke in her voice:
Her beauteous mother,

Was another,

Not this Janisette with she fury-wet lips and she vengeance.

Tan-Tan Mamee Ione, the lovely; Tan-Tan woulda do anything to please she, But she wasn't easy.

Her pappy,

Was never happy with all he had, oui?

He kill a man on Toussaint, leave he family to wail, Then he grab his little girl and flee through plenty dimension veil And bring her here, to this bitter backawall nowhere.

People, she was seven.

Them say the Robber Queen climb the everliving tree.

I tell you, that little girl was me.

“What the rass?” cried someone in the crowd. “Is what kind of paipse
robber talk this is any at all?”

Look, best make we get on with we jump-up, oui?”

Cho, the populace and them trying to get rowdy. How dare the bold-face
man not believe her story?

Regally she pulled her machète, brandished it at the heckler. She was the
Brigand à Miduit; they were *going* to hear her! She roared:

*Is me, I tell you! Tan-Tan the Robber Queen! The one and the same, She
warm the poor with candle flame*

And spirit the lame from harm.

“Oho!” the heckler said. “I know you now. You is Charlie crazy girlfriend.
Doux-doux darling, you might be name Tan-Tan, but that don’t make you a
legend.”

To rass it didn’t.

You nah believe is majesty you talking to?

Me won’t blame that on you;

From your face it plain you

Ignorant. What for do?

Somebody sniggered. “A-true, Dambudzo, you know sun don’t always
shine as bright for you as for the rest of we.” People laughed. “Lewwe hear
she story little bit.” Dambudzo frowned. Janisette revved the engine of the

death car. Her Majesty the Midnight Thief stepped prudently back a step or two.

Wait! Me ain't done relate

to you the full monstrosity of this man, Tan-Tan pappy.

She ain't come here by choice,

He never give she any voice

in she fate.

He use he wiles to trick she, a seven-year-old pickney, Into exile, oui?

Now even her supporter had lost interest. “Cho man, we ain’t business! Everybody life hard here. You coulda come up with a nicer speech than that, girl. Come Selector: start up the music again.”

“No, answer me, bitch,” yelled Janisette, climbing out onto the running board of the vehicle. She leaned and spat the words into the face of this body the Queen was wearing: “A who-for pickney that a big-up your belly?”

Oh, and fury made the Brigand Queen flare:

Like you ain't know, steplady?

Is she father who fuck she.

The restless crowd went still. Even from where she was, the Queen could see shock at her crudeness on some of the revellers’ faces. This was too nasty to be a Carnival mako. She didn’t care.

Yes, he inject Tan-Tan with he child, She sister or brother.

And you one

Come to accuse she? Of what then, nuh?

Tears started from Janisette's eyes. "I accuse you of looseness," she said. "Of sluttiness. Is you tempt Antonio with your leggo-beast ways."

Oh, Mama Nanny, the woman was lies incarnate, and right in the face of royalty!

Is that you believe, Antonio wife?

Is she tempt he?

Then why for her birthday you give her one knife?

The Midnight Robber pulled Tan-Tan's blade from its sheath, turned it so that it winked in the light. She held knife and cutlass at the ready, daring Janisette to rush her.

Someone moved forward from out of the crowd. Short legs, knobby knees, a head too big for its body.

"You recognise that, Janisette? Why you give your stepdaughter a blade, if not to protect herself from her own daddy?"

The Robber Queen's heart danced in her breast to hear Tan-Tan's friend speak up for her. But this story had to sing as her own soul, oui? Knife still in hand, she held up her arm to shush Melonhead.

People, oonuh must understand. The Robber Queen father was a slick, sick man.

The first time she did making baby for he, she was fourteen.

He uses to beat she too, and

this Janisette, who he woo at first with sweet words, Then give she the back of he hand.

Janisette put a trembling hand to her face, where Aislin's stitches traced a scar from cheekbone to chin.

Tan-Tan couldn't take it. When she turn sixteen, she and allyou tailor make a plan To leave and come to Sweet Pone,

To love each other on their own,

Away from Antonio.

Janisette pushed out her bottom lip. The look she flashed Melonhead was pained, unreadable.

Could the Robber tell the rest? Rough with emotion, her cracked voice came out in two registers simultaneously. Tan-Tan the Robber Queen, the good and the bad, regarded Janisette with a regal gaze and spoke:

That plan for love never come to transaction.

When Antonio find out, he rape she, beat she, nearly kill she.

Lying under he pounding body she see the knife.

And for she life she grab it and perform an execution.

She kill she daddy dead. The guilt come down 'pon she head, The Robber Queen get born that day, out of excruciation.

Hanging on her every word the crowd was frozen, most in attitudes of horror, but a few just looked wary, their faces clearly saying *what if them catch me?* She couldn't cipher that there one, though. Brer Mongoose does look watchful, seen, but Brer Fowl does do so too.

Janisette was shaking with tears, with fury. She made to climb back into the cab of the tank.

“I defend myself,” said the Robber Queen, dropping out of the free rhyme and back into herself. “For the first time, I defend myself, Janisette.”

Her stepmother turned at the sound of her name, one foot suspended in the air.

Tan-Tan said, “Is you give me the knife to do it with. Don’t tell me you never used to hear what Antonio was doing to me. Is you see my trial and never have courage to speak up. So why you hunting me now, woman, when I only do what you give me tools to do?”

Then Tan-Tan knew her body to be hers again, felt her own mouth stretching, stretching open in amazement at the words that had come out of it. Is she, speaking truth; is truth! “*Sans humanité!*” she spat at Janisette —“no mercy!”—the traditional final phrase of the calypsonian who’d won the battle of wits and words. Tan-Tan gasped, put a hand up to her magical mouth.

Her song had echoed out over the square. All were there to hear her sing the story true. She’d said them, spoke the words. Admitted to the murder. Let the people-them witness. She dropped her eyes to the ground, waited for the sound of Janisette’s machine springing. *Nanny, strike me dead now.*

But nothing happened.

She looked up.

The sorrow and love on Melonhead’s face was like healing balm. He nodded at her, a grim smile on his face. Janisette was standing on the running board, arms limp at her sides, a woman listening to her own condemnation. Her face had crumpled like a passion fruit that get suck dry.

The crowd erupted in cheers. Carnival pounds and pennies rained on Tan-Tan’s head. She re-sheathed her blades. Stood in the rain of money, just being Tan-Tan, sometimes good, sometimes bad, mostly just getting by like everybody else. She felt the Robber Queen relaxing into a grateful slumber. Daddy was dead, her baby was alive. Now was time to put away guilt.

Melonhead came and held on to her, his eyes glistening. He was holding the guns she’d dropped. “You all right?”

“Yes,” she said, meaning it.

Janisette clambered down from the tank, heavily and awkwardly. Her face was a mask of grief. She approached Tan-Tan, threw the handcuff key at her, spat on the ground at her feet. “You give me bitter gall to eat,” she said. “I hope sorrow consume you like it consuming me.”

“Sorrow was my father, my mother. I know sorrow good.”

The band was back on the stage again, taking up their instruments. The crowd flowed back into the square. People looked at Tan-Tan uncertainly. Some smiled. Many scowled. Somebody asked a friend,

“So is Masque that was, or real?”

Melonhead picked up the key, used it to free Tan-Tan’s wrist.

A man approached Tan-Tan with her sack. “Lady, good kaiso that. I done pick up all your change I could find and put in it.”

Melonhead took it and thanked him. “Come home with me, Tan-Tan.” The music started again. As they left the square, Tan-Tan heard the thrum of the tank starting up, turned to see it moving despondently through the crowd, going away.

They were almost at Melonhead’s door when a sudden pain wrung out her insides. She gasped, took a deep breath. “Melonhead, I have to go home.”

“What home? Where?”

“I have to go back in the bush to Abitefa.”

“You mad or what? You turn bassourdie? You need to lie down and rest.”

“I will lie down when I reach back in the bush. I have to go right now.” Holding her belly protectively, she turned on her heel and started walking, with or without him. “Soon,” she whispered to her tummy. “I take one life, and I just save two.”

• • •

Oh, sweetness; this is the hardest part, the last part of labour. I right here with you, don't fret. I know it feel like your mamee trying to crush you dead, but is only she body pushing you out into the world. No, she can't hear you yet, only I could hear you. Yes, that was a big one. Rest little bit; another one coming.

Is really your mamee we should be talking to, me and the Grande 'Nansi Web. When Granny Nanny realise how Antonio kidnap Tan-Tan, she hunt he through the dimension veils, with me riding she back like Dry Bone. Only a quantum computer coulda trace she through infinite dimensions like that, only Granny Nanny and me, a house eshu. And only because Tan-Tan's earbug never dead yet. A fearsome journey, little one; nearly as fearsome as the one you on now. Ai, ai; this push strong! I know, doux-doux. Try not to frighten. See? It stop now. Only a few more.

We try to contact your mamee when we find she nine years ago, but the nanomites growing she earbug did calibrate wrong for Nanny to talk to them across dimensions. Eight years it take Granny Nanny to figure it out, and then was too late. Tan-Tan reach maturity, the earbug

harden, and Nanny couldn't talk to she again. Another contraction sweetheart, hold on.

Antonio was a sick, needy man, but in he own way, is he provide the method for we to contact Tan-Tan. By the time she get pregnant with you, Nanny had figure out the calibration. She instruct the nanomites in your mamee blood to migrate into your growing tissue, to alter you as you grow so all of you could *feel* nannysong at this calibration. You could hear me because your whole body is one living connection with the Grande Anansi Nanotech Interface. Your little bodystring will sing to Nanny tune, doux-doux. You will be a weave in she web. Flesh people talk say how earbugs give them a sixth sense, but really is only a crutch, oui? Not a fully functional perception. You now; you really have that extra limb.

Whoops! It coming, it coming! That feeling is your head crowning, sweetheart—that is air on your skin of your scalp. Welcome into one of

the worlds, pickney!

• • •

Tan-Tan lay back, bassourdie with fatigue, and looked at the little bit of person in her arms. His eyes wavered over her body, fought for focus when they came to her face. For a second he stared right at her.

He had Antonio's face, but they were her features too, *hers*. Her son was not a monster. He yawned crookedly and worked his mouth. Squeaky sounds came out.

"He singing," laughed Melonhead. He touched the baby's cheek.

"No," Tan-Tan replied. "I think is only gas."

Abitefa thrust her beak into the nest of blankets that Melonhead had brought, sniffed the baby's skin in greeting.

"What you going to name he?" Melonhead asked. He stroked some of the tiny curls of the baby's hair.

"Tubman." Tan-Tan surprised herself, coming out with it so quickly. She hadn't been thinking of what to call him. She smiled up at Melonhead.

• • •

Tubman: the human bridge from slavery to freedom. She give you a good name, doux-doux. A seer woman might have name you that. Sleep, Tubman.

Call that George, the story done.

Jack Mandora, me nah choose none!

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