Me Nuh Choose None

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Chirp of tree frogs floating sonorous, each piercing chirrup rising on the wane of the last. Eyes shut, hands pressed against the windowpane to feel the cool damp night. Right here – the banana trees, the orange trees, the pumpkin patch that just won’t bear. Over there – the neighbour’s house, the football field, the hill leading to Spanish Town rising up in a smooth green curve. A dog barks; a door opens; a car engine sputters, then stops. Up here – the clothesline, the water pump, the pipe to the underground well that sometimes doubles as a slide. Behind there – the rosebushes, the old satellite dish, the gaping pit from that house that caught fire, the earth still dark and red like a crusted wound. Fingers spread, eyes open now – a lizard crawls across the glass, its white belly swelling red, then nothing, nothing, thick black nothing. A car starts and sirens wail and the frogs keep chirping, chirping. Is Anancy mek it. That’s what the woman said, the woman on TV with the big big smile and long brown dress and red plaid scarf tied round her head like a crown. Anancy trick poor Bredda Toad to jump ina wah pot o’ bwilin’ wata and eva since, woi! – long high whine curving up, ending shrill, like a scream. And the trees and the earth and the pigs’ snout and the reason why cows go ‘moo’ – is Anancy mek it, so she seh.

‘Why are you up?’
Orange light spills into my room, roams across the floor from the lamp in Daddy’s hand. The surge protector whines in high-pitched beepbeep beepbeeps from down the hall, signalling something’s changed, something’s gone all wrong.

‘We know, we know,’ says my sister as she walks down the hall towards the whiny beeps.

Daddy lifts the lamp and holds the flame next to his face. ‘Why are you awake?’ he says again.

Sitting down, I rub my fingers against my sheets. ‘The power’s out.’
He laughs, lowers the lamp. ‘You’re too old to be afraid of the dark.’

‘I’m not afraid!’ I exclaim as I jump up, my big toe catching on the hem of my nightie.

The surge protector beeps again, shuts off. ‘Finally,’ my sister Tamika says.

‘I’m not,’ I mutter, fingering the threads torn loose from my hem.
Tamika yawns as she walks past, returns to her room. Daddy walks over, still in his work shirt, and gives me a hug. Nose pressed against his collar, I inhale – oily sweetness of fried plantain with the faint stench of rotten eggs.

‘Go back to bed,’ Daddy says. He lifts me up, lays me down. The frogs keep chirping and that dog keeps barking and the orange light recedes to nothing as Daddy pulls the door shut.

Sunlight flits in and out through the lumpy grey clouds as the frogs chirp quieter, quieter, sinking into the early morning hush. My alarm clock goes off.

Smoothing the pleats and fixing the sleeves, I stare at my uniform in the bathroom mirror – white dress shirt beneath boxy tunic and straight-line skirt; awkward, rigid, not yet mine. First day of first form.

‘Come eat!’ Daddy yells. Grabbing my bag, I run down the hall to the kitchen. Around the handles of the fridge, Daddy’s belt loops in and out, the frayed leather holding the doors tight. On the table sits hard-dough bread and guava jelly, cereal and box milk. Tamika looks at the table and groans.

‘Hurry up,’ Daddy says, perching my brother on his hip as he fills the kettle. Tamika stares at the blue and white label on the milk, her nose wrinkled in disgust. We sit down.

‘I hate this milk,’ Tamika says. Daddy turns on the stove, lights a match. ‘Akúa,’ he says, gesturing to something on the table, ‘for you.’ He touches the match to the burner; the flame flares red then settles into a calm and even blue.

I pick up the long white box on the table, smelling the familiar stench of rotten eggs as I stare at the green logo on top. ‘It smells like your workplace.’

‘Sulphur,’ Daddy says, sitting down, ‘you’re smelling sulphur.’ He balances Bryson against his chest then cuts himself a piece of bread.

Inside the box are four pens, the kind you have to twist to expose the nub. Daddy gets up. ‘For your first day,’ he says. He goes to the stove and turns the fire up. ‘You can’t use pencils anymore,’ says Tamika as she loops her prefect’s tie into a loose knot. ‘Just pens.’

I take one out and draw the strange new weight across the white box. At first, nothing, just the bevelled scratch of something rough against paper, then – long black line, thick, smooth, dark as night. Daddy loops the Tetley tag around the handle of his mug. Bryson hiccups then stretches his little hands toward the bread.

‘I hate this milk,’ Tamika says. Bryson stares at the bread, slaps his hands on the table. Daddy picks up the sugar and puts two scoopfuls in his mug. I look at him. ‘Daddy?’

‘It doesn’t even taste like milk,’ Tamika says.
I tug the cuff of his rolled-up sleeve. ‘Daddy?’
Bryson claws at the table cloth, makes short wailing sounds.
‘Seriously,’ Tamika says, ‘what is this stuff?’
‘Lawd man, jus’ eat yuh food nuh!’ Daddy says.
Tamika glares at him.
Daddy looks at me. ‘Yes?’
‘Is Anancy the same spider who climbed up the water spout?’
He smiles. ‘What?’
‘That lady, on TV. Miss L – Miss Lea?’
‘Miss Lou,’ Daddy says.
‘She said that Anancy – he’s everyone and everything. That’s what she said, everyone and everything. So,’ I break a slice of bread in half, ‘so is he Itsy Bitsy too?’
‘Mi blouse-an’-skirt!’ Tamika exclaims, ‘you’re in high school now.’
‘Stop,’ Daddy says.
‘If you go into class talking like that, you’re going to get detention,’ Tamika continues.
‘Tamika!’ Daddy yells.
‘But that’s what she said!’ I yell, chest heaving. ‘The lady on TV, she said so.’
Tamika looks at me, the tongue of her tie flopped over her shoulder, and laughs.
‘Enough!’ Daddy yells.
Bryson flinches, begins to cry. Daddy stands up and holds Bryson against his chest. ‘Eat,’ he orders as he bounces Bryson up and down.
With my hands balled tight, I lean back in my chair. From down the hall comes the long high screech of the surge protector screaming to life. Power’s back.
Tamika looks at the fridge. ‘Can I–’
‘No.’ Daddy goes to the stove and turns the burner off.
‘But I hate this milk!’
Outside, the lumpy grey clouds give way to quiet drizzle as rain falls past the open window in streaks, like silver webs glinting.

He is everyone and everything, she said – that lady with the big big smile and gesturing hands like performing in a pantomime. And that laugh, that booming laugh that came rolling forth with every ha ha ha. She’d smile at the screen with her arms spread wide and tell how crab got his shell and where lizard got his croak and why night-owl isn’t called Pattoo. Is Anancy mek it! she would say, then laugh and gesture and laugh till the speakers crackled with static, as though she’d gone too far, as though they’d had enough. I’d watch the show again, and again, and every time she would laugh, and the audience would laugh, and I’d sit there, watching them, left out of the sweet sweet joke.

Someone coughs, brushes past. Blinking, I look about then inhale, smelling hair oil and clothes starch in the stuffy morning heat. Grey light slants in through the shutters, colours the auditorium in a sleepy haze as everyone stands in boxy tunics and white socks with light brown
shoes. The headmistress finishes the prayer then snaps her bible shut. End of morning devotion. Everyone joins together, miming as one – The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

After the psalm, the teachers lead the way to the exits, their shoes clacking against the linoleum tile. Pinching and laughing, everyone follows behind in a clump of jostling brown. Someone snickers, points at a girl with pink bubbles in her hair. Her skirt’s all bunched up in her bloomers, showing a birthmark jiggling on her thigh. Laughing, I lean forward to touch her arm.

‘Eternal Father, bless our Land–’

Clackclack the shoes stop. Colliding against the girl in front, I halt behind the teachers as they look about.

‘Guard us with Thy mighty hand–’

Everyone looks left, right – there. Near the front, an older teacher stands with her back to us, her heavy frame rendered gloomy by the slanted grey light. With her fist pressed against her palm in the small of her back, she sways and sways. ‘Keep us free from evil powers–’

I glance at the older teacher, at her calloused fingers curled in tight, then at the headmistress as she grips the podium, her thin hands brown and smooth.

‘Be our light through countless hours,’ the teacher sings, her voice crackling in falsetto.

‘To our leaders–’

Heads turn left and right as everyone looks at the headmistress then the teacher then the headmistress as she peers at the teacher then at us then takes two steps towards the edge of the stage.

‘Lawd Jesus!’ someone close to me yells. That girl, with the bloomers – she realized. I bite my lip to keep from laughing. The headmistress looks at us, at all the smothered smiles, then steps back.

‘Great Defender–,’ the older teacher sings as she sways.

The headmistress looks at the teacher, clears her throat. ‘Grant true wisdom from above,’ the headmistress joins in then glares at the other teachers and upper form students.

‘Justice, Truth–’, they chime in then turn to us, signalling to follow along. Near the doors I glimpse Tamika, her tie still flopped over her shoulder. She catches my gaze, narrows her eyes; you’re in high school now.

‘Be ours forever,’ I mumble. ‘Jamaica land we love.’

‘Jamaica,’ everyone sings, lingering on the ‘a’ as our voices fade into the pause–‘Bffffffff!’

A few people laugh. Someone’s trying to copy the bass drum.

‘Jamaica!’ we sing.

‘Bffffffff!’ Louder this time, more people, some even raising their fists and bringing them down like crashing against the drum. I crack a smile, unable to hold it in.

The older teacher turns and faces us.

‘Jamaica, land we love!’ we sing with our fists swinging, feeling so giddy like savouring something stolen. The teacher clasps her hands by her stomach, palm over fist.

‘Enough!’ the headmistress bellows.
The hall falls quiet, choked with silence. The teacher looks at the headmistress then pushes her glasses up her nose. The headmistress clutches her bible, straightens her back. The teacher walks towards us.

‘Come,’ she says, ‘come, come.’ She opens one of the doors.

Up the stairs, single file, brown-shoed feet plodding back to class. In the room sit twenty-four desks in tidy rows, their tops etched and sinkholes for inkpots now made waste bins for forbidden gum. The teacher calls roll. I look up, lean back. The teacher – that teacher, her calloused hands curled in tight.

‘My name,’ the teacher says, ‘is Mrs. Trowers.’ She goes to a box. The hem of her dress rides up her dark and swollen calves as she bends forward. ‘I am your form teacher.’ She straightens up, rests the books in her hands against her sagging stomach. ‘Trowers,’ she says, peering at us over her glasses. ‘Like flowers. Trowers.’

I sink my teeth into my lip; don’t laugh.

‘What’s the rule?’ she says as she hands the books down the rows.

Without prompting, without question, ‘Do not write in the books.’

_Algebra I. Introduction to Biology. Shakespeare’s Tragedies._ Books with smiling white faces beneath layers of laminate, passed down through the years, kept pristine. What’s the rule?

_Don’t ever write in the books._

Next book comes down the row: thin, worn, picture of pixelated chains on the cover set against inverting stripes of red and black. Next book: picture of pixelated chains set against, set against inverting stripes of, of grey and – what?

‘Miss? Excuse me, Miss?’

Mrs. Trowers looks at me. ‘What is it?’

‘I,’ I pick the books up, ‘I think there’s been some mistake.’ I hold them up, spine to spine, the pixelated chains joining as one. ‘I’ve been given the same book twice.’

Two desks over, someone laughs.

‘Child,’ Mrs. Trowers says, ‘can you read?’

Meekly, ‘Of course.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, Miss. Of course, Miss.’

‘Then why yuh aksin’ me such a stupid question?’

I look at the books: _A Pre-Emancipation History of the West Indies. A Post Emancipation History of the West Indies._ Pre/Post, but otherwise–

Mrs. Trowers pushes her glasses up her broad nose and makes that sound, that piercing squelch of air sucked through dead-set teeth – that sound that says, _How silly of you, how stupid. Have you no sense?_ Head bent, I put the books away.

Third block, after lunch, remnants of patty and coco bread stuck to the sides of my teeth. Sitting with my ankles crossed, I listen to the breathy pahs of people whispering and the
boomboomboom of rain beating down, so loud, so close, as though the roof’s paper thin. Mrs. Trowers raps the ruler against her desk. Heads snapping forward, the whispers stop.

‘Take out your history books,’ she says.

On my desk, Pre/Post side by side.

‘Chapter one,’ Mrs. Trowers says, nodding at the girl in the front left seat.

The girl begins, ‘The first people to venture into the New World did so at least ten thousand years ago. Some claim it was more than twenty thousand years . . .’

Mrs. Trowers gets up and goes to the board. ‘First inhabitants arrived ~ 20,000 years ago,’ she writes, the side of her palm smudging her left-handed cursive. Notebooks rustle open, followed by the soft pop of pens being uncapped.

Heavy in my hand, draws so thick and smooth, ‘First inhabitants–’

Next paragraph, next girl, ‘Jamaica seems to have been one of the more settled islands in the Antilles. Remains left by the aborigines show that they lived . . .’ Mrs. Trowers turns around, writes, ‘Jamaica most developed of Greater Antilles.’ Paper flipping; pens scratching. Mrs. Trowers faces us.

Next paragraph, me, ‘Although Christopher Columbus was probably not the first European to reach the New World, the discovery of the West Indies is attributable to him.’ Mrs. Trowers links her hands behind her back, her lips drooping into a frown.

Continuing, ‘Altogether Columbus made four voyages to the West Indies with the assistance of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain.’ ‘King Ferdinand,’ Mrs. Trowers writes, ‘Queen Isabella,’ putting a period after the ‘a’ with a decisive smack. She begins to pace.

Continuing, ‘On his second voyage, Columbus discovered Jamaica and several other small islands. The history of the West Indies dates from the time of their discovery by Columbus meaning that–’ Then she makes that sound, that sucking of air against teeth, her broad nose flared. I have sense. I have sense. That’s what the book says!

Mrs. Trowers paces down the aisle, stands next to my desk. ‘Class,’ she says.

That’s what it says. I have sense.

‘Everyone–’

‘I have sense!’

Mrs. Trowers turns to me, narrows her eyes. Chairs squeaking, people turn and stare. She walks to the front of the room, to the ruler sitting on the edge of her desk. A few people giggle as heads turn from Mrs. Trowers to the ruler to me.

‘Repeat after me, class,’ Mrs. Trowers says, ‘Christopher Columbus did not discover Jamaica.’

The room falls silent save the rain beating down, down, silver webs streaming.

‘Class!’ Mrs. Trowers bellows.

Jumbled, ‘Christopher Columbus . . . did not . . . but–?’

‘Cross it out,’ she says, ‘scratch it out!’

Pens drawn, heads turn left and right. Scattered, mumbled, ‘Christopher Columbus . . . did not . . . discover Jamaica.’ Pen to paper, we’re in high school now, pen to paper – thick,
smooth, colouring it in. On his second voyage, he discovered Jamai--. Uniform soft from the
day’s sweat, I swing my legs and cross my ankles. On his second voyage, he discovered Ja--.
‘Repeat after me.’ All of us, together, ‘Christopher Columbus did not discover Jamaica,’ pens
digging deeper and deeper into the page. On his second voyage, he discove---. Someone laughs,
giddy, like ringing the neighbour’s doorbell on a dare and getting away with it. On his second
voyage, he disc----. It spreads, laughter rolling across the room, loud and delicious. On his
second voyage, he-----.

‘Repeat after me.’ Watching her, sound of the rain filling my ears, so loud Christopher
Columbus did not discover Jamaica so close boomboomboom, heavy-set pen against pristine
page, thick smooth line again and again. On his second voyage------black, black, dark as night. In
my ears rain beating I get it. On his second voyage. On his second voyage? Ha ha ha! On his
second voyage nothing ha ha ha! Laughing and laughing, all of us sharing in the sweet sweet
joke.