



# An Ordinary Magic

Jason Thibeault

“An Ordinary Magic”

By Jason Thibeault

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## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wife, Jessica, and my kids, Quinn, Liam, Romy, and Sidonie, who's love and support has always been my ordinary magic.



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## THE BEGINNING

The rusty gun shook in his hand. Sweat made the worn leather handle, wrapped and re-wrapped over the years, hard to grip. So Panon squeezed harder, desperately hard. The bokor Bourné was in his sights, right at the end of the barrel. The man that caused every ounce of pain.

The man who wanted to be more than a man.

The darkness was so dense, so oppressive, it screamed at Panon that his target no longer stood in front of him. Panon wished he paid more attention to the bokor's house when he went there before, when he had struck the deal that started all of this and brought everything to this moment.

Still, he didn't squeeze the trigger.

"You don't have the balls old man," Bourné said.

Panon was sure Bourné sneered when he said it. Even though he couldn't see him, Bourné's visage was etched in Panon's mind. He squeezed the gun even harder.

Pull the trigger! A voice screamed in his head. Do it! Do it now!

Only he couldn't.

No matter how hard he wanted to, he couldn't will his finger to squeeze off the round.

Panon's great revelation, reached only hours before, should have been enough to pull the trigger again and again. But his new found understand was all too neat. Too neat and tidy for even a simple houngan like Panon to swallow without wondering.

“Face it, your time is up. Your time has been up forever. It's my turn now. I'm going to own this town. This island.”

Panon could hear his own heart pounding in his chest. He could hear Bougné's spittle hit the floor.

“And more.”

Panon wiped the sweat from his eyes with the back of his other arm. The darkness, like the storm had been, was dangerous. It enticed and frightened at the same time seemingly growing deeper with each passing second. Panon wondered how close the fire was outside, how close the Shanty-Goers had brought the flames to Bougné's door.

It would be an easy solution. Just let the flames take us.

He realized that he no longer knew in what direction he even faced.

And for the first time in his life, that was okay.

He gripped the pistol tighter, its ability to take life, its ability to end the evil schemes of the bokor that took his son, its ordinary magic the only thing keeping him centered on the task at hand.

“Pull the trigger old man. You know what will happen if you do. You know what Dela will do.”

Panon's heart pounded even more. It filled his ears with drums and rattles and singing.

But his voice escaped him. Ever since Bougné kicked his teeth in.

He had every reason to shoot the man.

So why am I waiting?

Without Dela, without his lost rattle, without his voice that brought his magic to life, this was the only way to stop the bokor's plans.

Panon wondered if Jaime still waited on the porch steps. He wondered which Jaime was in control, if his own son would try and kill him afterwards or embrace him as his savior.

Only one way to find out.

A huge tree, consumed by the fire, snapped in the distance, its trunk exploding; it sounded like a gunshot.

*Whoa! Hold on there. Stop making things up. We need to start this story the right way and there's a lot to tell. That's why I'm here. I'm telling this story because it needs to be told. Not just read. No, no, words won't do it justice. You have to feel this story, deep in your bones where your magic lives. And Jaime won't tell it. Not yet at least.*

*The story of the most ordinary magic of all, the kind that doesn't need a ritual or a sacrifice or a spell.*

*So I will tell it. Like I said already (are you paying attention?), this story needs to be told. And with a little bit of magic, just a pinch, I can get this man, this author as you call him, to write it down for me. To be my lips.*

*Don't roll your eyes. I would teach you a thing or two about life. And if you read this story, you'll get more than that—you'll see once and for all that magic is around us all the time no matter how much you run from it.*

*Are you ready? You better be.*

*I can feel the dance calling to me, my rattle shaking. It's time.*

*This is the story of Jaime, Panon, their little town and the big things that change their life, the big thing that can change your life.*

*Okay, here we go...*

*Dela Luamba*

*Spirit (extraordinaire)*

*P.S. I made him write that. Extraordinaire. Sounds good, no?*

CHAPTER 1

La Croix appeared like the island towns in travel brochures, an authentic fishing village—a collection of shops and buildings, architectural failures, a sickly combination of plaster, clay, wood, and brick somehow exuding a comfortable familiarity. Slathered with coats of peeling paint, colors vied for attention, blues on top of reds on top of greens, giving everything an overwhelming sense of antiquity, making it seem as if the entire town had been there since time began. Although seventy-five or so people enjoyed a secluded intimacy most of the year, everything changed during the summer when the tourists flooded through. Wave after wave of them pouring out of rickety old school buses painted green and white and day-glow orange, their fingers poised above camera buttons, money

dangling from their pockets like heavy flower petals. Dressed in random patterns and colors, shorts too short or too long, socks in sandals, sun screened noses, they were a stark contrast to the otherwise ideal life around them.

Still, no matter how many trinkets they bought or pictures they took, they could never quite capture the underlying spirit of the place because the town was comprised of so much more than the buildings and the houses. Most of the residents liked to believe the surrounding area—the beach, just a short walk from main street, the surrounding jungle which had to be cut back each year lest the plants swallow their shops and houses—were as much a part of the town as the shops, restaurants, and houses. And, of course, its magic—friend and foe to those who lived there, invisible to its visitors...utterly hidden from smartphones and camera flashes.

Some might say that La Croix had a bit of everything—coastline trees that swayed in the gentle ocean breeze; warm, pale blue water that climbed up the sand like curious fingers; monkeys that scampered about jungle branches; and hammocks, strung between jungle trunks which creaked lovingly in the seconds between sunlight and darkness.

Carved from the jungle and sprawled upon the coast, their town enjoyed the best of both worlds.

Only not this year.

Few could enjoy the authenticity when a freak, summer storm hovered off the coast, squeezing the air with an embrace of humidity and a tension which more than one tourist remarked you could feel right when you stepped off the bus.





“Stupid tourists,” Pierre said as he slammed his hand down on the old wooden table. The chess pieces all rocked but none fell. “Did you hear that one? No, the fat one. In the green shorts. Paradise he called it.”

Perhaps the tourists saw it as a paradise, but the residents knew differently. To them, the imperfections were not only visible, they were grossly apparent—the roads needed to be fixed, the docks should be rebuilt, the shops on the main street sorely needed a repainting, and most of all the East Side.

“Yeah, hard to call it paradise,” Big Pa said with a half smile. “The water is so much colder this year. Anyone else notice that?”

Big Pa, beer bottle in hand, rocked back in his chair until the back rested against the peeling blue stucco of Françoise’s bar.

“You got something to add, Pa?” Pierre asked. He leaned in a little closer, eager for what the sheriff had to say. The others did the same.

“Nah. Just everything is changing. Water. East Side. Government.”

He peered at them, hard with knowing.

“Even that tourist woman,” he added. “Fatter.”

They all chuckled but didn’t return to the chess game instead starting at the bus as people slowly began to board.

Big Pa wondered if they were all thinking what he was thinking—will the bus head back the way it had come, back to the capitol, or continue down the road towards the East Side?

The other La Croix.

No, Big Pa thought as he clenched his fists angrily. There is only one La Croix.

The thought of the split, three years ago, made him angry and sad at the same time, made his heart ache. He couldn't count how many times he'd spoken with Alfonso, tried to convince the fifty or so who'd left that night to come back, to reunite the town.

Only his pleas always fell on deaf ears.

Which made him even angrier.

Not only because a reunion didn't happen but also because he assumed the fault rested on his shoulders.

Big Pa looked at his watch as the last tourist climbed aboard and the bus rattled to life. Lurching, the rickety old vehicle began to slowly meander back to the capitol.

Part of him breathed a sigh of relief.

The less busses to the East Side, the better my argument might start to sound.

The other part of him, though, was worried.

2:30.

An hour before yesterday and two before the week before and no dust signaling more busses on the way. It's getting worse.

To the sheriff and many others, it was as if their little town waited for something to happen. An anxiety hung over everything. An apprehension. Big Pa wondered if the anticipation of something caused the decline in tourist traffic, if visitors picked different island getaways, different quaint seaside villages at which to spend their money, all because of an impending summer storm.

Big Pa watched Pierre talk Françoise's ear off—"it was a sign," Pierre said; the cold water, the declining tourists. It was all an omen.

Big Pa took another pull on his beer and half-smiled again because he knew Pierre and all hounsis were like that. They flashed toothless smiles and stroked thin white beards as they pronounced the reason for all their maladies—angry spirits.

All except Panon. Those hounsis look to him for their marching orders.

"It's a sign, I tell you," Pierre said as he played with the end of his snowy white beard. "The spirits are angry. We need a ritual. A dance. Panon should intervene before it's too late."

Françoise, though, shook his head.

"Nah, it's not spirits. The government is under a lot of stress. I heard some other countries labeled us a 'dangerous place to visit' again. Once everything is sorted out, it will go back to normal. You'll see."

He moved his rook.

Check.

Pierre cackled.

"Back to normal you say? Ha, you'll see. Angry spirits."

He moved his bishop to intercept the rook.

None of La Croix's younger generation like Françoise, who had inherited his bar from his parents, believed omens or angry spirits caused their problems. No, they said, just a sign of the times—a distressed economy, a murderous government, bandits on the roads. Despite these arguments muttered at nights over beers and from porch chairs, everyone agreed, even if they didn't say they did, that all those outside problems didn't really much matter to their town. They were at the rim, the farthest village from the capitol. Some even wondered if the

government remembered they were there at all. They had suffered through hard times before, weathered the sting of less tourist dollars as their government changed again, as UN warnings flashed across TV screens; and each time the little village had persevered because it was hard to imagine anything changing when the sun shone every morning and the temperature was perfect.

Big Pa let out a sigh, trying to find a comfortable position as everyone went about their business—fishing, or weaving, or packing up their odd magical trinkets they tried to sell to the last batch of worldly stragglers. But the rumors in the capitol of an impending government coup had reached their little town. As the town's sole law enforcement, its *laviil ofisyé polis*, he needed to know.

He needed to know what men like Pierre and Françoise thought, said, believed so that he could inform Panon who could address such issues in his weekly sermons.

So like now, he shut his mouth and opened his ears.

Françoise and Pierre continued their chess game even as the other shops closed. Back and forth. Pawn for rook. Knight for queen. The whole scene was almost sublime with the waves crashing in the distance and leaves rustling in the soft breeze. Big Pa glanced down towards the coast and harrumphed.

The storm hovered right off the shore. Still and waiting to pounce—a roiling mass of black clouds stretching from water to Heaven punctuated by an occasional, distant clap of thunder and fork of lightning. Big Pa couldn't see the churning water, but he knew there was a tumultuous sea right underneath those clouds.

With a storm like that waiting to break open upon their quaint little town, the world of “what if's” and “might bes”, the

world of government rumors and angry spirits, didn't interest many in town. They were more concerned with what was in front of them right now and what the storm meant to a town built on weak lumber and old stucco.

Unlike rumors of government insurrection or temperamental spirits, the storm was practical. Ordinary. It carried a weight of something impending, something which could do real damage. Even though people dismissed the lack of tourists, the *change*, as another hiccup in the town's colorful economic history, they couldn't ignore this sign—dark, angry clouds that seemed to bubble up from the sea itself. Day after day. Week after week. June, then July. A pall of darkness over the once perfect coast.

Big Pa was certain if it wasn't for the chess game, for Francoise's bold moves frustrating his older opponent, Pierre would be pointing his finger at the clouds and saying, "August is the storm season, not July. You should have listened to me. The spirits are angry!"

When enough of the hounsis said the same thing, the handful who looked to Panon for their spiritual guidance, doubt would creep into thoughts. People would wonder, "maybe this was worse than we thought." Worldly concerns over money and possessions would begin to give way under the weight of the town's true history—magic.

A reason imbued the storm.

The spirits were angry.

Someone had spelled them.

The idea that of a magic storm seemed easy to believe—for almost an entire month, the clouds loomed, growing outward rather than moving forward, almost magically, until, filling the sky, they blocked out the once pleasant sun, turning

the comfortable summer lethargy into a tense anxiety. The humidity was oppressive.

Big Pa shifted his weight, the back of the chair scraping off a bit more of the faded blue paint as Françoise eyed him angrily, muttering something about Big Pa not having to spend his money repainting. Only the fat sheriff heard something else entirely. Lost in thought, he swore Françoise mentioned something about the storm. Big Pa knew that soon everyone would be talking about the storm openly, the innuendo, the suspicion, the spirits. Maybe a day, maybe two, before the rumors became speculation, before they began to bud and bloom into a field of wild ideas ranging from angry spirits to a secret government plot. He knew deep down, everyone would be certain there had never been a storm like this before. So long on the horizon, so patient. Getting fatter everyday.

As if something was waiting behind the angry clouds.

“Everyone but Panon.”

“What did you say about Panon?” Pierre said suddenly, twisting in his chair until he was eye to eye with the big man.

Did I say that out loud?

“Nothing, Pierre. Relax...”

The old hounsis didn’t turn around right away, though. Not until Big Pa got up, pulling his belt up, the old leather creaking, the holster and pistol smacking against his leg, did Pierre return to the game.

“Check mate!” Françoise screamed.

“Cheater!” Pierre said. “You never beat me. You must have cheated!”

Françoise, though, was already up, hopping back and forth in a strange little dance on the porch of his bar.

While La Croix watched the skies, hoping for the storm to either strike or move one, things happened elsewhere.



On that same morning a little before dawn, the first invasion force had landed on the West side of the island, about thirty miles from the capitol. The company of 1500 soldiers, led by the ousted President of three years ago, moved swiftly through the under growth, stopping only to eat and thank the jungle spirits for concealing them so well. Halfway through Pierre and Françoise's chess game, they had set up camp, at the jungle's fringes around the capitol, with another sizable army. It seemed almost impossible that they could remain there unnoticed. But the people in the capitol had stopped paying attention to the jungle long ago.

And like any small army, full of hope and courage, they had sent out scouts and set up lookouts, claimed the jungle in the name of revenge. When the reports came back of the armed men patrolling the streets and the armored cars parked alongside curbs, the invading soldiers began to get restless and perhaps even a little bit scared.

Except they couldn't go back. Everything was inevitable. The island, with its history of dictators, was a haven for revenge. Thrown out, killed, uprooted, all its leaders returned for a second chance. Be it with guns, or magic, dead or alive, they came back, demanding the right to govern and trapping the island in a turbulent paradox of past and present that pulled it further and further into a whirlpool of self-destruction; while some of the world's greatest nations stood back, some, in the name of Democracy, offered their support— money, guns, and

a fool-proof blockade, sure to weaken the resistance and ensure quick defeat.

Shortly before 1:00am, long after Pierre and Francoise had put their differences over the chess game to bed, the culmination of months of planning came to a head—the first explosion, a mortar shell, rocked the streets of the capitol.

Within minutes of the first blast, thud after thud after thud boomed across the island. It wasn't the first thud, or even the second that pulled the people of La Croix from their homes, though. Only when the explosions started to happen one after another, like a tromping giant, did most of the people walk to the main intersection to watch, with more curiosity than horror, the little flashes of light in the distance and how, slowly, the flashes merged into a single large glow, as if the world itself burned.

Hounsis, mingling in the crowd, wide-eyed with certainty reminded everyone that the capitol was the place where people went to stop believing and the spirits, perhaps even God, angry over offerings long forgotten, finally dealt out a suitable punishment.

Panon stood on his porch, well removed from the rest of the town while his son slept safely in bed.

“Judgment Day,” Pierre said to Big Pa, the two staring into the distance with the rest of the town. “Them in the capitol have brought it upon us all.”

Big Pa waved him away as he tried to steady himself. No matter how much rum he drank that night, he couldn't get Pierre's face out of his dreams, the intensity of the hounsis' gaze when Big Pa had accidentally spoken Panon's name earlier that night. He promised himself to speak with Panon.



The sheriff cringed for a second even as a bubble of vomit rose in his throat. He searched for Jaime and hoped that Panon's boy wasn't at the capitol, right in the thick of all the fighting. Just as he realized his friend's wayward son must be somewhere else, the anarchy to the North of them reached a climax—one of the five government buildings, the Ministry of Finance, fell to the street in a cloud billowing above the jungle like a giant mushroom.

## CHAPTER 2

For Panon, Dela Luamba's day couldn't have come any sooner.

A few short days after the invasion, booms and thuds still echoing in the distance, anxiety reached an all time high. Perhaps exacerbated by the heat trapped beneath the storm clouds, Panon had heard about more than one fight Big Pa broke up about whether or not the new government would be better than the last.

The celebration will calm their nerves, Panon thought.

He stood up and stared down at Dela's symbol in the dirt.

Perfect.

He put the remaining sand in the bowl and placed it with the rest of the offerings on top of the table. Fruit. Rum. Two chickens.

“This is going to be perfect,” he mumbled as he meandered to the door to enjoy the sunrise.

The light should have been beginning to break the horizon, but Panon only saw the angry clouds, a muted dawn behind the roiling black mass of thunderheads still hanging off the coast—the one glaring imperfection on what should otherwise have been a perfect day.

He hoped the weather wouldn’t sour Dela’s spirits.

Massaging his lower back, he walked back into the small church, admiring both he and his father’s handiwork. He remembered trying to help his father build the church. Wielding the small hammer, he had followed his papa around eagerly tapping against the nails that were already hammered in.

How old was I? Panon wondered. Four? Five?

Despite the freshness of the memory, he couldn’t put his finger on how old he had been.

Doesn’t matter anyway. What’s important was that I was there to help when I was needed.

Which brought him back to Jaime.

No matter which way he turned nowadays, everything seemed to come back to his son.

I didn’t act like that when I was sixteen.

Panon walked to the table and ran his fingers along the edge. The same table he’d helped his father build.

Just like the table in our kitchen.

Panon let out a sigh.

There wasn’t going to be any good coming of thinking about his problems with Jaime on such an important day. A

special celebration to Dela. A time to give thanks and, hopefully, get answers about the storm, about the government. He needed to be in his best frame of mind when summoning the town's loa. Otherwise, things might go terribly wrong. He had to demonstrate to everyone he still remained their leader, that he could control the magic, that the spirits were there when the town needed them.

Especially now.

So much is changing. What will come of the future?

A silly question, but none-the-less eating away at him.

"Panon?" Ella called.

He turned to find his wife standing at the doorway, her long black hair splayed about her shoulders. She wore the same simple, white cotton dress she'd been sleeping in.

"Are you finished yet?" She asked. He heard the sleep in her voice. "I was supposed to help you set everything up."

He half smiled.

The plan had been simple—wake up late, have breakfast as a family, come down to the church, and setup for the ceremony. Only Panon hadn't been able to sleep at all. So under the cover of darkness, he'd snuck out of bed and down to the church. Riddled with anxiety, setting up Dela's ceremony soothed him if nothing else. Despite the back-breaking work of laying down the colored sand which made up Dela's symbol, the labor took his mind off the government, off the town, and especially off Jaime.

"I'm sorry, my love. I couldn't sleep."

"I understand," she said, yawning. "Come back to bed then for a little while." She glanced around the church—a single, huge open room with rows of benches Panon had pushed out of the way to make room for dancing marred only

by a thick, wooden pole in the middle around which Panon had drawn Dela's symbol.

"It looks like you don't need my help after all."

Panon felt a momentary pang of guilt he'd done what he wanted to do instead of the plans they agreed upon.

She understands. She knows why I needed to be here.

Taking one last glance around at the ceremony he'd preside over later in the afternoon, he walked to Ella and put his hand on the small of her back, smelling her hair as he led her back towards the house.



Shrugging off the heat, grimacing through smiles, everyone came dressed for the occasion—a day to celebrate Dela Luamba. The women wore longer more bold dresses, hair in braids or under colorful gossamer wraps, and the men wore their best linen pants and long sleeved shirts. The best clothes for the best time of the year.

"You wait," Jean said as he fingered the gold ring on his pinky. "The storm's going to break soon. And when it does, the spirits will unleash the anger against those Shanty-Goers..."

The shanty town sprung up almost overnight outside La Croix. No one knew where they came from or why they were there but Jean's vehemence towards them grew daily. He'd speculate and postulate to anyone who would listen. As one of the town's leading business men, many did. Big Pa heatedly expressed to Panon his concerns about Jean whipping the town into a frenzy over the Shanty-Goers.

Jean stood next to his wife who only shook her head and turned to other conversations.

“Shut your mouth, Jean,” Big Pa said, taking a swig of rum. “Stop stirring shit up. Not today, okay?”

Jean stared hard at the sheriff, a sly smile forming across his lips as he smoothed out his expensive blue shirt.

“Of course, of course,” he mumbled.

Such was people’s anxiety not only about the storm, but also about the new government and the rumors of higher taxes. Still, as a special day, everyone tried to act pleasant even if they didn’t mean it.

As more people gathered in the church, the waiting became an eternity. Even with the gaps in the walls circulating the air, the heat outside combined with the increasing number of people inside caused the temperature to rise quickly. It didn’t take long before men took off their shirts and rolled their pants up to their knees while the women hiked their dresses up and tied them around their waists giving them flouncy pantaloons. People fanned at themselves with anything they found—a giant palm leaf from a tree outside, a straw hat, or the occasional magazine someone brought to a ceremony before and left carelessly by the door.

Big Pa stood in the doorway as the designated “roll-taker” for the day, scowling his “hellos” as he let each person pass.

“Why do we have to be in the church?” Raffé asked as he fanned his young, pregnant wife. “Doesn’t Panon have any sense of how bad the heat is here? Who’s going to want to dance anyway?”

There were grunts and nods but no one else said anything.

“You should really hush,” Isabelle whispered to him. “Now is not a day to complain.” She leaned closer to him and

his wife eyed her suspiciously. “Especially with a wife such as yours. You wouldn’t want a birth not blessed by the spirits...”

Panon couldn’t ignore the tension. In a way, it only augmented the already unsteady look about him. Despite a morning spent by himself setting up the ceremony, despite the time he’d spent with his wife afterwards, despite everything seeming to point to a perfect day, Panon found himself wringing his hands anyway.

He observed how the heat ate away at the town, how some people refused to talk to the person behind them, even when tapped or pulled. Panon watched Morgan squeeze between two people to get away from Ruiza because he realized who tapped his shoulder. As he listened closely, Panon heard the tension—the accusations, the uncertainty, the anger not just about the heat but about the rumor of new taxes someone learned from the radio.

Panon rolled his own pants up and fanned at himself with a palm leaf someone handed him. The rasaka on his left arm rattled quietly with the motion. It was the ceremonial rattle—a dried section of goat intestine connected at the ends to form a loop—vested with the town’s magic rather than his own. It fit snugly above his elbow and each little shake soothed him, slowly smoothing the tension down which began to make him nauseous.

He shook his head in an attempt to rid himself of the paranoid feeling they were actually agitated because of Jaime. One of his younger hounsis startled him with a gentle touch on the arm.

“Are we all here?” Panon asked him, trying hard to exude the confidence that alluded him. The hounsis smiled and Panon remembered when he brought the boy, then only about

ten and now about Jaime's age, into the fold. He had fine features, which only matured with age, developing into a handsome face with high cheekbones, a square jaw, and piercing eyes.

The spirits pointed out to Panon that the boy had been full of magic. Panon stared for a moment into his deep brown eyes.

If only the spirits had called Jaime that day.

Two weeks and nothing had improved. Panon hoped the unrest in the capitol would have kept Jamie home, left him with nothing else to do but fish. Except the exact opposite happened, and Panon saw less and less of his son, only hearing through Jean that a friend happened upon him in the capitol the other day.

“Yes Panon.”

Stay focused. You need to stay focused...

Panon nodded.

But if only it had been Jaime...

He thought of the note again he'd found on the kitchen table. Sometime between setting up the ceremony and making love to his wife, Jaime slipped out of the house.

Why does he do this to me?

Panon wrung his hands even harder. The rasaka shook gently in response.

No. You can't start thinking like that today. Especially today.

He stopped his hands.

Unless you want Dela to find out everything.

He still harbored some hope Jaime would recognize the importance of the day and show up to the ceremony, a fulcrum of magic for not only the town but their family too.



He walked to the middle of the dirt floor, in front of the congregation, and tried to forget about his son as he motioned to everyone the ceremony's commencement. Some obliged, giving them their attention. Others continued to whisper and point, continued to argue and bicker, and Panon simply pushed their voices away.

No time for any of this now. Now is only time for Dela.

Panon stared at the symbol spreading out from the center pole almost to his feet. The lines were perfectly drawn with dyed blue sand. He followed one of the larger lines which split into three and then into six, creating diamonds or spirals, or a weaving of curved lines which seemed to go on forever. He began to get lost in the intricacy of the symbol he had drawn himself only hours before.

The young hounsis touched his shoulder again.

Panon snapped his head up.

“Houngan?”

Panon only heard his own, rapid breathing. The congregation eyed him past their waving leaves and magazines. They eyed him as they wiped the sweat from their brows.

They know. They know that something's wrong.

Panon nodded.

A drum began to beat steadily. Panon stepped to face the East and dipped his hand within a wooden bowl of water the hounsis held. He touched his own chest with his wet fingers and flicked the water into the air. The drops splashed silently onto the dirt floor.

He and his hounsis turned to each direction, touching water, then flicking. Panon took the bowl from him and placed it in front of the center pole.

He raised his arms and the drumbeat stopped.

*“Hey dead, hey dead,  
Just because you live underneath the sea,  
Doesn't mean we don't think of you.”*

The congregation sang it again as Panon shook the rasaka and the drum resumed. The structure of the ceremony consumed him. All rules and orders—not affected by the heat, or running off to the capitol, or having different opinions. Instead, it obeyed his every movement and song. He could drag it out for two hours or fifteen minutes depending upon his need for Dela.

Deep down, though, today was different.

One in which he needed to see Dela as soon as possible.

Panon kicked one leg back, bent at the knee, and then leaned forward, shuffling in a circle. His arms were outstretched, also slightly bent. With every shuffle, he snapped his arms forward, shaking the rasaka. He stopped, turned towards the center pole, his back facing East and rattled the rasaka over the drawing.

Come on Dela. Please come early, don't keep me waiting. I need you.

After Panon circled the pole, he started to back away slowly, realizing his movements were almost frantic, hurried. He glanced up at the congregation, some swaying with a song they held in their head, and wondered if they thought he hurried too, that he was somehow cheating them of the ceremony.

He clapped with each step and the congregation picked it up. Panon began to jump, spreading his legs first then bringing them back in, crossing his ankles. Each time he crossed his ankles, he spun his body around, using his feet like wound springs. As he spun himself, one arm above his head, he held the other out in front of him.

This will show them that I'm not hurrying or cheating.  
I'll dance like I've never danced before.

He stopped and shuffled his feet closely together, glancing up again at the congregation. A few were pointing at Panon and smiling, trying to show their neighbors they could dance like Panon did too.

Panon shook the rasaka three times. On the last shake, when it seemed the rustling of the bones would die out and leave the church in silence, Pierre's deep voice carried on the magic of the ceremony.

*"Dela,  
Dela Luamba,  
That's your name,  
Your name, not anyone else's.  
That means if we say  
Dela,  
Dela Luamba,  
We want you to come to our dance,  
our dance."*

His tender voice wove amongst the slaps of palms. The drum responded and soon, the claps and thumps were competing with each other to show Dela who had the most rhythm.

Panon wanted to smile at how the ceremony took everything over, dispelling anger about taxes or storms, but he still couldn't get Jaime out of his head and when he glanced at the congregation, some of which began to dance a little, he thought he saw some unhappy faces, faces which studied him too closely.

He picked up a white candle from the drawing and the hounsis broke into another song.

*“Our temple is big and our priest strong  
Dela Luamba watches over us.  
Anyone is invited to come and see  
Especially today  
Because Dela Luamba blesses us by showing himself.  
Especially today.”*

Panon handed the candle to his assistant as the song ended. He wasn't sure how he knew Dela was closer, perhaps it was how the ceremony seemed to keep itself going, or how the songs never seemed to end, rather echoing softly about the church, but he felt sure that Dela hovered above them, waiting until everything completed to show himself.

“Fraud,” a voice whispered.

Or at least Panon thought he heard it.

Only when he focused his attention, trying to find its owner, he only heard signing and happy murmurs.

Do they know about Jaime?

“Faker,” another voice said, this time closer.

Panon fought the urge to spin around, to break the flow of the ceremony and demand that whomever said it say it to his face.

But he dared not.

He would draw attention to himself if he broke the rules of the ceremony. And a man with his secret, a houngan with a son like Jaime, didn't draw attention to himself.

A secret, more than any other, he couldn't let Dela find out.

What spirit would listen to a houngan who can't control his own son?

For the first time ever, the thought of seeing his family's protector, the mightiest spirit in the sky, frightened him.

Only he couldn't turn back. He was going to Dela and that was that. Panon hoped he didn't make it obvious, that he didn't do anything which would give away the fact he held such a secret—hold his breath, purse his lips, or close his eyes at the wrong time.

He blinked as the sweat dripped down his face.

His hounsis held the candle in his left hand as he bent down to pick up a white clay bowl. Panon began to dance like the first time, except his bent leg kicked in at each step, the tips of his toes touching the dirt with each shuffle. The drum beat steadily and Panon began to clap his hands, trying to find the joy and enthusiasm he usually had on this day, the feelings which made the ceremony almost natural.

Panon stopped and took the proffered bowl. Together he and his young hounsis turned to face the East. Panon cupped his right hand underneath the brittle clay and held the bowl up. With three quick snaps, he shook the rasaka and the boy shook the candle.

The two of them turned to face the West. Again the bowl in the air, again the three quick snaps.

In each direction, Panon paid the town's respect to all the spirits. For a moment, he found himself staring at his hounsis out of the corner of his eye.

Such a strong boy.

There were so many times he wished it had been Jaime the spirits pointed out that day.

Why did they wait? Everything would have been solved if they had just called Jaime then.

He took a deep breath, chastising himself. No doubts. He couldn't have any doubts when he called for the loa.

Panon watched his assistant, at how he smiled, at how the ceremony took him over. He remembered his time as a hounsis with his father as the houngan and how it had been the same for him.

If only I can get that back.

In a flash, he saw Jaime there, standing beside him with the candle where the young hounsis was a second ago.

Panon almost dropped the bowl.

Only it wasn't Jaime and as quickly as the vision appeared, it vanished, replaced by the boy who held the candle firmly, the flame flickering from the gust of the congregation's hot breath. The air hung heavy with sweat and words and Panon didn't want to look up. He didn't want to know if everything stopped because he almost ruined the ceremony, or if Dela, watching above, shook his head and wondered what Panon was thinking about to make him clumsy.

His hounsis smiled at him. Panon tried to smile back. The congregation still danced and laughed. It seemed no one noticed. He couldn't even find those watchful faces he thought he saw before. He took a deep breath and raised his head, nodding to continue.

The drum began to beat louder as Panon returned the bowl to the drawing. He walked with deliberate steps, forcing every thought from his mind so there would be nothing to prevent the ceremony from taking him over. The hounsis set the candle down after Panon laid the bowl back in the indentation. A diamond of blue sand carefully guarded the candle.

It's my turn to sing now, to ask Dela to come. Am I ready?

As the drum beat, as the people clapped, Panon tried to clear his throat softly and quietly. That's when he realized he couldn't get the lump out. It bobbed with the rhythm, as if the ceremony itself made it.

The hounsis smiled and nodded at him that now was the time.

Panon took a deep breath.

This is it. If I mess this song up, I'm done for.

Still, he didn't sing and the hounsis touched Panon's shoulder again. Startled, Panon glanced back and stifled a gasp.

Was that a look of concern on his face? Does he suspect too?

Panon took another deep breath.

Steady yourself. Just believe you can do it. Let the song flow...

He took one more deep breath and in that moment of anticipation, the fine line between confidence and failure, the lump launched from his mouth in a sweet melody:

*"Dela Luamba, I've got a lot to show you*

*Come and join me for a dance.*

*You can lead.*

*You can lead.*

*The congregation has much to talk about,*

*Lots of gossip.*

*Come dance and sing and talk.*

*You can lead."*

Panon sang clear and steady, gathering strength with each word and propelling himself forward, towards the center pole, step by step. The symbol before him grew and grew until it became so huge he saw lines within the lines, a history of lines making up each swirl or diamond.

The pole became a blur, the people behind it a background in a painting, and Panon only vaguely remembered to clap three times at every third step. On the ninth slap of his palms, the drum beat three times. Without looking down, he knew he had stepped amongst the lines perfectly, leaving them untouched and that he stood before the center pole, with all the fresh fruit, the bottles of rum, and the fish stacked for Dela Luamba at his feet.

All I need to do is let go. Just let go and let it carry me away.

Only as he grabbed onto the pole, blazing with light blue sky and white billowy clouds, the image wavered and he found himself back in the church.

He let go of the pole.

The congregation waited anxiously for the final moment when Panon would fly to Dela.

They could always tell when the ceremony took their houngan. Some said his arms were the give away, while others pointed to his lips and still more to his closed eyes. Regardless, they waited.

Trembling with fear, he grabbed the pole again as he should and closed his eyes, hoping it would come back, hoping Dela was playing a trick on him. He squinted his eyes open, trying not to let the congregation know he was still there. His peeking was met by eager, questioning, faces.

To them, Panon didn't appear quite right.

He closed his eyes tightly again, praying to every ancestor he remembered to give back the image of the sky dancing upon the pole. Panon knew Dela hovered above him, growing impatient, knowing the ceremony had reached the climax.



Suddenly, in the blackness behind his lids, a little figure began to walk towards him. Even though the figure stood no taller than an ant, Panon recognized the gait, the blue jeans, the boots, and especially the hat.

“You’re late,” Panon wanted to say, “what do you want?”

“What,” Jaime said, his answer a whisper, “your magic not working?”

“Shut up. I didn’t ask for your opinion.”

“Dela waiting? Dela going to get mad?”

Panon wanted to reach into his own eyes and tear out the little figure, grind him beneath his thumb and forefinger. He held resolutely onto the center pole, though, praying his magic hadn’t failed somehow, praying evil spirits hadn’t gotten into the church to sabotage his ceremony.

“That’s because there’s no such thing as magic,” Jaime yelled.

Panon became acutely aware of the time passing and wondered if the congregation did too. He wanted to open his eyes, to make sure everyone still danced and laughed and hadn’t left thinking their houngan cheated them of a ceremony. Only he couldn’t because that’s how it always was when he summoned Dela on his day of celebration—he held onto the pole and closed his eyes before Dela entered his body.

“That’s why, your magic,” Jaime started.

Panon didn’t care Jaime was his son, that he fled to the capitol everyday, or that he might go to Hell. He only wanted the tiny, far away man to leave him alone with his magic.

“Get out of my sight,” Panon yelled.

He wasn't sure if his lips actually moved or if he just thought hard, but the far-away-Jaime disappeared leaving Panon with a vision of unblemished blue sky.

The chanting of the congregation the hounsis started, believing perhaps Panon required a little help, lifted the houngan higher into the air, through the clouds and back down again past billowy masses and in between.

"The sky," Panon whispered elatedly, relieved everything had worked out as it should.

A cool breeze blew through his hair and the vague sense of the church and the singing echoing under its tattered roof cleansed him of doubts.

He closed his eyes, trying to imagine Jaime flying next to him and suddenly wanted the little Jaime back, nuisance or not, disbelief or not.

Don't worry. Everything will be okay, you'll see.

He opened his eyes, sure he only needed a little bit of time to sort out his feelings. Glancing at a cloud, he saw Big Pa's face and smiled. As a younger houngan, he'd been frightened by the faces appearing in the clouds. He thought they were spirits trying to trick him, trying to take his concentration away. His father, though, having passed the mantle and resigned the finality of his life to a fishing boat, laughed and told him the people most important to you appear in the clouds. Since his first trip to Dela, Panon saw Ella and Jaime plenty of times; even Big Pa once.

Only as he glanced about, seeing another cloud with Big Pa's face, then another, then another, he realized all the clouds were the sheriff's face and wondered what it all meant.

His father never said anything about that.

Panon covered his face, wanting to cry at the worst ceremony he ever performed. He suspected the problems with Jaime must have somehow interfered with the purity of his magic, that the vehemence with which he banished his son from his sight tainted his soul.

But Big Pa? What makes Big Pa so important that he gets every cloud?

He uncovered his face to find Big Pa's billowy, fluffy likeness gone.

Panon tried to relax, to clear his thoughts and enjoy the buoyancy of flight, but the doubts and worries eating away at him refused to keep quiet. He began to brood on the upcoming meeting with the loa.

As he focused on how wrong things could go, how there seemed to be no way out of telling Dela the truth, Panon forgot about the one thing which had gotten him out of so many situations before—a resolute, steady voice which always, when listened to, stood as a bastion of reason.

The voice belong to his gut.

As Panon begged to scream, to curl up in a little ball, to hide in the clouds until everything turned back to normal, his gut, in a firm and loud voice, told him to shut up. Even though Panon knew Dela hovered nearby, his gut reminded him that his thoughts and feelings were awfully loose when he should be concentrating on keeping things secret.

*Panon*, a voice whispered.

Panon almost went white. As quickly as he could, he slammed the door on his thoughts about Jaime. It kept talking, though, knocking, scratching at the base boards like a mangy dog and Panon slammed another door, another, and another,

until he'd lost count of how many doors he'd slammed and where his problem hid.

*Calm down*, his gut whispered, *just be calm and we'll be okay.*

"Yes," Panon answered. "I'm here."

And then there was a rainbow in the sky, its vibrant belts of color pulling the billowy, white clouds together. It gave meaning to the sky and soothed Panon's fears. He closed his eyes and reveled in the brilliance, no more aware of his problem than Dela might be.

"I brought you fruit," Panon said as he gazed upon Dela Luamba. The spirit dressed in frayed linen pants that came down past his knees, a faded blue shirt fastened by one button at the bottom and a straw hat which dipped over his deep brown face. Panon marveled at how the spirit's muscles rippled as he swayed in the breeze, at the magnificence of the loa. His skin shone with an inner light, eclipsing even the sun with his radiance.

Panon reveled in his presence, basking as it washed over him, banishing his doubts, banishing his worry, casting out the darkness. He closed his eyes and let Dela's light fill him, even behind his eyelids, filling in all the cracks and crevices, caressing him.

"Oh mighty Dela Luamba," Panon whispered as he opened his eyes, the tears streaming down his cheeks. "Is there anything greater than your light?"

*I think I give the sun a run for his money, no?* Dela asked, smiling as he pivoted this way and the other, showing Panon that no matter which way he turned, he shone as the true light of Heaven.

"You are the sun to me," Panon whispered. "You are my sun."

*May we dance?* Dela asked, smiling, holding out his hand. His voice rang like a thousand sweet birds, each one more magnificent than the other. *I have much to tell you.*

Standing there on the swelling song of the congregation, facing the spirit protector of his town and family, Panon reached out for Dela's hand and wondered how he ever doubted his own magic.

The instant Panon made contact with the loa's fingers, he became something else, as if his body had been empty all the time and his legs and arms were only waiting for a soul to fill them.

His legs moved upon the symbol around the center pole. First his right, then his left. He ran sideways, crossing over at each step, his arms held high. The congregation laughed, a sweetness to Panon's ears. He felt Dela rubbing against the women, pressing himself up against their asses.

He wasn't sure where he went when Dela took his body, but it was the sweetest place anywhere because he didn't have a care in the world. For the first time since Jaime began to drift away, Panon was at ease, cradled within the secret place of possession, the purgatory for temporary souls. His eyes remained closed as colors, scents, and feelings flashed across the blackness of his lids, caressing him in a glowing wave of pleasure.

*Yes my wonderful friends, sing and dance with me,* Dela Luamba sang, *today is my day and I won't take no for an answer.*

Some of the bowls tipped, scattering the fruit and fish. Dela Luamba shuffled his feet as his body swung about, his arms up, then down.

*This Panon, he's a good dancer, huh?* Dela said to the congregation as he bent to his left a little and began to kick the side of his right foot against his left. The congregation laughed.

*But enough dancing,* Dela said, *Panon and I must talk.* Two people who danced with Dela were filled with spirits eager for their chance to play. The congregation surrounded them as they fenced, a leg kick by one parleyed by the other's spin. They jumped and kicked, clapped and spun about with a mad energy. The rest laughed and stomped with the drum as the two possessed whirled in the dirt, selectively dragging people into the circle to join in the activity. The drum began to beat faster and soon everyone danced, pounding their feet, clapping their hands, and breathing the intoxicating sweet scent of warm bodies.

*Langai and Papé like to dance too,* Dela said.

Panon relished in the comfort of not having a claim to a body or a place. With so many secrets weighing him down, he wondered if it wasn't better to leave his body there, clenching the center pole, and live out the rest of his life floating amongst the clouds

*Now come on Panon, you can't stay there forever. You've got things to do.* Dela said as he gently squeezed Panon's hands.

Like waking up a sleepwalker, Panon was disoriented when he opened his eyes, pausing at the web of eyelashes where everything outside was still blurry and surreal. As soon as he realized Dela stood before him, a warning bell went off inside that while Dela danced, his body gave the secret away. The one time he should be sharp and guarded, he let himself drift away into a state of relaxation he could ill afford.

A flash of horror crossed his face and he gasped.

*What's the matter, Panon? What makes you afraid of me?*

Panon shook his head and tried to smile, but his gut, reacting quickly to stave off a disaster, gave him a taste of bile to keep his lips tightly pursed.

*Don't worry my favorite child, this is not bad news. Would I bring bad news?*

Panon shook his head.

He wanted to breathe a sigh of relief as Dela hugged him. And without knowing why, tears came quickly as Panon nestled farther into the embrace, pushing so closely he wasn't sure where he ended and Dela began. More than anything, he desired the security of knowing the spirit still loved him, that someone still loved him who didn't have a different opinion of the way the world worked.

He cradled onto Dela like a sick child.

“What do you wish from me?” Panon whispered as a cool, gentle breeze caressed his body, moving up his legs and around his groin and then weaving amongst the strands of his hair, paying each one careful attention.

*I want your pitit-gasó.*

Panon couldn't respond. His body tightened, his tongue dried up, his lips cracked.

Jaime?

And then he was sure his body had given away the secret. Panon had been so enthralled with not having a body, his defenses were down and Dela found out everything. He was sure the spirit wanted Jaime so he could teach him a few lessons about not believing; maybe give him a lump in his neck or make his teeth fall out.

Panon wanted Jaime as far away from magic as possible, farther than the capitol, farther than disbelief.

He slowly pulled himself away from Dela. Only as he tried to disentangle himself, somewhere in their embrace, their skin became attached. Both frightening and exciting, he continued to pull away, wanting to get far enough so he could sit back and judge the situation.

Their skins stretched to the breaking point with only Panon's finger hooked into Dela's stomach. As Panon wondered if it was far enough, he realized he didn't know what he wanted. The euphoria of Dela's embrace clung to his hair and clothes, trying to pull him back in, while the image of Jaime almost made him sick.

*Quiet you fool, his gut said, clenching until Panon couldn't breathe. You don't know if he knows anything. Stop over-reacting or you really will give it all away.*

"My son," Panon whispered, almost afraid what the question would reveal. "What does the mighty want with my son?"

Either Dela didn't hear the question, or didn't care Panon asked it, because he turned his gaze upward and whispered:

*Bring him to me, to us. Bring him as a bounsis.*

Like a stretched rubber band, Panon snapped back into the embrace. As he gripped and hugged, he knew this was the way it was supposed to be. Dela would never hurt a member of Panon's family. He felt incredibly foolish as he gazed into Dela's eyes and kissed him once, twice, three times, each with more passion than the next

"Oh, this is wonderful news Dela Luamba, I am so happy. You must meet Jaime, he is such a handsome boy..."

*I know, he looks like you. And I bet he gets all the ladies too!*



Panon still couldn't believe it. More than what it meant for Jaime, a place of power, an eternal position within the spiritual, it was the key to bringing his family back together. He and Ella sometimes had completely different opinions about Jaime and magic, but Panon was sure with this news, she would have to see it his way. And what could Jaime say?

And I knew it all along even when Jaime was a little boy...

A slight smile crossed Panon's lips as he remembered how Jaime's birth, how intertwined his son was with Dela and magic, and realized the inevitability that Dela claim Jaime back someday. Panon did his part, as a father, as a guide, but Dela did the work in the first place.

"Jaime is strong with spirit," Panon whispered.

His smile faded quickly, though, because even as he cherished Dela's embrace he realized what it meant for Dela to ask for Jaime.

*I know he is strong, my sexy priest.*

Those soft words chilled Panon to the bone. He always wanted to deny Dela gave Ella and him their son, but he couldn't no matter how hard he tried—the way they had found him, curled in the embrace of the waves, the water sucking at his toes lovingly as it raced up the shore with the tide. Still as he began to resemble Panon more and more, he and Ella forgot about the day on the beach. Only now, Panon couldn't deny it. Jaime was magic. His real father wanted him back.

Panon had to be strong. More than ever, he had to keep Jaime's disbelief from Dela. It was his duty. He wasn't just protecting himself now, he was protecting Jaime as well.

There's no point in jeopardizing Jaime's future. I have to put my feelings aside. I owe it to Dela to bring Jaime back to magic.

He hung his head.

And if he found out what has happened with his son? What would he think of me?

Dela lifted Panon's chin and kissed him gently on the forehead.

*Your family is your pwé Panon. You family and this town. That's where you get your magic from. Remember that.*

Panon searched Dela's eyes for the knowledge that Jaime no longer believed, desperate to discover if Dela already knew. He only saw smiles and rainbows.

*Jaime will make a good Houngan some day. Bring him soon. Maybe the next celebration? Maybe give you time to get him ready?*

The words hung heavy in his ears. He tried to smile, and thought he managed the best one possible, but nothing seemed to go in his favor—a less than perfect ceremony, Dela asking for his son back, and now finding out his days in the church were numbered.

Panon wanted to give up.

Dela, perhaps sensing Panon's angst, only smiled wider.

*Not yet, Panon. Later, much later. When you're old and gray.*

He laughed loudly.

*You thought that I meant today?*

He laughed again, so loudly this time the clouds shook.

Panon wasn't relieved Dela didn't want him out of the church. A part of him wondered if it wouldn't have been for the better, because in the span of three minutes, Dela turned Panon's familial concerns into obligations.

I must get Jaime back as soon as possible, by any means possible.

Of that much he was certain.

How much will my life be worth if Dela finds out that I have let the responsibility I was entrusted with stray?

He stared at Dela's nose, his cheeks, anything but his eyes again. For the first time he felt daunted next to the spirit who cradled him as a child; the spirit who was as much his father as Jaime's.

Suddenly, Dela gripped Panon's shoulders fiercely. The fingers dug into his skin, not like before, but hard, fleshy with sharp fingernails and bone.

*You have many trials to come Panon. Remember. Many trials. Jaime is but a hurdle to the first.*

Before Panon could say anything, ask another question, ask what Dela meant, the loa pushed him backward. Panon tried to grab on to anything—Dela's shirt, his hair, the feeling of pleasure from the temporary place, but everything extended just beyond his reach and he fell through sweet music and tender weeping that wanted desperately to keep him up.

As he fell, he wanted to know what Dela meant. He wanted to ask the spirit what about his family and magic. He wanted to know about the storm, about the government, if Dela had a secret of his own—how to bring Jaime back to magic.

*Panon, we'll see each other again soon. You're such a good dancer. And you have a sexy ass. Give your wife a kiss on the vagina for me.*

The drums were finishing, the beats softer and softer and the hounsis sang as Panon opened his eyes.

*“Sweet Dela Luamba,  
Sweet like candy or fruit,  
Kiss us goodnight,*

*Like good little children,  
Like good little children."*

Panon was spent. His knees buckled as he glanced down at the remnant of the drawing, the sand scattered by so much dancing, the empty bottles of rum, the half eaten fish and crushed fruit.

Jaime. Dela wants Jaime. He wants his son back.

He let go of the center pole and backed away. His hounsis grabbed his shoulders, whispering congratulations.

Only the words didn't sink in. Panon didn't even recognize Ella when he picked his head up and found her standing next to him. As every bit of his being, every fiber of his body and soul focused on one thing—he must bring Jaime back and he must do it now.

The congregation surrounded them.

"Oh Panon, it's so wonderful," Ella said as she kissed his sweaty forehead. Panon hadn't realized he was crying until Ella wiped the tears away. "Jaime," she said.

The hot, throbbing air and the brilliant smiles of his congregation quickly dried the tears, but Panon couldn't get Dela's words, *bring him to me*, out of his head, and he wondered if Ella believed the same—they were losing their son.

"Is Jaime here?" Panon whispered to Ella, knowing what the answer would be but needing to ask anyway.

She shook her head.

"Hey Panon, maybe this is what Jaime needs, bring him back to the church," a voice said. Even with all the people around him, shouting congratulations or patting him on the shoulders, the voice was too loud, too close, and Panon turned frantically around, ready to clamp shut the mouth with a well

placed curse. If his body managed to keep the secret while Dela danced, Panon told himself he could keep it from everyone else.

His search into the faces of the congregation was met only with smiles, and his quest for the voice's owner became lost in the pain that flared in his side. He gripped the skin as his legs wobbled. Ella held him up while she could until the rough, fat hands of Big Pa reached through the people and straightened him out.

Panon looked questioningly at Big Pa who nodded his head and helped Panon's other arm around Ella's shoulder.

Who ever said it is right. This is going to bring the family back together.

"Let's go home," he said to Ella, vowing to forget about Jaime for a few hours so he could get some sleep. He stared at his wife and thought of the countless times he let his face rest in her hair as he laid on top of her, nestled between her legs, wishing for a child.

"The dance was beautiful," she said.

He looked at her, the way he first looked at her, the way he looked at her just this morning standing in the doorway in her white cotton dress—with lust and love and wondered if they might try again. Maybe wishing now for a boy would be different because they had raised a child, because they knew what to do.

"So are you," he said and pushed from his mind the little voice which whispered, *but look at the job you've done on this one*, as they walked through the crowd.