

WOMEN LIKE AND UNLIKE US:  
A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN  
IMMIGRANT MOTHERS AND THEIR BICULTURAL DAUGHTERS

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Rena Yalimaiwai.

I am like and unlike you in so many ways.

Your life is my inspiration.

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## INTRODUCTION

As daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours. We need not to be the vessels of another woman's self-denial and frustration. The quality of the mother's life – however embattled and unprotected – is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create livable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist.

Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (247)

Adrienne Rich writes in *Of Woman Born* that there comes a time in a daughter's life where she realizes that her mother, like herself, is also engaged in an identity struggle with the society around her. The frustrated daughter may sometimes hate her mother for being the "victim" if she sees the mother's struggle; "and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, [the daughter] perform[s] radical surgery" (236), that can sever the mother-daughter bond forever. However, Rich writes of a way to escape this alarming fate. She claims that the "most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities [...] it means that the mother herself [should try] to expand the limits of her life. *To refuse to be a victim*: and then to go on from there" (246). A mother must show her daughter that she is not a victim. But how can a woman "refuse to be a victim" if she is unable to comprehend fully the nuances of a society that victimizes her and her daughter? More specifically, how can an immigrant mother breed reassurance and self-love in her American daughter when the Anglo society the daughter grows up in tells her to reject the minority ethnicity she was born into and embrace the mainstream and predominantly white one she was raised in?

At the time Rich published *Of Woman Born* in 1976 – and even of the re-issue a decade later – these questions of mothers with bicultural or multicultural children were not taken into consideration. Race was often ignored, except when both mother and daughter belonged to minority groups of the same culture – meaning that both were of the same non-white ethnicity, and identified as non-immigrant, American-born citizens. Thus, what happened when mothers and daughters identified with two different ethnic and/or cultural groups remained almost unexplained in the literary field until scholars started paying attention to mixed races and cultures as seen in literature. And even fewer scholars tried to learn about mothers and their multicultural children through novels and short stories. Being a mixed writer myself (ethnically part of the Polynesian, African and Arab groups), it is refreshing to know that authors of mixed race and culture literature are being studied more and more by scholars such as Jonathan Brennan, Anne E. Brown and Marjanne E. Gooze, and Katharine Payant.

In the anthology *Mixed Race Literature*, editor Jonathan Brennan writes that “the prevailing notions of race in the United States require [bicultural and multicultural] writers to choose one identity, thus erasing others that they might assume” (21). This is the reason why daughters in mixed race and cultural literature tend to have difficult relationships with their mothers. They consider themselves to be “American” *and* belonging to their mother’s culture, but the dominant culture in America – and sometimes even the immigrant mother – tells bicultural daughters to choose only one, leaving no room for hybridization. And bicultural and multicultural writers are likely to create characters who struggle

with their identity because that is what happens to them. If the writer's fiction is set in that society, the characters will also have such struggles.

And these writers often show that there is room for hybridization, if either the immigrant mother, or the bicultural daughter, makes an effort to find space for compromise. For my research, I join scholars such as Brennan, Brown, Gooze, and Payant, in their quest to bring mixed race and mixed cultured literature to the forefront by analyzing seven short stories by four different authors who write about (and are themselves) bicultural daughters growing up with immigrant mothers and trying to find room for both their ethnic culture as well as the dominant American culture they live in. Although most scholars have looked at longer works of literature such as the novel, I analyze only the short story genre and novella because it allows me to look at a larger sample. Included after the analytical part of my thesis, are two of my own short stories of bicultural daughters and their mothers. Since I am a citizen of America who is ethnically mixed, with the majority of my heritage being Fijian, Sierra Leonean and Lebanese, I include my own contributions to add myself to this informal bi- and mixed race literary canon.

Keeping in mind that no single measuring stick exists for literature of all immigrant mother-bicultural daughter relationships, Anne E. Brown and Marjanne E. Gooze write in "Placing Identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective" that "no single or fixed definition of identity can be universally applied" (xiii). Therefore, the short stories that I analyze for my thesis should not be perceived as representative of the given ethnic groups in every particular instance. Instead, I map out the



specific ways in which the bicultural daughters portrayed in these short stories struggle with associating themselves with her mothers' cultures<sup>1</sup> and the hegemonic American culture in which they grow up.

### **A Brief Overview of the Short Stories**

This thesis participates in the scholarly work done so far on mother-daughter relationships depicted in fiction which takes place, and was published, during and after the Second World War. Since most of the existing research is on novels rather than stories, I apply that research to my own study of certain short stories. Like most scholars in this field, I rely on ideas from Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* as a springboard to further develop my ideas, as well as other sources published in the 1990s and early millennium. I examine short stories by the following authors: Edwidge Danticat, Maxine Hong Kingston, Leslie Pietrzyk, and Amy Tan. Of the aforementioned authors, the following ethnicities are covered: Haitian and Haitian-American, Chinese and Chinese-American, and Polish and Polish-American.

As stated above, there is a lot more research on the mother-daughter relationship as seen in famous novels than there is within the short-story genre, particularly stories in the post-World War II time period which deal with the immigrant mother and her bicultural daughter. I rely on ideas made by other literary critics on the stories I chose, as well as on critiques of other similar novels

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<sup>1</sup> Given that the main focus of my research is to analyze the relationship between immigrant mothers and bicultural daughters, the role of the father and how he affects this relationship will be only briefly discussed, depending on the amount of time the narrator in the short story invests in the father character and how he as a separate entity affects the mother-daughter relationship. However, the primary characters remain the mothers and their daughters.

previously studied. The concepts of bicultural daughters and immigrant mothers in novels should also apply to this relationship as seen in short stories, since I am mainly analyzing content<sup>2</sup>, and the more important factors in applying criticism originally used with one genre to another genre are the time periods and ethnic groups. Thus, my thesis compares the relationships between immigrant mothers and their bicultural daughters in specific short stories, and gives examples of this relationship as seen in two of my own stories. My literary research brings to the forefront of current criticism the struggles represented in short fiction that a bicultural daughter deals with while trying to retain her mother's culture while being pressured to assimilate into the dominant culture.

A number of articles are useful for analyzing these struggles endured by mother and daughter characters across specific ethnic groups, and listed in this introduction are only a handful of what I used throughout the rest of my thesis. Carol Boyd, et al.'s article "Mother-Daughter Identification: Polish and Polish-American Mothers and Their Adult Daughters" suggests that "the process by which a mother and her daughter internalize characteristics of each other" (181) differs among Polish mother-daughters, and Polish-American mother-daughters (188). Boyd's findings helped me analyze the three Pietrzyk short stories in my research because the Polish-born Rose and her American-born daughter Helen and granddaughter Ginger, internalize characteristics of each other quite differently. For example the character Rose born and raised in Poland, believes that when a daughter leaves a home – like she left her home of Poland to

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<sup>2</sup> However, form is analyzed as well, particularly in Kingston's "No Name Woman" and Danticat's "New York Day Women."

immigrate to America – the mother slowly dies. Rose warns her daughter Helen of this, and Helen passes the idea on to her own daughter Ginger. This belief should make any Polish daughter wary of leaving home, and eventually is the reason why Helen never leaves. However, Ginger – Helen’s American-born daughter and also the narrator of “Blue Beads” and “Best Friends” – leaves her mother’s home as soon as she is legally able. Going against the Polish tradition passed down to her that a woman should never leave her family, Ginger walks away from the only life she has ever known in Detroit, Michigan in search for a new life in Arizona.

As Boyd studies the close bond that forms between mothers and their daughters, and the values that daughters inherit from their mothers, in “Making Mother-Blaming Visible: The Emperor’s New Clothes,” Paula Caplan writes that she is disgusted by society’s disapproval of such a close relationship. Caplan states that she disapproves of the idea that in society today – or in the early 1990s when her article was written – “closeness is considered unhealthy, embarrassing, sick, female” (65) and thus women are taught that to become women they must automatically separate themselves from their mothers, perhaps a reason why Ginger felt the need to leave Detroit once she graduated from high school.

But in “Voice, Mind, Self,” M. Marie Booth Foster, like Caplan, opposes the idea that women need to separate themselves from their mothers. Foster mentions Kathie Carlson, a psychotherapist and author of *In Her Image: The Unhealed Daughter’s Search for Her Mother*, in saying that the mother-daughter

relationship is “the birthplace of a woman’s ego identity, her sense of security in the world, her feelings about herself, her body and other women. From her mother, a woman receives her first impression of how to be a woman” (209). Yet, the bicultural daughter often feels ambivalence about her mother’s culture and specifically the mother’s teachings about how to be a woman. This dichotomy of both acceptance and rejection of the mother’s culture is seen in the short stories I analyze.

Just as there is a chance that in these stories bicultural daughters will grow up to reject their mother’s culture, immigrant mothers of such daughters fear that this will happen, and try to instill ethnic traditions more strongly to combat that fear. In Amy Ling’s 1990 volume *Between Worlds*, she states that “[m]inority parents’ own fear of losing their cultural heritage is intensified by the fear of losing their children to the ‘foreign’ culture, and therefore they insist with greater vehemence on their children’s acceptance of family traditions and Old World ties” (213). In other words, it is the immigrant mother’s own fear of her child’s loss of her culture that pushes her daughter toward the dominant culture that the girl will often end up choosing. An example of this is seen in Danticat’s, “New York Day Women” when the narrator Suzette’s mom tells her, “You are pretty enough to be a stewardess. Only dogs like bones” (150) in response to Suzette’s want for a thin body – which the mother sees in direct opposition to what Haitian beauty is. Here, by Suzette’s mother vocalizing Haitian ideals of beauty to her daughter Suzette, assuming that she has been doing this all of

Suzette's life, we see Suzette's rejection of her mother's beauty standards because in the same scene she mentions wanting to get an exercise machine.

However, Suzette is able to compromise between her own ideals and her mother's when she realizes that her mother endured the shame of an immigrant woman's working-class job just so that her daughter could grow up to have a better life. And in looking for the compromises between bicultural daughters and their immigrant mothers, two recent dissertations offer ideas that allowed me to enter the current discussion on my topic – Patianne D. Stabile's "Talking Story": the Evolution of the Mother/Daughter Relationship in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Immigrant Women's Writing" (2006) and Kristi Ann Girard's "Mother/cultures and the 'New World' Daughters: Ethnic Identity Formation and the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Contemporary American Literature" (2006). Stabile focuses on works by Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, and her insights on story-telling help with my own analyses of the two authors. Also, Girard's two main points that 1) mother and daughter face "power dynamics," and 2) the daughter struggles between associating with her mother's "cultural heritage" and the larger American culture in which she grew up (iii) mapped out a trail to where I began my own journey, especially where Girard analyzes the bicultural daughter's relationship "to her mother as it overlaps and conflicts with her relationship to her ethnic or cultural heritage" (2).

Girard's idea that the bicultural daughter experiences conflicting relationships between both her mother's native culture and the dominant American culture she is raised in is further analyzed in the specific short stories

of this thesis. Although Girard analyzes only Tan and Kingston in her dissertation, this idea of conflicting identities is also seen in the stories by the other authors I analyze. For example, in Danticat's "Caroline's Wedding," both the narrator Grace and her sister Caroline feel ambivalent towards their Haitian superstitions by rebelling against a belief in order to get a desired outcome – refusing to wear red panties after their father dies – a sign to warn spirits not to come after them in their sleep (170), because they'd rather see their father again than follow a tradition that warns them against communication with the dead. Caroline also experiences this struggle when she can't understand why her Haitian mother is against her marrying a non-Haitian man (161). Girard's idea of the struggle between two cultures is seen in some other articles used for my research, like Carmen Faymonville's "Motherland Versus Daughterland," where she states a related idea: that the mother's "retention of her native cultural identity" confuses the daughter because "[a]lthough she recognizes the pull of different cultures, she has no identity-supporting link" (128).

I hypothesize that the "identity-supporting link" of Faymonville's article is a bridge of acceptance between mother or daughter or both, and that this bridge can eventually lead to a compromise between the ideas and beliefs of the bicultural daughter and her immigrant mother, whether the compromise is detrimental or beneficial to either. As stated previously, my thesis also includes two of my own short stories – "Sisters of the Lotus" which takes place in Fiji and "Her Colored Coats" which takes place in Hawaii – hoping to provide more stories that others will analyze when entering the discussion on bicultural

daughters and their mothers, finding the bridges that mother and daughter try to cross. Although Fiji is not part of the United States, I include the story “Sisters of the Lotus” because the main conflict between Padmaja and her mother Padma revolves around the different ethnic and cultural groups they belong to.

Thus, the seven main short stories I analyze in my research, not including my own two short stories, are Maxine Hong Kingston’s “No Name Woman”; Amy Tan’s “Two Kinds”; three stories from Leslie Pietrzyk’s *Pears on a Willow Tree*: “Those Places I’ve Been,” “Blue Beads,” and “Best Friends”; and two from Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!* – “New York Day Women” and “Caroline’s Wedding.” Although Kingston’s “No Name Woman” was published as nonfiction, Sheryl A. Mylan’s article “The Mother as Other” reveals that Kingston initially wanted to publish *Woman Warrior* as a novel but her publishers convinced her to issue it under the “autobiography” rubric (134). Since “No Name Woman” reads more like a highly stylized short story than a transparent piece of nonfiction, for my research I treat it like a short story.

I arranged this thesis chronologically by the year the stories take place, as well as by ethnic group. Chapter one will focus on Maxine Hong Kingston’s “No Name Woman,” as well as Amy Tan’s “Two Kinds,” chapter two will be on Leslie Pietrzyk’s stories, and chapter three’s focus will be Edwidge Danticat’s two stories. In her introduction to *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature*, Katharine Payant states that in order to comment on themes of immigration in literary works, “it is helpful to know something about the history of immigration, as well as cultural attitudes” (xvi). Thus, the first three chapters of

my thesis begin with some brief historical and cultural context. I then analyze each story in each chapter by answering a set of questions similar to the following: 1) What is the form and structure of the story? 2) When and where does the story take place? 3) What is the bicultural daughter's relation to both her cultural heritages? 4) What are the components of the daughter's ambivalence towards her ethnic heritage? 5) How does the mother embody this heritage? 6) What specific versions of matrophobia<sup>3</sup> arise in this relationship, if at all one does arise? 7) Does the historical setting contribute to the conflict experienced between mother and daughter? And 8) what life lessons are hidden in the stories that the immigrant mother tells her bi-cultural daughter? Certain stories, such as Danticat's "New York Day Women," deal with other issues such as social class that affect the mother-daughter dyad, and are also discussed where needed.

Chapter four is one of the two short stories of my own. Titled "Sisters of the Lotus," this tells the story of a teen girl named Padmaja, and her identity struggle with being both Indian and Fijian. The main struggle and shame of dealing with her mixed heritage stems from Padmaja's mother – Padma's – hatred of her own Fijian ancestry. Throughout the story, we find that Padma is so ashamed of being Fijian, as well as the fact that she passed on this Shame to her mixed daughter, that she finds her daughter not to be good enough to marry or even date a full-Indian boy. And the daughter she doesn't favor happens to be the one whom she has the most similarities with, a common idea in most of the stories discussed.

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<sup>3</sup> Adrienne Rich states in *Of Woman Born* that matrophobia "is the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's mother" (235).



Chapter five is my second short story, taking place in Hawaii. It tells of the mother-daughter relationship between a Sierra Leonean mother and her American-born daughter. Amid her failing marriage due to her inability to birth a living child, Esther must deal with the anger she feels towards her mother's seemingly lack of sympathy for her loss, as well as realize that her mother who she has always taken for granted has been the one constant person in her life. As mentioned before, I include both of my stories hoping that the next person will come along and use them to shed more light on the genre of bicultural literature.

Thus, both analytical and creative chapters of my thesis display the best and the worst of bicultural daughters and their mothers as writers represent this relationship in short stories. Throughout the analytical chapters, I show that the through their fiction these writers help us understand that the bicultural daughter/immigrant mother relationship not only is affected by general feelings of matrophobia – as Adrienne Rich points out – but also by different pressures and paradigms that can only be experienced if the daughter belongs to and/or associates herself with a different culture than that of her mother. I hypothesize that the stories reflect these paradigms as usually negative because the pressures from both “American” society and the immigrant mother are often so great that the bicultural daughter cannot embrace either one fully. However, with the adverse feelings from both mother and daughter, comes a realization from both that neither will succeed in dominating the other. Once this is established, both mother and daughter will either reach a consensual agreement to disagree, or will continue having a hostile relationship. By including my own short stories in

context with the analyses done for the stories by Kingston, Tan, Pietrzyk and Danticat, I hope to bring interest to this genre for further analysis on the bicultural daughter and immigrant mother relationship as depicted in short stories.

## CHAPTER ONE

Teaching from Loss in the Chinese-American Mother-Daughter Dyad:  
Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman" and Amy Tan's "Two Kinds"

In the introduction to a volume of essays titled *Mixed Race Literature*, Jonathan Brennan writes that "it is important to read and understand mixed race narratives because they provide an opportunity for us to open our eyes, to gain new perspectives and thus renew ourselves" (50). Taking his idea a step further, the importance of studying mixed and bi-cultural narratives to gain new perspectives on the ever-changing society is seen in the very makeup of the current United States – a country where more and more people are identifying as ethnically and culturally mixed, as seen with the election of President Barack Obama, who has a White-American mother and a Kenyan father. By studying literature that has been written by and about bi-cultural citizens, particularly bi-cultural women, the challenges faced by this marginalized group will expand what it means to be an American woman with multiple identities.

In this chapter, I examine representations of Chinese-American identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman" and Amy Tan's "Two Kinds." Kirsten Hoyte writes in "Contradiction and Culture: Revisiting Amy Tan's 'Two Kinds' (Again)" that race and ethnicity invariably affect the mother-daughter relationship, due to W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double-consciousness" – where the bi-cultural daughter looks at her Chinese heritage through American eyes (164). Kingston and Tan are aware of this dual consciousness and thus dramatize in

their fiction aspects of their mother's culture and values, keeping in mind that in order for the mother-daughter dyad to successfully deal with the strains, the mother or daughter has to accept the other's differences or the daughter adopts her mother's values as her own. And in "No Name Woman" and "Two Kinds," we see that acceptance of the ethnic culture often comes when the daughter has grown up, and is remembering the stories that her mother used to tell her.

### **Kingston's "No Name Woman"**

"Your aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night. The next morning when I went for the water, I found her and the baby plugging up the family well. Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful."

Maxine Hong Kingston, "No Name Woman" (5)

In the passage above, Maxine Hong Kingston is stylizing a conversation she had with her mother at Kingston's first period. Coming from China, the mother is trying to teach her American-born daughter about pregnancy by telling the tragic tale of her sister-in-law. Stories are how the immigrant mother teaches her American daughter about the old country. Thus, story-telling, particularly cautionary tales, becomes one of the means by which an immigrant mother imparts to her daughter her ethnic heritage – including cultural gender norms that teach the daughter what is appropriate behavior for a female. However, since the daughter is bi-cultural – an American citizen of Chinese origin – she experiences pressures from both the "American" society as well as her mother's ethnic enclave. These pressures are so great that the bicultural daughter cannot

embrace either culture fully. This is the case with Kingston and her relation to the story depicted in “No Name Woman.”

Although Kingston’s struggles with her Chinese ethnicity and American culture were published as non-fiction, Sheryl A. Mylan writes in her article “The Mother as Other” that Kingston initially wanted to publish *Woman Warrior* – the collection that contains “No Name Woman” – as a novel. However, Kingston’s publishers convinced her to publish under the “autobiography” branch (134). Thus, because “No Name Woman” reads more like a highly stylized short story than a transparent piece of nonfiction, it is only discussed alongside other pieces of fiction in this thesis.

The short story “No Name Woman,” like all of the short stories I examine in this thesis, can stand alone but also fit together as part of a longer work with the rest of the stories it was published with, as is the case with Kingston’s auto-fiction *Woman Warrior*. Kingston chose to use this story as the first in her collection, and it seems fitting because it is a memory she associates with a time that every woman remembers – the onset of her period.

Maxine Hong Kingston’s “No Name Woman” is structured as a frame narrative, with Kingston telling the frame of the story and her mother telling the interior part with stories meant to dissuade Kingston from getting pregnant. Kingston remembers having a conversation with her mother when Kingston first started menstruating, and in the beginning and sporadically throughout the story, Kingston’s mother tells the tale of how her sister-in-law in China, Kingston’s aunt,

killed herself after giving birth to an illegitimate child while her husband was working in America.

Many Chinese men, like Kingston's aunt's husband, migrated to America to work in order to provide for their families back home in China. Min Zhou writes in *Contemporary Chinese America* that "the Chinese American community increased [...] from 237,000 in 1960 to 1.6 million in 1990 and 3.6 million in 2006" in the United States (43), years after Kingston's own family emigrated. Zhou finds that because legal exclusive acts prohibited many Chinese to come to America during World War II, when they did emigrate to America many, like Kingston's family, lived in areas that were already populated by Chinese immigrants – particularly California. Of the Chinese who were permitted to come over, many of them moved towards the San Francisco area (44). Maxine Hong's family was one of them.

Although Kingston as narrator picks up the story with her own first-person account of living in California in the 1950s, she also weaves in her parents' immigration tales in her story, as well as their tales in the United States. Kingston's mother's stories are mostly cautionary tales, and in the one below, Kingston's mother is remembering the 1920s when her new husband was sent to work in America:

In 1924 just a few days after our village celebrated seventeen hurry-up weddings – to make sure that every young man who went "out on the road" would responsibly come home – your father and his brothers and your grandfather and his brothers and your aunt's new husband sailed for America, the Gold Mountain [...] 'We'll meet in California next year,' they said. All of them sent money home. (3)

Not only were ladies in Chinese culture expected to live up to high moral standards, their husbands were too. And since it was the duty of Kingston's father to return to his wife in China, the opposite is implied, that a wife's duty was to remain at home and stay faithful to her husband while he was working in America – something that Kingston's aunt, the woman without a name, did not do.

The 1924 account of Chinese men sailing to America is corroborated by historical sources because, according to Min Zhou, many Chinese during this time “intended to ‘sojourn’ for only a short time and return home with gold and glory” (44). However, Kingston's father's success during this sojourn is not catalogued in “No Name Woman,” suggesting that the main relationship – as with the other stories in this thesis – is between the mother and daughter. Thus, it can be inferred that Kingston's father did not find much success mining for gold, and this is why the family settled in Stockton. After all, “[t]hose who could not afford the return journey or were ashamed to return home penniless gravitated towards San Francisco [...] for self-protection” (Zhou 44).

And it is the shame that comes with not reaching the expectations set by traditions and culture that brings the relationship of immigrant mothers and their bicultural daughters to the forefront of Chinese-American literature. Kingston herself writes in “No Name Woman” that

[t]hose of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America [...] Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from

what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (5-6)

In her dissertation “Mother/cultures and the ‘New World’ Daughters,” Kristin Ann Girard points out that the bicultural daughter struggles between associating with her mother’s “cultural heritage” and the American culture in which she grew up (iii). As a child, Kingston not only saw how her mother viewed her ancestry and ethnicity, Kingston also saw how “solid America” viewed her Chinese background – a background that Kingston didn’t know much about because she had never been to China and could only learn about the country through her mother’s stories from her homeland.

In his essay “Culture’s In-Between,” Homi Bhabha quotes T.S. Eliot’s *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, writing that “The culture which develops on the new soil must therefore be bafflingly alike and different from the parent culture: it will be complicated sometimes by whatever relations are established with some native race and further by immigration from other than the original source” (Eliot qtd. in Bhabha 54). Thus, Kingston’s feelings towards her ethnic homeland of China are bafflingly different from her mother’s feelings because unlike her parents, Kingston was raised in the United States. The ambivalence she feels is a reflection of depictions she sees of her Chinese people in American films. The love that her parents share for their homeland seems to oppose Kingston’s duty as an American citizen, especially since the narrator Kingston in “No Name Woman” has never experienced for herself what her parents did in China. And because of this, she is confused as to whether or not she can embrace her Chinese ethnicity. After all, Kingston has never witnessed firsthand



what it is like to work “in the fields” (6) like her mother and aunt have. So it seems that Kingston shows a little more than ambivalence to her mother’s Chinese heritage and sides more with America’s interpretation of it. Instead of trusting her mother’s stories, Kingston uses her American mind to question the accuracy in them. This uncertainty is seen when Kingston is thinking about the story of her aunt:

To be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was a waste enough. My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil. I wonder whether he masked himself when he joined the raid on her family. (6)

The reader already knows the version of this story through the eyes of Kingston’s mother. But here, Kingston’s voice is clearly defiant. She is seeing her aunt through her own bicultural eyes, taking into consideration the victim’s feelings and not just the overall perception of a shamed village. Kingston’s hybrid mind allows her to see the situation from more than one side. She knows that Chinese women were required by society to remain faithful while their husbands worked in other countries. Kingston’s mother, through her stories, confirms this. But since Kingston’s aunt still managed to get pregnant, Kingston reasons that the pregnancy might well have not been her aunt’s fault.

Thus, Kingston’s American experience takes precedence over the Chinese, especially regarding gender norms. Amy Ling points out in *Between Worlds* that Kingston refers to herself as Chinese American “without a hyphen, so that Chinese is only the adjective for American” (122). This is seen even in the way Kingston walks: she tries to turn herself into what she calls “American-

feminine” by walking straight with “toes pointed forward, not pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine” (11). When Kingston’s mother tells her the story of how married women in China cut their hair short, it is almost with a sense of pain that Kingston writes, “At their weddings they displayed themselves in their long hair for the last time” (9). And almost immediately after Kingston begins to feel sorry for her mother – or her mother’s lengthy hair – the mood changes back to one of hostility for the many Chinese traditions that her mother brought to America, like the painful process of hair removal described in the scene below:

She looped a piece of thread, knotted into a circle between her index fingers and thumbs, and ran the double strand across her forehead [...] Then she pulled the thread away from her skin, ripping the hairs out neatly, her eyes watering from the needles of pain [...] My mother did the same to me and my sisters [...] It especially hurt at the temples, but my mother said we were lucky we didn’t have to have our feet bound when we were seven. (9)

Although it is not mentioned, if Kingston’s aunt’s feet were bound, it would be almost impossible to run away from a man forcing himself on her – yet another way to rationalize the idea that Kingston’s aunt was a victim of a societal belief, backed by Kingston’s mother. Although this sexual double standard affects many cultures other than Chinese, it remains a reason why the American-born Kingston will want to associate herself more with American values, especially when the values are more equal regarding gender.

By Kingston’s mother continuing to tell her daughter of these stories and values in “No Name Woman,” she is embodying the ambivalent feelings that the narrator Kingston felt as an adolescent. The mother described in this story holds on to the traditions of her Chinese people, and passes on the ones that American

society allows her to pass on to her daughters – such as threading the brow and eyebrow hair. And Kingston’s mother also embodies her Chinese heritage by the stories that she tells.

Because both Kingston’s aunt and mother were raised in China, both were put under the same stresses and bound to the same laws by their Chinese culture. These laws prohibited much interaction with men living nearby so that women could not consider them as potential mates. Yet implicit in Maxine Hong Kingston’s frame narration, there’s a sense of how this story will be received in America, particularly in the feminist era – a time when American women were demanding equality, including reproductive rights (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 111). Kingston writes that “[a]ny man within visiting distance would have been neutralized as a lover” by being called “brother” (12). So it would be shameful for a woman, such as Kingston’s mother or aunt, to make public any sexual relationship that they may have had while their husbands were away. Not just because it would be considered adultery, but also because it would be looked upon as incest – something that would not be applauded in the United States either, though the consequences were definitely less severe. These unwritten Chinese laws also grouped children and romantic individualists together:

A preoccupied child who took his bowl with one hand got a sideways glare. A complete moment of total attention is due everyone alike. Children and lovers have no singularity here, but my aunt used a secret voice, a separate attentiveness. She kept the man’s name to herself throughout her labor and dying; she did not accuse him that he be punished with her. To save her inseminator’s name she gave silent birth. (11)

Kingston's wording implies that although she respects her aunt, she is disgusted by "her inseminator" – a man who allowed this to happen and chose not to come forward and take responsibility for what he had done. If Kingston were more sympathetic to him, she would label him her aunt's lover, and not just by the function of his bodily fluids.

Although this story shows that Kingston's aunt and mother were raised under the same circumstances, we cannot conclude that if in a similar situation Kingston's mother would've done the same as her sister-in-law by not giving up the man's name. However, it is clear that her mother is still – if only a little – rebellious toward certain beliefs, such as keeping stories like this secret and out of the children's reach. Because she did, in fact, tell Kingston the story, thus un-silencing her sister-in-law to a certain extent. She concludes the tale: "Don't tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born" (15).

But Kingston doesn't want to forget her aunt. Just the act of devoting "pages of paper to her" (16) means that she is consciously remembering her, even though she has never known her aunt's name. And the act of her mother telling her this story, even though her mother's reasons behind telling the secret involved the mother's fear of a potential unwanted pregnancy, impels Kingston even more to remember this story. It is as if Kingston, however ironically, buys into the Chinese folklore that her mother has been trying to get her to believe all along. And so even though her aunt's story frightens her, Kingston can't do anything but think of her, or write about her:

My aunt haunts me [...] I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute. (16)

But more than simply remembering her dead aunt, Kingston is using these memories to distance herself from her mother, to craft a narrative in which women mattered differently than they did in her mother's stories. Whereas Kingston sees strength in her aunt silently accepting the taunting of the village and killing herself, her mother sees strength in survival at whatever cost:

Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities. Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home. (5)

Here Kingston's mother is telling Kingston that she needs to be stronger than the rest in order to survive. The world is brutal, and it does not take hostages. The only two options are to be assertive and live, or remain silent and die – like Kingston's aunt who remained silent by never giving the name of the man who very possibly raped her. Kingston's mother was afraid that her daughter could end up with a shameful pregnancy like her aunt, and thus needed to make Kingston stronger and more aware of the consequences of such outcomes by telling her stories, most of the stories causing fear like this one.

In her essay "Motherland Versus Daughterland," Carmen Faymonville writes this about the bicultural daughter: "Although she recognizes the pull of different cultures, she has no identity-supporting link to a [place] that is located mainly in her mother's stories and an 'other-world'" (128). Because Kingston has only known what it is like to live in America, she identifies with her drowned aunt,

and the link to her ethnic heritage is only through her mother's tales of the homeland. Kingston is told by her mother in "No Name Woman" that she is weak and that having a baby outside of marriage will bring shame on her family. Kingston's mother uses stories of home to pass these ideas on. But instead of providing a real understanding and appreciation to her mother and the Chinese culture Kingston's mother represents, the stories provide Kingston with a link to the main character of her mother's stories – her dead aunt.

But again, by Kingston forcing herself to remember her aunt, and write of her tragic story, she is proving to her mother that she is not weak. She is proving, despite her mother's cautionary stories of a disobedient aunt, that Kingston is stronger than she appears to be because she can take the stories, come up with her own conclusions, and establish her own reality. This is seen when Kingston offers a further interpretation of her aunt's suicide:

Carrying the baby to the well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it.  
Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take  
them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of  
forgiveness for boys. (15)

Just as Kingston saw strength in her aunt's silence when she refused to tell the village who the father of her child was, Kingston also sees power in the way her aunt killed herself and her child because she was able to take away the stigma of illegitimacy that would have followed her assumed baby girl by drowning her as well.

Without her mother having to give her the rest of the details of the story, Kingston concludes that her aunt's baby must have been a girl. Kingston also brings up forgiveness in this quote, implying that there is no forgiveness for girls,

because only a prized baby boy, preferable to a daughter in traditional Chinese culture, would have possibly been shown forgiveness. Thus, throughout “No Name Woman,” Kingston’s double-consciousness allows her to develop her own conclusions from the stories that her mother tells her, thus leaving Kingston to view mistakes of her dead aunt described by her mother as ways to show strength and power. Being bi-cultural allows her to reinterpret the myths of her Chinese culture from the status of an outsider. And although this can lead to confusion or alienation, Kingston finds insight by questioning the dogma of her Chinese culture. By Kingston re-telling the stories of her mother in “No Name Woman,” she finds a way to pay homage to her mother’s beliefs while accepting that she, as a Chinese American woman, can reinterpret them to arrive at new truths regarding feminine worth. And in Amy Tan’s “Two Kinds,” Jing-Mei learns something new from her mother’s stories as well.

### **Tan’s “Two Kinds”**

America was where all my mother’s hopes lay. She had come to San Francisco in 1949 after losing everything in China: her mother and father, her family, her first husband, and two daughters, twin baby girls. But she never looked back with regret. Things could get better in so many ways.

Amy Tan, “Two Kinds” (258)

In the case of Amy Tan’s short story “Two Kinds,” Jing-Mei’s mother only tells her one story – the story of her twin sisters who died back in China. Like Kingston’s mother in “No Name Woman,” here Jing-Mei’s mother tries to instill her Chinese ideals of how a proper woman should behave in her American daughter by story-telling – a link to the homeland’s idea of identity.

In the essay “Placing Identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” Anne E. Brown and Marjanne E. Gooze write that “no single or fixed definition of identity can be universally applied” (xiii). This is why instead of just looking at the mother-daughter relationship as seen in Kingston’s “No Name Woman,” this chapter also discusses the relationship with another Chinese-American family depicted through Amy Tan’s short story “Two Kinds.”

Amy Tan, like Maxine Hong Kingston, was born in the United States to immigrant Chinese parents. However, Tan is clear that her first-person story “Two Kinds” is fictional. Although it can stand alone as a short story – since it also has been published separately in the *Atlantic Monthly* – “Two Kinds” is part of the novel *The Joy Luck Club*. In “Born of a Stranger,” Gloria Shen states that characterizing the mother-daughter relationship in Tan’s work by a first-person narrative shows that the relationship is both “typical and universal” (235). A narrative becomes “universal” when the reader is brought into the story by the narrator who is also the protagonist. And when the narrator is mentioning her feelings and experiences growing up, all readers can relate better or will want to relate to such instances. Like Kingston’s “No Name Woman,” the narrator in “Two Kinds” has grown up and is writing retrospectively of her childhood in a universal manner.

“Two Kinds” takes place solely in America, unlike “No Name Woman.” The main character and narrator Jing-Mei of “Two Kinds” grows up in San Francisco during the 1950s. Because of her traumatic experiences back home in



China, Jing-Mei's mother is all for her daughter's assimilation into American culture, just as long as she reaches perfection:

Every night after dinner my mother [...] would present new tests, taking her examples from stories of amazing children that she had read in *Ripley's Believe It or Not* or *Good Housekeeping*, *Reader's Digest*, or any of a dozen other magazines she kept in a pile in our bathroom. My mother got these magazines from people whose houses she cleaned [...] She would look through them all, searching for stories about remarkable children (259).

It is because of these pressures from so-called "remarkable" prodigies that Jing-Mei grows to despise her mother, despite her mother's intentions. After being quizzed on things such as the state capitals, capital cities in Europe, magic tricks, and other trivia, Jing-Mei grows tired of her mother's tactics. More so, she feels embarrassment because she cannot quite reach her mother's standards:

And after seeing, once again, my mother's disappointed face, something inside me began to die. I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations. Before going to bed that night I looked in the mirror [...] and when I saw only my face staring back – and understood that it would always be this ordinary face – I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl! (260).

In the scene above, Jing-Mei believes that her achievement is tied to her appearance. Much like how Kingston's mother in "No Name Woman" describes achieving beauty by the Chinese ritual of removing hair from a woman's forehead, Jing-Mei has learnt that a successful Chinese woman in America achieves greatness with both her talents and her outward appearance. But despite Jing-Mei's mother wanting her to become a prodigy of looks and talents, an ethic she seems to have absorbed from U.S. society, Jing-Mei still sees an ugliness about herself when she is unable to reach her mother's standards.

And it is through this agony of not feeling good enough that Jing-Mei realizes that she does not want to become the child her mother wishes her to be. In Tan's words, "American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these things do not mix?" (qtd. in Foster 215). It is Jing-Mei's mother's Chinese character that pushes Jing-Mei into American "circumstances." By rebelling against her mother – despite having internalized American values for her daughter's benefit – the girl is rejecting her mother's dreams and asserting an identity devoid of perfection. Jing-Mei continues to look at the "ugly girl" she sees in the mirror, as anger and rebellion become sources of her identity:

And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me – a face I had never seen before [...] The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. She and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts – or, rather, thoughts filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not (260).

Part of the plan to remain unchanged by her mother includes Jing-Mei not taking her daily piano lessons seriously. In fact, Jing-Mei's instructor is slightly deaf and partially blind, making it easier for Jing-Mei to "be lazy and get away with mistakes, lots of mistakes" (263). So much so, that Jing-Mei utterly embarrasses her parents at a local talent show because she is unprepared. After playing her terrible recital of the piece "Pleading Child" – whose title itself signifies the inadequacy of a child – Jing-Mei feels "the shame of [her] mother and father as they sat stiffly though the rest of the show" (265). For not only has she made a fool of herself in front of her parents, but before the entire audience as well. The worst part, however, is what Jing-Mei observes from her mother – "a

quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything” (265), telling Jing-Mei that her mother sees only hyperbolic success as the way to assimilate in America.

It is through this incident where we see the intensifying conflict between the immigrant mother and her bi-cultural daughter. Only two days after the terrible recital, Jing-Mei’s mother tells her to practice the piano again. After yelling back and forth to each other, her mother pulls Jing-Mei towards the piano and shoves her hard onto the bench. A tear-streaked Jing-Mei replies: “You want me to be someone that I’m not! [...] I’ll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!” Jing-Mei’s mother says, “Only two kinds of daughters [...] Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!” (266).

It isn’t until this fight between the two that we see the mother’s loss while fleeing China years before as being a contributing factor to the relationship between Chinese-American Jing-Mei and her immigrant mother. Up until now, Jing-Mei’s mother has tried to force American talents on to her daughter. Not realizing that Jing-Mei’s mentality of rebelling against parental rules is truly American, her mother is frustrated by Jing-Mei’s resistance. And finally, at the story’s climax, Jing-Mei uses the most powerful weapon she can think of to attack her mother:

And I could sense her anger rising to its breaking point. I wanted to see it spill over. And that’s when I remembered the babies she had lost in China, the ones we never talked about. “Then I wish I’d never been born!” I shouted. “I wish I were dead! Like them” (266).

Immediately, the retrospective Jing-Mei wishes she hadn’t said those words. But at the moment, she did feel that way. Jing-Mei, although still just a child, felt that

if she could not do what she wanted to do – if she could not be the American girl that she knew she was – then she would rather not live in her mother’s house. She would rather be dead than have to abide by her Chinese mother’s rules.

Carmen Faymonville touches on Jing-Mei’s feelings when she quotes Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* that “many daughters seek to become the opposite of their mothers in order to find their own identity but discover gradually that they remain deeply connected by the umbilical cord” (129). This is seen towards the end of “Two Kinds” when Jing-Mei is an adult, her mother is dead, and she returns to her parents’ apartment. She picks up the same music that she failed to play at the talent show, and “for the first time, or so it seemed, I noticed the piece on the right-hand side” (Tan 268). She realizes that both pieces are part of a larger piece. Whereas she struggled to play “Pleading Child” when she was younger, now she is able to play both that and the second piece titled “Perfectly Contented” and realize that both “were two halves of the same song” (268). Furthermore, all of the practices that Jing-Mei’s mother forced her to endure paid off in the end because she now plays the piano well enough. After all these years, It isn’t until Jing-Mei plays both pieces that she realizes just how deeply she remains connected to her mother. Because unlike her mother, Jing-Mei “did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be” (267) – an American ideology that her mother had adopted for her daughter.

Because Jing-Mei is both Chinese and American, growing up she thought that her hybridity meant that she couldn’t become great. And so, instead of living up to her nightmares of failure, she instead failed to live up to her mother’s

dreams of success. M. Marie Booth Foster asserts in “Voice, Mind, Self” that these “problems of biculturalism” are seen when “daughters who do not know their mothers’ ‘importance’ [...] cannot know their own” (225). It wasn’t until going back to her mother’s house as an adult that Jing-Mei realizes that it is possible to be both pleading and content.

In “Americanization and Hybridization in *The Hundred Secret Senses* by Amy Tan,” Lina Unali writes about the hybridized woman and how a “balanced blend” is more acceptable than a “dilution” (116). Both Kingston and Tan dramatize the conflict that leads to a “balanced blend,” allowing the Chinese and the American aspects of themselves to coexist. Both “No Name Woman” and “Two Kinds” successfully depict the struggles that an immigrant mother and her bicultural daughter go through, and bring awareness to this particular mother-daughter dyad in America.

## CHAPTER TWO

Failed Dreams and Dreaming of More in the Polish-American Mother-Daughter Dyad: Leslie Pietrzyk's "Those Places I've Been," "Blue Beads," and "Best Friends"

Like Maxine Hong Kingston in "No Name Woman" and Jing-Mei in Amy Tan's "Two Kinds," the family of women in Leslie Pietrzyk's stories consist of more than one generation of women, with Pietrzyk's stories consisting of first-, second- and third-generation Americans. All the women hear tales about their ethnic homeland from previous generations, and like their Chinese counterparts, the Polish-American women in Pietrzyk's *Pears on a Willow Tree* must maneuver within the two cultures that form their double identities. Three stories in *Pears on a Willow Tree* – "Those Places I've Been," "Blue Beads," and "Best Friends" – focus on the characters Helen and Ginger struggling to integrate their ethnic Polish heritage with the Polish-American culture of Detroit, Michigan. Just as Helen's mother Rose, born in Poland, tells her cautionary stories of what is considered to be proper in the Polish culture, Helen continues this trend with her rebellious daughter Ginger. Ginger's desire to break from her family's traditions – although never wholly successful anyway – comes at a cost: she becomes an alcoholic. And Ginger's daughter Amy, like many third and fourth-generation Americans, takes a greater interest in her roots.

But each generation, more or less, reflects the amount of time it spent immersed in both Polish and American cultures. And by the time it is American-

born Ginger's turn to grow up and hear the stories of the Polish women before her, she has decided to fully embrace American ideals. This decision creates adverse feelings in both Helen and Ginger, and this mother-daughter relationship continues to be hostile until Helen's death. Like in Tan's "Two Kinds," Ginger doesn't fully appreciate her mother until after she is gone. Before she herself dies too, she tries to make amends with her own daughter Amy. And like Kingston in "No Name Woman," Helen adds her own interpretations to the stories told by her mother Rose in order to become the Polish-American woman she chooses to be.

### **"Those Places I've Been"**

The kitchen is the kitchen. It's where we laugh and cry, share secrets and think about the secrets we don't dare tell. It's where we ask questions and where, maybe, we find answers. Am I a mother or a daughter, a wife or a woman, someone who wants to leave or needs to stay?

Leslie Pietrzyk, "Those Places I've Been" (171)

"Those Places I've Been" is written in first-person with Helen, a second-generation Polish American, narrating the story. It is one of sixteen interlocking short stories in Leslie Pietrzyk's *Pears on a Willow Tree*. Taking place in Detroit, Michigan in 1967, Helen admits to the reader the many U.S. states she hasn't traveled to, by showing us the rooms in her house that represent different places. Helen says that she "never once left Detroit, so [she doesn't] know, not really, not much at all" (Pietrzyk 152). But although she has never physically traveled to these places, her inner longing and knowledge of the world are seen in the way she names her respective rooms: New York City is the busy entryway to her home (151), California is her sunny living room (153), New Orleans is her dining

room where men and women gather (156), Hawaii is her dark and exotic bedroom (160), and although not explicitly stated, her kitchen is like Poland in that it “smells like bacon in the morning, fried bologna at lunch, and sauerkraut or *kielbasa* at supper” (171).

The naming of her house shows just how much Helen relates to both her American and Polish cultures, especially since her parents came to the United States as Polish immigrants. Her mother and father both sailed to America around 1919 before Helen and her sisters were born. According to *A History of the Poles in America to 1908*, Waclaw Kruszkka writes that “[d]ue to the massive immigration of peasant folk, Polish settlements in America grew rapidly in number and strength after 1870 [...]” (36). He writes later that by 1904, there were at least one million Polish immigrants living in the U.S. (39). And since Helen’s father and mother were part of the first waves of Polish migration to America, it is only natural that they carried with them a strong sense of pride towards their homeland of Poland.

So although Helen was born shortly after her parents emigrated from Poland to America and thus raised Helen in the United States, all her life Helen has identified more with her Polish ethnicity and culture. This is seen in all of the descriptions of her kitchen, which is implicitly described in contrast to the living room – “where the men and the children sit when the whole family gets together, when there’s company. I don’t know what they talk about; all I know is that it’s different than what I talk about with the women in the kitchen” (Pietrzyk 153). Since Helen lives in a predominantly Polish neighborhood in Detroit, surrounded



by her mother and all of her sisters and their families, the only people who frequent the kitchen are her Polish relatives.

But now Helen is a widow, her daughter Ginger lives with her own husband and two children in Arizona, and the noise and bustle of constantly being surrounded by family no longer exist in Helen's home:

Now, coming through the front entryway puts me into a different place because my husband is gone forever. My daughter moved all the way to Arizona nine years ago, and my husband passed away in early spring, and I'm a widow, standing in the front entryway, but the only thing I hear is silence, what used to be here, what isn't here anymore. (152)

Even the kitchen, the one place where Helen and the rest of the women in her family could share stories with one another, is empty. Now with both her husband and daughter gone, Helen only has to cook enough food for herself. Since less food means fewer used dishes, tasks such as washing her plate after dinner become unnecessary:

The kitchen door slapped open, then closed – surely my mother [...] She would see that I hadn't washed last night's supper dishes; what I was thinking was, why waste all that soap lather on so few dishes? (163)

Immediately after overhearing Helen's thoughts, we see Helen's mother "running hot water into the plastic dish tub" (163) and doing Helen's dishes for her. Like this scene tells us, Helen rarely openly acknowledges her bicultural self to her family, especially to her mother. She, instead, follows her mother's traditions because it is the right thing for a Polish woman to do. And "like a shadow," Helen follows these traditions automatically, despite sometimes wanting to do something else (168).

The main and very un-shadow-like thing that Helen wants to do in this story is add to the short list of places where she has traveled. She wants to pack up her bags and travel to Arizona to visit, and maybe even live with, her daughter Ginger:

“Maybe I’ll move to Phoenix. Instead of Ginger coming back here, I’ll leave and go there.” That was the idea that came into my mind this morning when I was sitting in the sun in the living room, but now was the first time to say the words out loud. They sounded like nothing I’d ever said before, like having a dream and then seeing in daylight that it had really happened. (155)

Prior to Ginger’s departure, Helen’s mother Rose was the only one who left her mother’s home and her entire family behind for better opportunities. “I never saw my mother again. That’s what I paid for my family to be in this country,” is what Rose tells Helen in the kitchen (164). Here, we see the immigrant mother using her own cautionary tale to warn her daughter that she should not leave home, and that it is only natural that a daughter should be where her mother is. So when Helen tells her mother of her plans to move to Arizona to be with Ginger, Rose says, “No daughter should leave her mother [...] So Ginger will come home” (164).

Apart from being a cautionary tale of hardship for the daughter who leaves and heartbreak for the mother left behind, Rose is exhibiting her own power over her daughter by telling Helen of the immense sacrifice that she made in order to come to America. In her dissertation “‘Talking Story’: the Evolution of the Mother/Daughter Relationship in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Immigrant Women’s Writing,” Patianne D. Stabile writes that “the mother’s power frightens and compels [the daughter] rather than nurtures” (11). Following this idea that Rose’s maternal

power can influence Helen, it is clear why Helen physically does what her mother tells her to do, even though she may not fully agree with her – essentially choosing her mother over her daughter Ginger. And when Rose convinces Helen to stay because “Ginger will come [back] home,” Helen stays in Detroit.

But Helen knows that her daughter Ginger will never want to come back home and live with her:

She could've asked if she should leave, and I would've known to say no. Or if she'd asked if we'd miss her, I would've said yes. Or maybe those questions weren't so easy either, not when the open suitcase was there on the floor and she was maybe really going to go, the first one to leave, my only daughter, Ginger, who in so many ways wasn't like any of us but who was us. She wanted her own stories, was that so wrong? (Pietrzyk 162)

It is at this point in the story when we realize just how much Helen sacrifices for both her mother *and* her daughter. Helen understands her mother's Polish customs and stories, but she also understands Ginger's thirst for freedom, asking herself, “was that so wrong” that Ginger wanted to create her own stories? Essentially, Helen sacrifices herself, her yearning, as both a mother and a daughter. As a self-sacrificing mother she doesn't try and stop Ginger from moving to Arizona. And as a self-sacrificing daughter, Helen listens to everything her mother says, and makes her decisions based on what will benefit her Polish family.

Part of Helen listening to her mother meant not going to visit Ginger in Arizona. Rose thought that it was wrong for a Polish daughter to want to live her own life, and make her own stories. And when Helen insists on wanting to leave Detroit, Rose tells her, “Ginger is the one like this, not you” (159). In other words,

Ginger is the American thinker and the one willing to sacrifice her mother's well-being for her own. In a way, Rose sees herself in her granddaughter Ginger because they both were able to move away from home, despite what it did to their mothers. And in a final act, Rose simply has to compare her daughter Helen to Ginger in order to get what she wants – all of her daughters with her in Detroit.

By Helen not wanting to be compared to her daughter Ginger, she is exhibiting an opposite form of matrophobia. With the typical case, the daughter has a fear of becoming her mother (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 235). But here, Helen would rather compare herself to her mother than her daughter, exhibiting a type of sororophobia, described by Su-Lin Yu in "Sisterhood as Cultural Differences in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* and Cristina Garcia's *The Aguero Sisters*" as a "bond between women [that] provides a safe space in which to articulate friction between them" (2006). This "friction," articulated by Helen's wish to see her daughter Ginger, is resolved after Rose reminds Helen who she is – a daughter that cares more about family than self.

However, the friction between Helen and Ginger never gets resolved. Yu goes on to quote Helena Michie saying that Sororophobia

[...] is about negotiation; it attempts to describe the negotiation of sameness and difference, identity and separation, between women [...] and is meant to encompass both the desire for and the recoil from identification with other women [...] it is a matrix against and through which women work out – or fail to work out – their differences. (Michie qtd. in Yu, 2006).

Thus, seeing as Helen chooses not to travel to Arizona to visit Ginger, this particular mother-daughter dyad fails to work out their differences. Helen realizes how much Ginger's actions hurt her, while she stays in Detroit to be the daughter

that her own mother Rose wants her to be – the type of daughter who works out differences by giving in to her mother.

Helen does it her “mother’s way,” as do all of her sisters in every aspect of their lives, and obeys her mother’s command. Pushing back her own shadowy death of having to deal with Ginger living so far away from her, Helen decides to stay in Detroit with her mother, knowing all too well that “when a daughter left, the mother died” (Pietrzyk 155). So as to prevent the heartache of her mother Rose, Helen takes on her own heartache. And like a good Polish woman, she stays with her mother.

By continuing to live at home in Detroit, Helen continues to adopt characteristics of her mother – an observation that Carol Boyd discusses in her article “Mother-Daughter Identification: Polish and Polish-American Mothers and Their Adult Daughters.” Here Boyd observes “the process by which a mother and her daughter internalize characteristics of each other” (181). Boyd’s study shows that within Polish-American families, mothers and daughters rated differently “the concepts *son*, *unpleasant*, *family*, *husband*, and *daughter*; however, there are more similar ratings within both Polish-born mothers and daughters” (188). Helen definitely sees these concepts of family like her mother Rose taught her to. And although Helen is nationally Polish-American, she consciously takes on the roles of a proper Polish woman – as taught to her by her mother Rose.

Rose, like her mother before her, embodies the ideal of the self-sacrificing Polish woman. In the article “Why Did We Not Become Feminists? Women in Poland,” Eva Stachniak writes the following of the Polish Mother:

*Matka Polka* [Polish Mother], a vision of venerated motherhood, a model for all women, became the fortress against foreign oppression in the sacred sphere of private life. *Matka Polka* made sure that her family retained Polishness, patriotism [...] In return the society granted her a sacred place in the national consciousness. Motherhood was lifted from the private domain to a position in the patriotic struggle for the nation's future. That's where the often referred to honor and veneration of Polish women came from, but the same process was also the source of most severe restrictions. For a woman who wanted to place her own needs on an equal footing with those of her family was not just seeking self-fulfillment. She was betraying her country, her patriotic duty, and her religious obligations. What made her powerful tied her down (71).

Helen, like the rest of her sisters, honors her *Matka Polka* Rose. To her daughters, Rose is all of the above. She "retained Polishness" in her family by teaching her daughters how to cook, clean and garden and raise a Polish family, she remains firmly patriotic about her native Poland, and she places her family's needs above those of her own – much like Helen. And when Rose asks Helen to remain in Detroit she implies that the proper thing for a *Matka Polka* to do is stay with her family. However, Rose may just as well be playing the martyr and manipulating her family by making them feel guilty for Rose having to give up Poland for their life in America.

Thus, Helen puts aside the ambivalence she feels towards her ethnic Polish heritage, despite what it does to her own relationship with her own daughter, because she must become the *Matka Polka* Rose has raised her to be. Rose teaches Helen and the rest of her daughters to "Iron like this, wash your dishes like that, fix your cabbage this way not that way. Go to church and trust in God" (Pietrzyk, 152). Although this story takes place in the 1960's, Helen has grown up with these rules her entire life. Whether it is her willpower or her

personality that keeps her sane, despite wanting to do one thing but always succumbing to the will of her mother instead, Helen is able to live in America while staying in agreement with her Polish mother. Yes, she questions her mother at times. Like when she asks her “How big is an ocean?” and her mother replies with the parable-like saying, “If we knew how far from one side, we wouldn’t leave” (153). Helen tells her readers that her mother’s “answers were like that, never quite saying what you wanted to know. But in school I learned distances and miles, and that wasn’t the right answer either” (154). In school, Helen learned things that were scientific and mechanistic. And because of that, she cannot follow her mother blindly, like her actions would lead us to believe. She thinks before she acts, even though most of her actions are in alignment with her mother’s ideals.

Something that is important to note is the line, “But in school I learned distances and miles, and that wasn’t the right answer either” (154). Perhaps Helen agrees with her mother’s stories and teachings not only to appease her, but because she sees the alternative viewpoint as being just as unacceptable. In “Cultures In-Between,” also quoted in chapter one of this thesis, Homi Bhabha quotes T.S. Eliot’s *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* saying that “people have taken with them only a part of the total culture...The culture which develops on the new soil must therefore be bafflingly alike and different from the parent culture [...]” (Eliot qtd. in Bhabha 54). Likewise, Helen’s understanding of the world, although definitely more Polish than her daughter Ginger’s understanding, is also more American than Rose’s understanding. And since Helen is right in the

middle of these two cultural ways of thinking, rather than assimilating completely into the country of her birth, she sides with the mother who raised her to be a woman with strong Polish ideals. And the consequence of Helen choosing to side with her mother Rose is seen in the story “Blue Beads” – when Helen’s daughter Ginger, who feels more of an outcast from her Polish family than ever before, returns to Detroit for Rose’s funeral.

### **“Blue Beads”**

“The rosary is not for things. The rosary is for who, why, how. Life is questions, God is questions.” She looked at me until I nodded, then she said, “Some questions are more important than answers,” and I nodded again though I couldn’t imagine how that could be true.

Leslie Pietrzyk, “Blue Beads” (47)

“Blue Beads,” like “Those Places I’ve Been,” is one of the many stories of Polish and Polish-American traditions that interlock with the rest of Leslie Pietrzyk’s *Pears on a Willow Tree*. But unlike “Those Places I’ve Been,” this story looks at three mother-daughter dyads: Rose and Helen, Helen and Ginger, and Ginger and Amy, with Ginger’s narrative and her relationship to her grandmother’s prayer beads at the center of her alcoholism and crumbling marriage. In the selection above, Ginger is remembering her grandmother Rose’s words about prayer when she was still a young girl living at home in Detroit. Ginger – although now having little to no ties to Polish Catholicism – remembers as a child wondering what incredible things her grandmother could possibly be asking God for, over and over again. It is then when Rose tells Ginger that sometimes the act of asking is more important than the answers that do or do not



come. In “Joy in Repetition: Poetry, Prayer, and the Purpose of Rhythm,” D. Graham Burnett writes the following of how reciting the rosary originated from reciting psalms:

A lingering sense around the exercise implied that this invocation of the psalm cycle could garner its devotees the merit of the psalms themselves by means of a mystical act of “completion” – what you did not say, indeed, what you did not even know, the angels might sing for you. (12)

Although the tone of Burnett’s article is quite skeptical, here he makes a valid point that is taken seriously by devout Catholics, particularly the *Matka Polka* Rose – who just happens to have a name that is in the very root of the word rosary. This repetitive prayer is the motion of spiritual fortitude – *trwanie* – which means endurance, and can sometimes take the form of a passive waiting out of difficult times. By waiting out and asking questions over and over to God, Rose is taking part in a tradition of prayer and meditation that began centuries ago. But more importantly, she is taking part in a tradition that was completed by her mother in Poland, herself in America, and her daughter Helen. And now, when this story takes place, Rose is dead. But by her teaching Ginger the rosary as a child, Rose hopes that the tradition will carry on with her granddaughter.

“Blue Beads” takes place in 1969, two years after the previous story where Helen tries to build up enough courage to travel to Arizona to see Ginger. Here, Ginger has come back to Detroit for the funeral of her grandmother, Rose. Ginger brings her daughter Amy and son Cal along, while she tells the rest of her family in Detroit that her estranged husband Jimmy is on a “business trip” (Pietrzyk 39).

Because Ginger feels like an outcast in her own family, she'd rather lie to them than tell the truth. An example of this is seen in the very first scene when as soon as Ginger steps out of her car, her mother Helen tells her, "She died" (33). The plan was for Ginger to get to Detroit before her sick grandmother passed away, but that hadn't happened. And instead of telling the truth – that Ginger was hung over – she tells her mother that she was delayed because the "car overheated" (33). Later, when Ginger is trying to get her daughter Amy to go to sleep, Ginger thinks about the lie that she told her mother:

I'd done nothing wrong. It was a matter of saying what had to be said. Like about the car, when the truth was I'd had a wish-I-were-dead hangover so the kids played in the pool at the Holiday Inn one or two days we should've been driving. (37-8)

Ginger seems to find nothing wrong in the little lies she tells her Polish family members because she relates more to the lifestyle and culture she experiences away from them in Arizona. Lying then becomes part of an ambivalence in Ginger because she wishes to live down her ancestry through avoidance rather than through outright confrontation. When commenting on her past she says, "The truth was, let's say I'd been [in Detroit] all my life. There would be no difference. Even when I was here, I had nothing to say to them" (38). By using the word "them" when referring to her blood relatives, Ginger is not only physically distancing herself from her family, she's mentally doing so as well.

Ginger's ambivalent ideas towards her Polish family is seen when she thinks of her relatives as folk "who liked to think they knew [her], all those people who thought [she] belonged to them" (46). And it is no surprise that Ginger's

ambivalence to her background correlates with embarrassing events of her life, such as the vicious rumors her cousin spread:

When I left Detroit after high school, [my cousin] June was the one to tell everybody I was going to a home for unwed mothers and that I'd be back in exactly six and a half months. "The skinny ones don't show," I heard she'd said, and there were plenty of people who believed her. She ended up marrying one of the brothers of my high school boyfriend, and damn if I didn't get her wedding veil UPS a week after her wedding. (38-9)

Unlike June and the rest of her cousins for that matter, Ginger was the only one who left Detroit. She was the only one that married a non-Polish man too, further adding insult to the injury of her Polish family.

Another example of Ginger's ambivalence is found when she remembers the many Polish stories her family associated with grandmother Rose. Everyone believed that Rose knew when her daughters and grandchildren were lying because she could "look into the deepest part of your soul" (41). That is, everyone believed except Ginger:

When I was old enough to know that being away from the house Saturdays at four meant not having to go to confession, I was also old enough to know that when they thought I was lying and my grandmother looked at me to see into the deepest part of my soul, she cleared her throat not because she knew I was lying, but because she didn't know. Either there was no truth in me, or it was where she couldn't see it. That's how alone I felt, how alone I was. (47)

Ginger's skepticism of her grandmother's mystical powers leads her to a kind of nihilism, leaving her alone on an island of unbelief in a sea of her family's faith. Even now, at the funeral gathering of her grandmother, Ginger still feels alone because she cannot relate to the stories and traditions of her Polish family. And just as she finds it easy to lie to her family, she is also quick to point out that

there is “no truth” in herself because the ambivalence she feels towards the heritage of her mother and grandmother really is ambivalence towards herself as well.

Ginger continues to have contradictory feelings about her religion and her mother Helen even after the funeral begins. The climactic moment in the story – which crystallizes Helen’s, Ginger’s and Amy’s attitudes towards Polish Catholicism – involves Helen stealing her dead mother’s blue rosary from the coffin, unknowing that Amy sees the whole thing. Ginger is still unsure about whether or not her daughter did see her mother Helen switch out the beads, so Ginger checks her mother’s purse to make sure:

[...] I felt like crap, everything was crap, dying was crap, and why I did this, I don’t know – I guess because I knew I wasn’t really one of them – but a few minutes later I went through my mother’s purse, pretending I needed a tissue, and there was the rosary. (48)

And just like Helen sided with her mother Rose in “Those Places I’ve Been” by listening to her and not going off to Arizona, Ginger chooses to side with her mother Helen by not ratting her out to the family. However, by choosing to side with her mother, Ginger chooses the Polish culture that Helen represents instead of choosing the American one that her daughter Amy represents – an American culture that Ginger tried all her life to fit into. And just like her mother before her, Ginger – if only for this moment – sacrifices the relationship she has with her daughter in order to protect her mother by keeping her mother’s secret that she really did take Rose’s prayer beads.

And it is the mother figure, or the *Matka Polka* figure that has a lasting presence throughout the stories in *Pears on a Willow Tree*, especially since it

deals with four generations of Polish-American women all brought up – with the exception of Amy – in a very Catholic home. In the essay “Mary, Mother of the Eternal Priest and Ultimate Nurturer,” Denise Pencola writes that “Mary is not only the first disciple but she is the supreme Mother and ultimate nurturer, certainly an exemplary role model for all disciples to emulate” (3) – although, her dual state as virgin and mother becomes impossible for any woman to emulate absolutely. Nevertheless, it is no wonder that the mother is revered in the Polish community, and especially in Ginger’s very Polish family in Detroit. If Mary is the role model for all disciples, the *Matka Polka* is the role model for all women. And although Ginger isn’t anything like her mother Helen, the moment she sees the rosary in her mother’s purse, Ginger knows that she must go along with Helen’s side of the story because she is the closest thing Ginger has now to a Polish Mother, particularly since her grandmother Rose is dead.

But despite seeking her mother’s approval in sporadic acts like siding with Helen at Rose’s funeral, Ginger still reveals signs of matrophobia in “Blue Beads” because she claims to not want to end up like her mother or anyone else in her Polish family. Ginger has been locked inside her bicultural identity all her life by being constantly compared to her cousins in high school, and being forced to take part in religious practices she doesn’t fully believe in. And because she could not conform to her Polish ethnicity she grew to despise it. Her negative feelings toward her Polish Catholic family, especially after what transpired at her grandmother’s funeral, cause Ginger to flee to a bar. After she gets completely drunk, her mother and cousin find her there:

I nodded at the bartender for another drink, which he brought over, sloshing it a bit on the bar. I ran my sleeve through the spill, sopping it up. In the mirror, June turned away, probably deciding exactly how she'd tell this story to everyone, how to start, what details to give, the expression on her face [...] My mother shook her head. "This isn't really you." I laughed. "You never had any idea who I was." (Pietrzyk 49)

By Helen seeing her only child drunk in a bar, she immediately denies Ginger's behavior because as a mother, Helen feels that she knows who her daughter is and what her daughter is like. As with her own mother, Helen tries to keep the peace through avoidance. And in her moment of sadness, shock, and a little denial, Helen tells Ginger, "This isn't really you." Ginger has been hiding her alcoholism from her family because her opinion of herself is so low. And like any daughter or child that feels misunderstood amid an oblique moment of truth telling, Ginger tells her mother that she "never had any idea who [she] was."

Ginger believes that her mother Helen failed to discover her true identity while she was growing up in Detroit. And whether or not Ginger means to, it is as if she blames her mother for her current life that led to her alcoholism. In the article "The Effect of the Mother on the Success of the Daughter," Ruth Moulton writes that if "the mother does not encourage and reinforce her daughter [...] the resulting discouragement can undermine the daughter and result in extreme anxiety and a tendency to fail" (266). In other words, if the mother does not encourage her daughter, the lack of positive reinforcement leaves only discouragement for the daughter and a bigger chance at her failing. Unfortunately, this "tendency to fail" is reflected in Ginger's life, especially since she feels her choices and actions have never been accepted by her mother who

tries to instill all of her own Polish values on her. Though it is obvious that Helen didn't purposely impede Ginger's ability to succeed as a wife and mother, the cultural rules that Helen followed were too narrow for Ginger; and she is forced to break them without being able to rightfully explain why she does so.

Yet, there is a moment in the bar when Ginger realizes that Helen may know more about her than she realizes. After the initial confrontation in the bar, Helen hands Ginger the blue beads of her mother's rosary and tells her, "You're family even when you don't want to be, Ginger [...] Don't forget to take this with you [...] It's yours now" (Pietrzyk 49-50). Just this simple gesture throws Ginger off balance, if only for a short while. Up until then, she thought that she felt like she never fit in with her Polish family. But by Helen giving her the rosary that she took from her own mother Rose, Helen shows Ginger that her Polish identity has been a part of her all along. So when the bartender tells Ginger she needs to be getting home, Ginger replies with "I am home" (50) – not just because she's an alcoholic and feels at home in a bar, but also because she is in Detroit with her family.

When Ginger sobers up a bit, she no longer feels like her mother is trying to force her Polish culture onto her lifestyle. Instead, she feels some regret that she can't be more like the *Matka Polka* her mother and grandmother are: "My mother had stolen and lied to get this rosary. But with me, it would end up lost, broken, dropped into a drawer, forgotten. Didn't she know that about me?" (50). Ginger wants to continue her Polish Catholic traditions, but knows that she cannot, especially with her impending alcoholism. And in an act of unselfishness,

she gives the rosary to her daughter Amy. Ginger realizes that a great family tradition must carry on, even if it is not through her. Ginger thinks to herself, later, as she and her two children are driving back to Arizona, “How did someone like me have a daughter who knew with such certainty what to do, how to do it, why it had to be done that way?” In other words, how could a bicultural woman like Ginger – who is only now realizing how much she identifies with her Polish background – raise a daughter who turned out to be more like Helen, more integrated in ethnic traditions than herself, and better able to face problems head on instead of hiding behind alcoholism?

### **“Best Friends”**

“So I became a mother and a wife. Like my mother before me, and her mother and back into the past, and like a long mirror looking into itself, there you were. I knew you’d be beautiful. I knew you’d be smart. I knew you’d be able to tell a joke well. I knew people would like you. I knew one day you’d leave.”

Leslie Pietrzyk, “Best Friends” (235)

We see just how well Ginger raises her daughter Amy in the epistolary story “Best Friends.” But more so, we see how much Ginger’s mothering reflects what she thought of her own mother’s parenting. The third to last story in Pietrzyk’s *Pears on a Willow Tree*, “Best Friends” is the last one narrated by Ginger. Helen and Rose are both dead by this point. And by the time we get to this story, Amy has left Arizona to teach in Thailand, thereby sharing something with her great-grandmother Rose and her mother Ginger – the only other women in her family who were able to leave their own mothers. As opposed to Ginger’s other narrative “Blue Beads,” we see more in “Best Friends” what she thinks



about her alcoholism especially during Amy's adolescent years. And through the letters that Ginger writes to Amy – both mailed and unsent – we catch much more than a glimpse of the mother-daughter relationship that Ginger and Amy had; we see the more pressing relationship between Ginger and her mother Helen.

It's ironic that the title of this story is "Best Friends" because the relationship between Ginger and Amy, as well as Ginger's relationship with her mother Helen, is anything but similar to an ideal friendship. Taking place back in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1987, it has now been eighteen years since Rose's funeral in "Blue Beads," and Amy has had to put up with her alcoholic mother for twenty-four years. When Ginger asks Amy why she suddenly decided to move away for a while, Amy responds, "I should've left a long time ago" (Pietrzyk 224).

One of the possible reasons Amy might have wanted to leave can be found in Ginger's narration of an event from Amy's youth. When asking her mother questions from a magazine to determine whether or not someone is alcoholic, the then fourteen-year-old Amy and Ginger start to argue over the reasons why Jim divorced Ginger. Amy claims that it was because of Ginger's alcoholism, but Ginger denies it. Amy doesn't stop accusing her mother, however, and tells Ginger that Jim said, "[...] you're a stinking, disgusting drunk, and you're always embarrassing everyone by drinking too much wherever you go" (220). And as Ginger "lean[s] toward [Amy] the way you lean when you're about to hug someone," she slaps her daughter instead (231).

The reader isn't told whether or not Ginger ever lovingly embraced her daughter Amy. However, Amy not flinching away as Ginger walks towards her proves one of two things: either Amy was used to getting hugs, or Amy hoped that she would receive one. But it wasn't only Ginger's physical abuse that affected her relationship with Amy, especially since Ginger claims to only have hit her daughter that one time. The psychological abuse that Ginger put Amy through was far worse, as seen in the following quote where Ginger remembers that Amy

[...] screamed that you hated me (like I'd heard you say several times before), but I screamed back that I hated you, too. Your jaw went suddenly slack, still, your eyes widened. You were surprised to learn that a mother might hate a child, even for an instant. We stood in front of the hall mirror, and as I watched your face, I looked beyond it to see my own. I remember thinking, So that's what a mother who hates her daughter looks like. (223)

The last line in the above quote has a double meaning. The first is that Ginger admits to hating her daughter, even if it was for "only that single instant" (223). But more than that is the shock that Ginger felt when she saw her reflection in the mirror and realized that she had never seen it before – meaning that although Ginger couldn't wait to leave Detroit when she was eighteen, she always knew that her mother loved her because she never saw hate in her face. In fact, Ginger describes the day she left Detroit as a day when

My mother cried, my grandmother, my aunts, my cousins all cried. Even my father slipped off his glasses and wiped at his eyes with a handkerchief [...] and it wasn't until halfway down the block that I realized I hadn't cried. I remember thinking, Now I'm going to cry, I'm going to cry because I should have, and I didn't. The entire bus trip I didn't. (226)

The quote above further reiterates that although Helen isn't physically in the story "Best Friends," Ginger's relationship with her mother is reflected in Ginger's relationship with her daughter. Ginger, writing to Amy, asks her "Are you surprised?" (226) that she didn't cry when leaving her Polish family. But Ginger is also asking herself, "Did you expect something else?" In other words, for someone who spent all of her life feeling alienated from her family, the only logical outcome was not to shed any tears for them when she left Detroit.

Much like in "Blue Beads" when Ginger remembers all the reasons why she is ambivalent towards her ethnic heritage, Ginger writes about the instances that feed her ambivalence and writes about them to Amy in "Best Friends." In a letter filled with excuses as to why she wasn't a good mother to Amy, Ginger writes:

It wasn't easy for me. Isn't that how we all begin an apology, by apologizing to ourselves first? I had no idea how to be a wife, how to be a mother. All I knew – maybe all anyone knows? – is that I didn't want what I'd seen [...] I hated Detroit, hated being Polish, hated the way my grandmother spoke so slowly in English, so carefully, each word made of glass. (225)

Although the version of matrophobia that Ginger expressed in "Blue Beads" is one that stems from being unlike her mother, in "Best Friends" Ginger blatantly states that she willed herself to be the exact opposite of her mother. It was no longer an issue of being born a certain way, and being physically inclined to behave a certain way. "All I knew [...] is that I didn't want what I'd seen" (225). But Ginger didn't take into consideration how her life choices would impact the wants and needs of her daughter Amy until she had already grown up:

I always thought about you and your brother, about what I was doing to you. I wanted you to love me. I wanted to be a good mother, the best mother – fun and young and fresh and free and all the things my mother, trapped in Detroit, wasn't. And I was some of those things. I know I was. You must love me, I'm your mother. You do love me? (233)

In her own insecurity, Ginger sought from her daughter unconditional love. And although in this instance Ginger claims to have thought about her children's well-being, she was really thinking about herself because she defined all of her actions based on what she *didn't* want to be – a mother like her own, Helen.

The only life lessons Ginger picks up from Helen are ways to not live like her mother and the rest of her Polish family:

The food we ate was slow and heavy, dense, took too many bites to chew [...] We all looked alike, my cousins and I were confused with one another at school and church. That made me feel I'd never get out, knowing that months after I was gone, someone was calling my cousin Theresa "Ginger." (226)

Ginger's ambivalence also may have stemmed from the anti-Polish sentiment that was common in the industrial U.S. during the time of her adolescence, given the prejudice of "Polak" jokes, whose punch lines emphasized Polish stupidity, as seen in the story "The Wanting-To-Be-An-Artist Summer," also part of Pietrzyk's *Pears on a Willow Tree*. Here, Amy hears Polak jokes from another girl and even repeats one of them in front of Ginger and Helen. In "The Image and Self-Image of Polish Americans," John J. Bukowczyk writes that it wasn't until "broad familiarity with and approval" of the Polish Pope John Paul II, that the image of Polish Americans began to improve (78). Although Bukowczyk mentions the idea of self-parody among Polish populations in the United States, it is clear that Ginger found nothing funny about her traditional Polish home.

Growing up was hard for Ginger because she felt pressured by her family into having an identity associated with the rest of them. She was always part of the group, whether it was cooking in the kitchen with her aunts or going to church with her cousins. Ginger couldn't even hide the fact that she and her relatives looked alike – further grouping her as being Polish, and not seeing her as a multifaceted, bicultural young woman. And tragically, Ginger became an alcoholic wife and mother because this pressure was too much for her to handle. She simply could not share her family's pride in being Polish. And although it would be unfair to place all of the blame on her alcoholism on the fact that she is bicultural, trying to live up to the Polish American standards set by her family did take a toll on her mental and physical health. Like her mother Helen who always put her Polish culture above her daughter, Ginger always put her disdain for her Polish culture above her own daughter Amy, showing that no matter which ethnic path Ginger chose, there was still some sort of heartache in the end because she never felt complete.

## CHAPTER THREE

Realizing How Past Meets Present in the Haitian Mother-Daughter Dyad:

Edwidge Danticat's "New York Day Women" and "Caroline's Wedding"

Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian American author whose story collection *Krik? Krak!* was a National Book Award Finalist, came to the United States in 1981 when she was just twelve years old, and published her first work in America two years later in a collection by New York City teenagers. *Krik? Krak!*, unlike Danticat's much acclaimed first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, follows many women across different generations, taking place both in Haiti and in the United States. Danticat's collection is appropriately named *Krik? Krak!* because by writing about the generations of Haitian women who have struggled to survive in a war-torn Haiti and the alien society of American culture, Danticat is answering back to the women who came before her. She is both allowing them to speak and actively listening to what they are saying. And just as it is hard sometimes to listen to our elders, the daughters in these selected stories do not always appreciate what their mothers have to say – or what their mothers have done for them – until they are older. Danticat writes

You remember her silence when you laid your first notebook in front of her. Her disappointment when you told her that words would be your life's work, like the kitchen had always been hers. She was angry at you for not understanding [...] The sacrifices had been too great. (*Krik? Krak!* 221)

Although the daughters in these stories do not share Danticat's passion for writing, their experiences with their own mothers are similar to hers. The

sacrifices the mothers endured in coming to America were solely for their daughter's futures. And it frustrates the immigrant mother when she realizes that her dreams are not in sync with her bicultural daughter's.

Thus, the daughter depicted through different characters in Danticat's stories has ambivalent relations to the ethnic culture of her mother because the daughter has yet to understand the sacrifice the mother made in migrating to America. Also, the bicultural daughter shows ambivalence towards the working-class status of her family, especially when juxtaposed with her Haitian and American bicultural identity. In both stories, the bicultural daughter finds ways to link the belief system of her Haitian-born mother with aspects of her American social class – a class that encourages the daughter to hold popular ideals of work, marriage, religion and family higher than the ideals from Haiti, her mother's land. For example, Suzette in "New York Day Women" only hears about her Haitian roots in the evenings when both she and her mother are at home. In order to prevent her daughter – or her daughter's teachers – from seeing her doing something menial, Suzette's mother projects her own shame onto her daughter by remaining uninvolved in Suzette's academic and working life. And it surprises Suzette to see as the story unfolds that her very Haitian mother functions in a day job in America that requires her to look after someone else's white child – something Suzette never witnessed during her school years. And despite the discontent she may feel toward her mother, "New York Day Women" reads like a love poem that honors her mother's words, wisdom, and work – aspects of her mother's life that shape Suzette's own social and working life as a

Haitian-American. In “Caroline’s Wedding,” the narrator Grace, who came to America when she was young, tells of her American-born sister Caroline’s disagreements with their mother Hermine in order to show her own very different type of relationship with their mother. Both sisters experience their Haitian culture at home, especially when it comes to mourning rituals, food, and life lessons – like what makes a man suitable for marriage. Caroline struggles to ignore her mother’s disapproval of her non-Haitian fiancé, especially since Hermine feels that Caroline is only settling due to her handicap of a missing forearm she was born with – something that Hermine continues to blame herself for because of the drugs American doctors gave her while pregnant with Caroline during a sweatshop raid. But it is because of Hermine’s decision to migrate to America and join the migrant working-class that Grace is even able to become an American citizen. Thus, Hermine must convince herself that she made the right choice for her family, even if it meant sacrificing her relationship with her own husband for two American daughters.

Like the other mother-daughter dyads of Kingston, Tan, and Pietrzyk, those in *Krik? Krak!* look for ways to compromise in order to remain peaceful. And like the mothers in Kingston’s “No Name Woman” and Tan’s “Two Kinds,” the working-class mothers in Danticat’s stories aim to provide the best for their bicultural daughters. Often times, the bicultural daughter becomes a bridge between the mother’s culture and the mainstream American one, and this is seen with Suzette in “New York Day Woman” and Grace in “Caroline’s Wedding.” And



it is up to the mother whether or not she chooses to cross the bridge to compromise between the old world Haiti and the new American world.

But compromise and peace don't come easily, especially when used to living in an impoverished war-torn country like Haiti, where civil unrest is prominent. And as Katherine Payant writes in *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature: Carving Out a Niche*, a brief history on immigration – specifically Haitian immigration for this chapter – is helpful when discussing how “immigrant authors have portrayed their experiences coming to America [as well as] those of their parents and grandparents” (xv).

Haitians began immigrating to the United States many years after Chinese and Polish immigrants. In *Haitians: Migration and Diaspora*, Anthony V. Catanese cites U.S. Census data reporting that “86 percent of foreign-born Haitian Americans moved to the United States after 1970” (93-4). Because of the civil unrest in Haiti during the rule of the Duvalier family – Francois and Jean-Claude – Haitians remained poor for well over thirty years starting in 1957 and continuing into the 1990s and the new millennium (6). In order to gain a better life, many families migrated to America, especially New York and Florida (90).

Most – if not all – Haitian immigrants brought to America ties to their religion. In “Calling Upon the Sacred: Migrants’ Use of Religion in the Migration Process,” Jacqueline Hagan and Helen Rose Ebaugh write that

[...] migrants make more use of, or rely more strongly on, religion when they feel little control over the situations they confront; when risks are extremely high [...] we should expect to find that religion is a substantial resource used by many undocumented migrant groups as a source of support for enduring the hardship of the journey. (1159)

Although not discussed in detail in Danticat's "New York Day Women," both the mother and her daughters in "Caroline's Wedding" rely on their Haitian-Catholic practices when grieving their husband and father who dies before the story takes place.

Hagan and Ebaugh also write that many "Haitians and Chinese who [faced] the dangers of the high seas in their migration journeys [relied] on spiritual resources and religious practices" (1159). As stated previously, out of the two Danticat stories discussed in this section, a strong reliance on religion is seen in "Caroline's Wedding." Although not particularly noticed in the Chinese-American stories of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan previously discussed, this idea of religion and spirituality as a lifeline is seen in the other stories in Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, and in Leslie Pietrzyk's Polish-American stories, particularly "Those Places I've Been" and "Blue Beads."

And with religious ties to the motherland, come political and familial ties as well. In "Exercising Exit, Voice and Loyalty: A Gender Perspective on Transnationalism in Haiti," Sarah Gammage notes that "a substantial number of Haitians remain intimately connected to Haiti, visiting, sending remittances and gifts, investing in land and exercising political voice in Haiti and in their country of residence" (743). This idea of a transnational working class is seen in "New York Day Women," where Suzette's mother's ties to Haiti are so strong that she fills her entire garage with clothes that she plans on sending back to her family. At first Suzette can only see her mother's ties to Haiti. As the story unfolds,

however, Suzette begins to notice her mother's ties to the United States as well – a country she works hard in for her daughter to succeed.

### **“New York Day Women”**

Yet, here she is, my mother, who I left at home that morning in her bathrobe, with pieces of newspapers twisted like rollers in her hair. My mother, who accuses me of random offenses as I dash out of the house.

Edwidge Danticat, “New York Day Women” (145)

“New York Day Women” is one of the nine stories in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*. It is narrated in first person by Suzette, who is either an American-born Haitian or a Haitian who came to America at an age young enough where she now associates herself more with the dominant American culture. The story takes place during the 90s, and the structure is very similar to Maxine Hong Kingston's “No Name Woman” because quotes from Suzette's mother are interspersed throughout Suzette's narration. And most, if not all of them, refer to “random offenses” that are supposed to teach Suzette how to behave like a proper Haitian woman. This call and response narration allows Suzette's mother to communicate the lore of Haiti by to Suzette within an American, working-class, context. And although Suzette rarely appreciates her words, they still haunt her thoughts and memories.

Throughout “New York Day Women,” Suzette spends her entire lunch break from her middle-class desk job following her mother across New York City. Up until this point, Suzette has never known how her mother spends her hours while Suzette is working or in school. As far as she knows, her mother's

pronouncements on certain American ways means that she has never taken part in them herself. And although Suzette feels ambivalence while remembering the past, she now feels a sense of compassion for what a working-class “day woman” like her mother had to endure to give their children better and more secure lives in America.

In *Class Definitions: On the Lives and Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros, and Dorothy Allison*, Michelle Tokarczyk interviews Dorothy Allison, a fellow working-class writer, discussing what it was like growing up in a working-class home. Allison recalls a time during graduate school where her thesis director called her in because she “wasn’t wearing the right clothing” (223) because clothing choices seemed to reflect social class. Both Allison and Tokarczyk later agree that it is because the working class has been either romanticized or given negative stereotypes that people are prevented “from knowing what working-class lives are really like” (224). Clearly, up until the day Suzette decides to follow her Mom across New York City, Suzette has only been exposed to the negative stereotypes of her social class, as seen in the example below.

While watching her mother from a distance, although there is still a sense of unease, Suzette is fascinated to witness her mother operating independently – an independence that Suzette is often criticized for:

She stops by another vendor selling sundresses for seven dollars each. I can tell that she is looking at an African print dress, contemplating my size. I think to myself, Please Ma, don’t buy it. It would be just another thing that I would bury in the garage or give to Goodwill. (149)

In the scene above, she's watching from somewhere out of sight as her mother dress shops and buys a can of soda from a "corner hot-dog stand" – something typically American, and very unlike her to do. Just moments before, Suzette remembers her mother's reasoning for not going out to dinner: "If they want to eat with me, let them come to my house, even if I boil water and give it to them" (148). Especially in New York where going out to eat is often expensive, dining out might well be out of the question for someone on a budget. But because Suzette has yet to understand this, it seems that her mother's dining habits, as well as her inexpensive clothing are just a few of the things that show their social class – something that annoys Suzette.

In her essay "Liberating Memory," Janet Zandy recalls growing up in her own working-class Italian family in New Jersey, one where her family, like Suzette's, also bought clothes that reflected the amount of income coming in. One of the instances Zandy recounts is Parents' Weekend her freshman year of college. Her father was unable to attend due to his work, and Zandy and her mother "arrive overdressed and feel a discomfort [they] do not voice" to each other or anyone else at the academic institute:

The discrepancy between what my mother and I felt and the scene that was played out could not be acknowledged. We had intense feelings but we didn't have the language to identify and affirm them. We could only push the feelings down and go home [...] I loved school *almost* as much as I loved my parents. But, the more schooling I got, the more separate I felt from them. It is an old working-class story. (65)

It is interesting to note that Suzette and her mother have similar feelings to Zandy and her mother when it comes to interactions within the academia,

although Zandy and her family are more of the middle-class. Both experience feelings of internalized shame that reflect the class they belong to:

My mother, who never went to any of my Parent-Teacher Association meetings when I was in school [...] You're so good anyway. What are they going to tell me: I don't want to make you ashamed of this day woman. Shame is heavier than a hundred bags of salt. (154)

It appears that Suzette's mother, though imagining her daughter's shame, is instead pointing out her own shame of being a "day woman" – babysitting other people's children. Suzette's mother fears that her daughter will be ashamed of her, and thus decides not to take part in her Suzette's academic life. Now that Suzette watches her mother babysit someone else's child in a public park, her mother not taking the time to attend a PTA meeting no longer hurts Suzette. Now she feels more compassion as she watches this "day woman."

Now that Suzette is starting to understand her mother's working life, she realizes that the annoyances she used to hate are really hopes and dreams that Suzette's mother has for Suzette – hopes that her daughter will not have to take care of other people's children in order to ensure that her own are financially comfortable. In an interview conducted with Renee Shea, Edwidge Danticat states the following about the mother-daughter relationship:

I think it's an evolving relationship where sometimes the mothers see themselves mirrored [...] and vicariously she is infusing her dreams into the daughter, especially in very difficult circumstances. Many of the mother's dreams are transported to the daughter who might do all the things she did not get to do. Suddenly, this person has a personality with different ideas [...] Our mothers – Haitian mothers or mothers of immigrant daughters who are growing up in this culture – often suffer because, in their daughters' eyes, they become an anachronism. ("The Dangerous Job," 383)

Danticat's idea of mirroring works both ways between mother and daughter. Suzette's mother hopes that her daughter will one day marry, have children, and not have to be a part of the immigrant working-class she herself is in. And as Suzette watches her mother at a distance, she realizes that she is able to have her office job because of her mother's sacrifices. Both mother and daughter work in light of – and in spite of – the other.

This idea of mother and daughter mirroring the other is also seen in Kathleen Gyssels' "Haitians in the City: Two Modern-Day Trickster Tales," where she writes of the "vodou" culture in Haiti that assigns twins as "exceptionally powerful." Because of the esteem that comes with this idea of doubling, the "twinning structure [of "New York Day Women"] allows Danticat to explore and unveil resemblances and differences between persons and situations" – in this case, between Suzette and her mother (*JOUVERT* 2002).

Looking at the differences between mother and daughter, and taking Danticat's last point about the suffering of Haitian mothers one step further, the relationship between immigrant mothers and their American daughters suffers because – much like Suzette and her immigrant mother – the mother feels out of place in her daughter's world. Since Suzette is ethnically Haitian and culturally American, this mixed heritage causes most of the problems that both mother and daughter face in "New York Day Women." Suzette hears about her Haitian culture mostly from her mother's constant nagging – "Would you get up and give an old lady like me your subway seat? In this state of mind, I bet you don't even give up your seat to a pregnant lady" (Danticat 146). The "state of mind" that

Suzette's mother talks about is clearly the way of thinking that growing up in independent America has encouraged Suzette into adopting. But when Suzette's mother says things like this to her, it almost seems like Suzette would rather remain silent than have the same arguments over and over again:

Sometimes I get up and give my seat. Other times, I don't. It all depends on how pregnant the woman is and whether or not she is with her boyfriend or husband and whether or not *he* is sitting down. (146)

But at the same time, Suzette admits in the quote above that her mother is sometimes right. She doesn't give up her subway seat all the time. Unfortunately, since her mother is only focused on Suzette's actions, she fails to see the logical, American and feminist, thought processes behind such choices.

And it is the choices that Suzette is able to have because she lives and works in New York that Suzette clings so strongly to. Being an American woman, Suzette can actively take part in things that only men above the poverty level in Haiti would do. For example, Suzette works in a middle-class advertising office that her mother has "never seen" (145). Suzette, for whatever her reasons, also chooses not to have any children. For her mother, this childlessness is seen as a curse:

My mother, who stuffs thimbles in her mouth and then blows up her cheeks like Dizzy Gillespie while sewing yet another Raggedy Ann doll that she names Suzette after me. [/] I will have all these little Suzettes in case you never have any babies, which looks more and more like it is going to happen. [/] My mother who had me when she was thirty-three – *l'âge du Christ* – at the age that Christ died on the cross. [/] That's a blessing, believe you me, even if American doctors say by that time you can make retarded babies. (153)



Although we are never given the exact age of both women, the quote above implies that Suzette is close to the same age her mother was when she had Suzette – thirty-three. This is why she continues to sew dolls for her non-existent grandchildren, in the hopes that one day soon Suzette will have a child, despite her age, “even if American doctors say by that time you can make retarded babies.”

Although at first reading it is likely to be missed, here the story finally reflects Suzette’s changing attitude towards her mother as a “day woman.” When living in America, her mother pushed off having children of her own until she was thirty-three because she and her husband both had to work to provide for themselves and for their future children. Now that Suzette sees her mother as a working-class woman, she may understand her mother’s reasoning behind pressuring her to begin to have children at the same age that she herself did.

Despite all the times her mother hounded Suzette to be a proper Haitian lady and to give her grandchildren, Suzette looks with awe at her mother who walks down the streets “as though she owns the sidewalk under her feet” (149) – something a woman would do if she was proud of the life she currently had – a life in America. So it surprises Suzette that this very American woman during the working day is also the same woman who, at home, holds on to her life in Haiti:

Twenty years we have been saving all kinds of things for the relatives in Haiti. I need the place in the garage for an exercise bike. [/] You are pretty enough to be a stewardess. Only dogs like bones. (150)

Here, Suzette mentions that her mother has been collecting “things” for her relatives in Haiti for over twenty years. Although her first priority is making sure

her own daughter is well cared for, she also feels obligated to use her earnings to help out her family in Haiti.

Also seen in the quote above is that Suzette and her mother differ greatly when it comes to gender norms, especially when it comes to Suzette's appearance. Suzette expresses her impatience with all of the things her mother still has yet to send to their relatives in Haiti. And since Suzette already has an office job – a step up from the working-class woman – she also aspires to get out of the curvy body shape that she is to adopt the body of a more thinner, mainstream woman – one who, unlike her mother – does not do physical labor and actually has the leisure to work out. Suzette would rather use the space in the garage for an exercise bike to lose her curves and model herself like a skinnier, perhaps even richer, woman. But her mother embraces her natural body shape, and tells Suzette that she is “pretty enough to be a stewardess,” further exemplifying her mother's notion of what is an appropriate job for a woman of her class.

But because Suzette thinks differently of her body than her mother, and that she has an office job while her mother provides care for other people's children, Suzette is forced to deal with her own double consciousness of trying to find a balance between her mother's beliefs and actions and her own. In “Rags to Riches to Suicide: Unhappy Narratives of Upward Mobility: *Martin Eden*, *Bread Givers*, *Delia's Song*, and *Hunger of Memory*,” Renny Christopher writes that “the narrative of upward mobility [...] is necessarily a narrative of divided consciousness” because class “cannot comfortably be discussed within a

traditional paradigm of ‘conventional coherence’” (89). We see Christopher’s idea in Suzette’s dilemma. Where Suzette lives and wants to live a middle-class life that gives her the leisure to exert physical labor as opposed to being required to do so at her job, she also sees her mother in a working-class job. But although Suzette learns to appreciate her mother despite feeling sorry for her, Suzette still thinks differently than her mother and still wants to move up the social ladder.

Because Suzette’s ideas of class and gender differ from her mother’s, instead of experiencing a true version of Adrienne Rich’s *matrophobia* – where the daughter has a fear of becoming her mother (*Of Woman Born* 235) – Suzette begins to accept and tries to understand the mother that she has never known. For example, what the old Suzette would have described as wishful thinking, she now looks at as prudent spending:

My mother, who watches the lottery drawing every night on channel 11 without ever having played the numbers. [/] A third of that money is all I would need. We would pay the mortgage, and your father could stop driving that taxicab all over Brooklyn. (Danticat 147)

Suzette’s mother watching the lottery and says that “A third of that money is all I would need” to get by. And now, Suzette looks at her mother as not falling for a “get rich quick” scheme no matter how much the family could use the money. Even though she would like for her husband to stop driving a taxicab, his occupation – as well as her own day job of looking of babysitting white American’s children – is more tangible and reasonable than taking a chance on a lottery ticket, or even wearing expensive perfume and jewelry from “Chanel and Tiffany’s” (145), which on her income she cannot afford.

Throughout “New York Day Women,” it is the fear that Suzette doesn’t really know her mother and her mother’s daydreams for something more, as well as her growing respect for her mother, that moves the story along, including the realization that the mother she doesn’t know is more like herself than she once thought. In her dissertation “Mother/cultures and the ‘New World’ Daughters: Ethnic Identity Formation and the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Contemporary American Literature,” Kristin Ann Girard writes that “cultural and ethnic identities merge [as the daughter] struggles through sameness and difference across various ethnicities” (19). As is the case in “New York Day Women,” Suzette sees similarities between her American self and her Haitian mother who roams the streets of New York and takes care of a privileged woman’s child. And all her life, Suzette’s mother has been teaching her life lessons of her both similar and contradicting aspects of her Haitian culture – not to bash the American culture she grew up in, but to help Suzette not to be ashamed of her mother and the gender and class norms of a working-class Haitian woman.

Suzette, like Kingston’s narrator in “No Name Woman,” reflects on little snippets and life lessons of things her mom has said about women and Haiti throughout “New York Day Women.” The interesting point of view choice – breaking up the central “day in the life” narrative of adult daughter following her mother through New York by interspersing quotes from the mother – accords the mother subjectivity and allows Suzette to move from weariness to acceptance, even love, in how she regards her mother. Central to this new understanding is

Suzette's increasing awareness of social class as a shaping force in her mother's life:

I stand behind the bus and take a peek at my mother in the park. She is standing in a circle, chatting with a group of women who are taking other people's children on an afternoon outing. They look like a Third World Parent-Teacher Association meeting. (Danticat 152)

Suzette is finally aware of her mother's social class when she discovers that her mother is one of many immigrant women that provide care during the day for more privileged children than their own. Suzette realizes that her mother is part of a group of brown women who work throughout New York City during the day by caring for white people's children.

Because Suzette makes a reference to a PTA meeting when witnessing her mother and the rest of the brown-skinned working-class women she sees at the park, it seems that Suzette realizes that she could've had her mother at her school functions had her mother not projected her own feelings of embarrassment and shame onto her daughter; or more likely, had her mother not had to work. Without Suzette's mother ever knowing, by Suzette following her mother around town and discovering the working life of the mother she never knew she had, Suzette is able to bridge her ethnic and class identity to the identity of her Haitian mother. Suzette finally understands what her mother and the rest of the day women of New York had to put up with so their daughters could assimilate.

## **“Caroline’s Wedding”**

“I do not want my grandchildren to feel sorry for me,” she said. “The past, it fades a person. And yes. Today, it was a nice wedding.”

Edwidge Danticat, “Caroline’s Wedding” (213)

“Caroline’s Wedding,” the last story in Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*, can be considered a novella because it is sixty pages long. The older daughter Grace Azile is the protagonist as well as the narrator. Out of all the other stories mentioned in this thesis, “Caroline’s Wedding” is unique in that the mother-daughter relationship between Grace and her mother Hermine is looked at amid Caroline’s relationship with their mother. Thus, Grace functions as an interpreter between her Haitian-born mother and her American-born sister Caroline, while Caroline functions as the foil for Grace and her relationship with their mother.

“Caroline’s Wedding” starts off informing us that Grace and her mother were both Haitian-born, while Caroline was born, without a left forearm, in America. The story takes place during the late 90s in New York, and the opening scene shows Grace becoming a naturalized citizen – a significant thing because it is potentially a milestone of assimilation. Grace is so excited that she calls her mother, Mrs. Hermine Azile, from a pay phone in McDonald’s to tell her that she’s bringing the certificate home to show her. But although her mother is excited for Grace, she tells her to turn it back in to the naturalization office so that it can process her passport:

Without the certificate, I suddenly felt like unclaimed property. When my mother was three months pregnant with my younger sister, Caroline, she was arrested in a sweatshop raid and spent three days in an immigration jail. In my family, we have always been very anxious about our papers. (158)

Grace's inclination to hold on to her papers goes back to when her mother had just moved to the United States and worked in a sweatshop to help make ends meet. Grace thinking back on this incident is very important because it provides the back-story for a major plot line in this novella – Caroline being born without her left forearm, and Hermine feeling responsible for it. Hermine believes that the reason Caroline had been born that way was because of a drug that the doctor gave her while she was in the immigration prison.

In *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*, working-class writer Janet Zandy notes that

Hands are class and cultural markers. Missing fingers attest to the dangers of farm labor or factory work. Working-class hands are rarely still. They often embroider spoken languages with subtlety and emphasis, anger and love [...] in linking forms of cultural expression with physical labor [...] (1-2)

It is interesting to note that Caroline, the only American-born member of this family, is the one who is born without a forearm and a hand. Caroline's missing limb attests to the fear of being sent back to Haiti that her mother Hermine felt when the sweatshop she worked in during her pregnancy was raided by immigration officers. But the love that is spoken with subtlety is the fact that Hermine risked working in a sweatshop in the first place because most jobs were not open to undocumented workers. She loved both Grace and Caroline enough to do that, and unfortunately the citizenship of both her daughters came at a price – Caroline's arm.

As much as her mother's history with legal papers makes Grace anxious about getting her certificate of naturalization back with her passport, American-

born Caroline couldn't care less. When Hermine starts making a pot of "strong bone soup" to celebrate this momentous occasion (159), as well as to dissuade Caroline from marrying a non-Haitian, Caroline says, "Ma, if we keep on with this soup [...] we'll all grow horns like the ones that used to be on these cows" (160). Grace later comments that "Caroline had been born in America, something that she very much took for granted" (160), implying that since Grace just became an American through naturalization, she won't take her citizenship for granted like her younger sister does.

Throughout the story, we find – through Grace's narration – that the bicultural Caroline relates more to her American culture than to her Haitian heritage, while Grace is better able to balance both cultures. Caroline is about twenty-five years old (161), and like many women of African descent, she has "chemically straightened and streaked bright copper" hair (160), which is another mode of assimilation. Meanwhile, Grace is at least around thirty years old because she remembers the sweatshop incident, and since Caroline's relationship to her mother and her Haitian heritage is contrasted with Grace's, we can conclude that Grace's hair is more of a natural dark brown color. And unlike Grace, Caroline can't understand some of the simple traditions and teachings of her Haitian ethnicity. For example, when asking Grace about whether or not her mother cried about all of the deaths of Haitians escaping to the U.S. they heard about at Mass, Caroline impatiently remarks, "It's not like she knows these people" (169). And it is up to Grace, the sister more attuned to her Haitian roots, to tell Caroline that "Ma says all Haitians know each other" (169).



There are other components of Caroline's ambivalence towards her ethnic heritage rooted in her mother Hermine. One component is the concept of marriage – a huge one that is seen throughout this story. Hermine is a very strict Haitian-Catholic and wants both of her daughters to marry someone Haitian (161). In the article "Motherland Versus Daughterland in Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Land of the Sun*," Carmen Faymonville writes that the immigrant mother retains her "native cultural identity [of] social conservatism" (128). And since Hermine is a very strict Catholic, not only does she want both her daughters to marry Haitian men, Hermine wants the proposal and engagement to be done the proper way, as Grace reveals:

Ma wanted Eric to officially come and ask her permission to marry her daughter. She wanted him to bring his family to our house and have his father ask her blessing. She wanted Eric to kiss up to her, escort her around, buy her gifts, and shower her with compliments. Ma wanted a full-blown church wedding. She wanted Eric to be Haitian. (Danticat 169)

Unfortunately for Hermine, Caroline's fiancé is not from Haiti. Eric Abrahams is from the Bahamas and has "eyes like Haitian lizards, bright copper with a tint of jade" (183). And although both Grace and Caroline were raised Catholic, having sex before marriage isn't a big deal to Caroline who tells her sister, "It's not like I have no intention of getting married" (187).

Even before Caroline was in a relationship with a non-Haitian, she was doing things that went against her mother's cultural beliefs – like refusing to wear red panties after a male relative dies. According to Hermine, daughters who resembled their mothers needed to wear red panties so that the spirit of their dead father would not come back and haunt his daughter (170). But Caroline and

Grace were not ready to let go of their father's spirit, and both decided not to wear the red panties. They even decided, after the appropriate eighteen months of mourning, not to wear red clothes either:

The red for the world to see meant that our mourning period had ended, that we were beyond our grief. The red covering our very private parts was to tell our father that he was dead and we no longer wanted anything to do with him. (171)

In order to keep their secret from their mother, Caroline and Grace never told Hermine that they constantly dreamt of their father. If they had, she would know that they didn't listen to her warnings. Even though Caroline was born American, she believed in this particular Haitian superstition because she did not want to forget the face of her father.

Carl Azile, Grace and Caroline's father, although dead, plays a very important role in the relationship between Caroline and her mother because it is her own early romance with Carl that Hermine wants to push on to her daughter Caroline to emulate. Thus, the dead Carl, rendered in flashback, is also a foil for Hermine. Hermine only wants best for her daughter, like a proposal letter from her fiancé Eric. When talking to Grace one night about her younger days, Hermine shows her a letter that reads, "My son, Carl Romelus Azile, would be honored to make your daughter, Hermine Francoise Genie, his wife" (213). However, Hermine admits to Grace – the daughter who listens more to her mother than her sister Caroline does – that Carl stopped being in love with Hermine when he moved to America by himself, and then married a Haitian widow in order to get the proper documents to bring pregnant Hermine and Grace over to the United States (190). Hermine could tell from the letters that he

sent – “I don’t know how or what I was looking for, but somehow in the words he was sending me, I knew he had stopped thinking of me the same way” (212). It is because of the love that Hermine *once* had with Carl, that she is willing to let Caroline marry Eric – “The daughter resents a mother forever who keeps her from her love [...] She is my child. You don’t cut off your own finger because it smells bad” (181). And like the mother-daughter dyad in “New York Day Women” Caroline is so much like her mother Hermine that to cut her daughter off would be like cutting a part of her own self.

It is interesting to note that while Hermine compares herself to her daughter Caroline, she also associates her late husband Carl with Caroline’s husband-to-be Eric. When talking with Grace, Hermine said, “Maybe [Caroline] thinks he is being noble. Maybe she thinks he is doing her a favor. Maybe she thinks he is the only man who will ever come along to marry her” (194). But Grace, the voice of reason in Caroline and Hermine’s relationship, is quick to point out to her mother that Eric is marrying Caroline because “he loves her” (194). Unfortunately for Hermine, as much as she wants to believe in love, when Carl married another woman to come to America, she forgot about the love she felt at her own wedding, saying “All hearts are stone until we melt, and then they turn back to stone again” (194).

It is the different historical circumstances under which both mother and daughter were married that cause Hermine’s heart to “turn back to stone.” Not only did Hermine have to think about whether or not her love for Carl was true, she was married during a time of civil unrest, which eventually led to her husband

having to marry another woman to become an American citizen in order to properly provide for his former family – “It had cost my parents’ marriage, my mother’s spirit, my sister’s arm” (214).

It is partially because Grace always feels the need to protect her sister that when Caroline spends the night at Eric’s place, Grace lies to their mother in the mornings and tells her that Caroline woke up early to go to work – “Yes, Ma,” I said. “Caroline is just like you. She sleeps a hair thread away from waking, and rises with the roosters” (186). In a way, Grace’s relationship with her mother, is developed by Grace’s protective nature towards her baby sister. By explaining and making excuses to her mother for Caroline, Grace is developing a relationship with her mother built on appeasement. But while Grace is pointing out a false similarity between her sister and mother, it is Grace who is the one that “rises with the roosters” like Hermine. Grace is the American daughter who is like her mother who wakes up early every morning. And it is because she wakes up with her mother that she is able to lie to her about Caroline’s whereabouts. Although Grace is only lying to keep her mother off Caroline’s trail, in this instance Hermine still only notices similarities between herself and her daughter Caroline, like the example below of Caroline’s wedding day.

On the morning of her wedding, Caroline wakes up feeling sick and nervous and needing her mother’s approval. Caroline physically cannot move because her mother has not accepted her marriage. And without Hermine’s strength and reassurance that this marriage will work, Caroline will probably not go through with it. And surprisingly, instead of seeing this as a sign that she is

right and that Caroline will be better off not marrying Eric, Hermine shocks both her daughters with what she says:

“Don’t worry [...] I was the same on the morning of my wedding. I fell into a stupor, frightened of all the possibilities. We will give you a bath and then you lay down for a bit and you will rise as promised and get married.” (200)

In this scene, Hermine finally accepts, in front of both of her daughters, that Caroline is like her – “‘At last a sign,’ she joked. ‘She is my daughter after all. This is just the way I was on the day of my wedding’” (201).

Hermine’s own wedding took place in a turbulent Haiti, during the oppressive and corrupt reign of Francois Duvalier. In order to make Grace and Caroline go to sleep when they were children, Hermine and Carl would tell jokes about their past in Haiti to the girls. Although funny stories like how God himself wouldn’t get up from his throne to greet Duvalier for fear being usurped made the girls laugh at the time, Grace notes that it was all too serious a matter for her parents, and that these stories became her and Caroline’s “sole inheritance” (180).

But the idea of remembering these stories to later tell and give to her children as an inheritance gives power to Hermine, despite only having stories to pass down as heirlooms to her daughters. In the article “Defilee Diasporic Daughters: Revolutionary Narratives of Ayiti (Haiti), Nanchon (Nation), and Dyaspora (Diaspora) in Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*,” Jana Braziel mentions the idea of *re-membering* women, a continuing act of remembering as opposed to only recalling a memory once (81). Braziel writes that re-membering is recognized through the rebirth of a country; and this rebirth is symbolized by the

birthing process of women. This ability to continually produce life gives women the power of “maternal mortality” (83). By giving birth to Caroline in the United States, Hermine is taking on this power for herself – a power that only existed for her in Haiti before she moved to America – and she is re-membering, or paying homage to her homeland by giving life to her own daughter in the United States. And now, instead of disagreeing with the life that Caroline has chosen, Hermine remembers the love she once felt for her own husband, and thus comes to terms with her American-born daughter’s life choice to marry Eric. It is also interesting to note that the term re-membering could easily relate to having “membership” in a group – or a cultural group – and that a leg or an arm – as in Caroline’s dismembered limb – is a “member” of the body. And in Hermine migrating to the United States to give birth to her last daughter, all of these implications and similarities of re-membering occurred.

Like Suzette’s shift in attitude in “New York Day Women,” Grace’s relationship with her mother reaches a level of gratitude and respect the more she notices similarities between mother and daughter. While Suzette’s mother daily takes upon the shame of looking after someone else’s white child in order for her daughter to live comfortably in America, Hermine sacrifices her “marriage, [...] spirit, [and] Caroline’s arm,” (214) all for Grace to become an American citizen; after all, the decision to emigrate to America in the first place had nothing to do with Caroline because she wasn’t even conceived until after Hermine and Grace arrived in New York.

Thus, although the relationship between Caroline and Hermine is worthy of discussion, the relationship between Grace and Hermine is even more meaningful because it shows two women appreciating the actions of each other, despite the cultural contexts in which both grew up. For example, when Hermine is at a loss for words at the small lunch Caroline and Eric have after the wedding. Hermine asks Grace to speak on their behalf, and Grace says, “A few years ago, our parents made this journey [...] This is a stop on the journey where my sister leaves us. We will miss her greatly, but she will never be gone from us” (207). This speech has symbolic weight in that it not only celebrates the new mixed union of Caroline and her Bahamian husband, it also honors the journey their family took by migrating from Haiti to America. Hermine later approves of Grace’s choice of words by saying, “I like how you stood up and spoke for your sister” (208). And when Grace isn’t able to get her sister to calm down on the morning of her wedding, Hermine is. Because Hermine lacks the ability to produce eloquent speeches like Grace, and Grace cannot comfort with her actions, the two of them work together and have worked together in raising Caroline. And it appears that the only thing that Grace wants is her mother’s recognition, such as when she sought her mother’s approval in the beginning of “Caroline’s Wedding” when she received her naturalization papers. All it takes is her mother’s blessing to make Grace feel validated.

Despite feelings of ambivalence towards their mothers, these daughters in Danticat’s stories all have one thing in common – they are able to cross the bridge of cultural misunderstanding that separates them from appreciating their

mother's sacrifices. Hermine re-members, or actively honors, the struggles her mother and grandmothers went through under Duvalier's dictatorship by doing whatever she can in order to ensure that both her daughters will become American citizens and not experience such oppression. By Grace realizing this great sacrifice – of both her mother's marriage and her sister's arm – she better understands her mother and this relationship between immigrant mother and bicultural daughter continues to flourish. More than simply compromising their thoughts about life, both Suzette and Grace are able to internalize their mothers' beliefs and struggles as their inherent past, and are able to fit together their American culture with their ethnic background through love and respect for each piece of their identity.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Sisters of the Lotus

My name is Padmaja, and I am sixteen going on seventeen.

“Padi, finish brushing your hair and help your sister make breakfast for your father!”

Actually Maatajee, I’m combing my hair not brushing it, I’d like to say to her, but it’s too early for talking back and suffering the wrath of mother’s backhanded slap. Besides, it is fishing season, and Fiji Pacific Fishery is sending my father and the rest of his crew out to the Koro Sea. I won’t see Pitajee in a month, so I don’t mind making him breakfast.

“Yes, Maatajee.” But my twin sister Ela has already fried the cassava, warmed up the can of corned beef, and poured out a glass of whole milk for Pitajee. “Maa, Ela is done.”

“Then finish your hair! I will not permit you to leave this house until it looks like Ela’s.” Ela has straight Indian hair like Pitajee’s. Every Tuesday she French braids it, straight down her back and ties the end with white hair bands – just like Brigitta von Trapp in “The Sound of Music.” Like Maatajee’s natural hair (she has it chemically straightened every three months), my hair is coarse and curly, and only a large-toothed comb can chew it enough for me to tie into a massive ball of cotton. The hair bands that freely sway at the bottom of Ela’s braids will get lost in my snarls of hair.

I kiss Pitajee goodbye and wish him another successful fishing trip. Maatajee tries to smooth out my cotton ball as Ela and I pass her on our way out the door.

Ever since we were little, I always felt safer walking to school holding Ela's hand. Part of the reason is that I know she will always protect me. Another part of me still hopes that the longer I hold on to her hand, the more like her I will look. Despite the morning's events, today is no different. Ela reaches out her hand for me to grab and leads the way to Natabua High School.

"I hate it when Maa does that. Sorry, Padi." Ela in her big sister role tends to apologize for everything offensive Maatajee says or does.

"It's not your fault," I say as we reach the school gates.

Ela and I are fraternal twins, born five minutes apart. She was the first one out, her delivery normal. I, however, did not want to leave the womb. The medicine men performed an emergency C-section on Maatajee, permanently damaging her lower stomach nerves and denying her of any feeling there. She tried to say no to the men and their "unqualified hospital instruments," but Pitajee was on a fishing trip. And in Fiji, women have no say on most matters – including the birthing of their own twin daughters.

"It's not your fault," Ela says when Maatajee absentmindedly rubs her stomach. I know it isn't. But sometimes I wonder what would have happened if the medicine men had listened to Maatajee. Ela would be an only child. Would they tell her of me?

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As Ela and I enter our lecture room, the sea of white uniforms tells us that the rest of our grade eleven classmates arrived early today, and they are frantically going over notes – Quiz-day Tuesday. I had planned on reviewing the History of Polynesia this morning, but Maatajee’s high-pitched voice worked like an eraser to my chalkboard memory. I look at Ela’s face, hoping she forgot too. She remembered.

We take our assigned seats on opposite sides of the classroom and soon after, Mr. Redhi – “because I am always ready!” – tells us to clear our desks. The curry he had for breakfast stains the pocket of his baby blue shirt. I start praying to the gods, asking for grace and knowledge. Jesus, my savior, have mercy on me. Saraswati, Hindi goddess of knowledge, help me to remember. Degei, great-god of the islands and Fijian warrior after my own heart, help me when I try to explain my unsatisfactory grade to Maatajee.

Results-day Thursday tells me that the gods have more important things to do “How can you shame me like this?” Maa says. “How can you shame your father?”

“How do you know Pitajee is ashamed? He isn’t even home.”

“Ela got a 97, Padmaja. 97! What is a 54 – fail? You failed! You might as well drop out of school and work at the sugar mill with the other Fijians.”

“Maatajee, last week I got an 82. If Mr. Redhi had quizzed us on the stuff I knew, I would’ve done better. I’m serious, Maa. Ask me who the first Christian

missionaries were that came to Fiji. Ask me who was Chief of the Lau Islands during that time.”

“*Adhajal gagari chalakat jaay!*” The half-filled pot goes spilling out water.

My name is Padmaja, the half-brained pot.

Maatajee is what the locals call *kai Viti* or “of Fiji” because her father was Fijian. Since Pitajee is Indian, he is *kai India* – “of India.” Though she is only half, there is no mistaking Maatajee’s Fijian ancestry. I never figured out how she tricked Pitajee into marrying her, but “trick” is the word Maa uses nonetheless. According to her, she tricked him with food, her brain, and a beautiful smile. Pitajee says she won him with her love.

I wish I spoke more Hindi. Maatajee’s father died when she was young, so she had no reason to learn the Fijian language. And she believes that speaking fluent Hindi makes her look more Indian.

“Padma, your Hindi is excellent,” people say when they hear Maatajee talk. “Did your husband teach you?” I sometimes feel embarrassed for her. No matter how much she straightens her hair, or how much she speaks Hindi, she can never hide her ancestry.

I can never hide my ancestry. My Hindi is broken because we only speak English in school, and sometimes it is hard for me to talk with my relatives. This, according to Maa, is a good enough reason for me not to go to India with Maatajee and Ela this November for Diwali, the festival of lights – my favorite

time of year, the season when Ela was born and I was ripped out of my mother's stomach.

My name is Padmaja, and it means born from the lotus, *padma*.

It has been two and a half weeks since my 54 on the quiz. This should be a sufficient enough time for Maatajee to meet Kavi Kumar, my boyfriend. He is full Indian, and his straight hair is one of the reasons I decide to bring him home to Maa. Kavi is also the only male, apart from Pitajee, who calls me beautiful.

"But my hair is not straight," is all I could say when he kissed me behind the Headmaster's office on my birthday last year. As he pulled his lips away from mine, his eyes slowly darted to the top of my head, as if seeing the curly strands for the first time. My heart sank, and I was angry for breaking the spell that the gods had conjured for me. An embarrassed tear ran down my cheek. Just before I could wipe it away, I felt Kavi remove his hand from the small of my back, and gently touch my face. I flinched – a reflex from Maa's many slaps.

"No, my hair is straight. Your hair is beautiful." Unlike Maa's hand, the warmth radiating between Kavi's palm and my face felt like Sparklers and Moon Whistlers – the firecrackers that Ela and I lit later on that beautiful Diwali evening.

The other reason I decide to bring Kavi home today is that he is going off to the University next year, and we plan on announcing our engagement before then. We follow the smell of warm sugar, almonds and milk. Maa is making *halwa* – my favorite dessert. I lead the way towards the kitchen and extend my left hand

back for Kavi to hold. I also find myself praying Oh great Saraswati, could this sugary sign foretell a peaceful evening? Maa takes off her apron and looks Kavi up and down as we enter. The setting sun from outside shines directly through the window and onto Maa. She has not yet given us permission to turn the inside lights on. The corners of her eyes briefly tense up when she sees us holding hands. She turns around and walks back to the stove to check on our dinner. I see that she has picked up a few hair tips from Ela and has decided on the Brigitta-style braid, straight down the back.

“You are *Kai India*?” Her voice is clearly heard, though it seems like she is talking to the pot of boiling lentils. I can tell this unexpected question startles Kavi because he takes a step back before answering.

“Yes, Aunty,” he replies. His palm begins to sweat, but all I can do is offer an encouraging squeeze and a little tug to bring him back closer to me. I want to say, Stand up to her, Kavi. Control your quivering voice. Maa keeps stirring, clockwise.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.” That’s it, I say in my head. Puff out your chest, Kavi.

“When is your birthday?” Maa asks as she adds salt and spices to the pot.

“January twenty-second.”

“So you are one year and ten months older than Padmaja?” Kavi’s eyes dart back and forth as he calculates our ages in his head.

“Uh, yes,” Kavi answers with a bit less surety than I hope for. Maa tastes the lentils, adds a bit more salt, and continues stirring.

“What is your mother’s maiden name, Kavi?”

“Prasad.” The wooden spoon Maa is stirring with drops to the bottom of the pot and she turns to face us.

“Is your mother *Vijayata* Prasad?”

“Yes, Aunty.”

“Padmaja, help me bring the clothes in from the line.” I throw an apologetic look to Kavi as I follow Maatajee outside. She’s silent for the first four minutes, robotically removing the clothespins with one hand while throwing the skirts and socks into a basket with the other. Curly strands are starting to show at the roots of Maatajee’s head and soon she will need to straighten her hair again.

“Why did you bring this boy to my house, to your father’s house? Have you no shame?” she says.

“But he’s Indian. I thought you’d approve of him.”

“His mother is a Prasad!”

“Yes she is, and my father is a Singh. We are both Indian.”

“He is not like you. You are not allowed to date him, *accha*? After dinner you are never to see him again, understand?”

“First I’m not Indian enough, and then my boyfriend is too Indian for me? I may look like you, Maatajee, but I am more Indian than you!” And with that, she slaps me.

“Go inside and wash your face. Tell Ela to set the table. We have a guest.”

My name is Padmaja, and tonight I hate my mother.

Maatajee rubs her stomach with the same hand she used to slap my face. All throughout dinner she rubs. When Maatajee and Ela take the dishes to the kitchen, Kavi asks me to have dinner at his house the following evening. I am ashamed of the prejudice my mother feels towards me, her own daughter. So I smile and tell him I'd love to have dinner with him and his mother. Like Pitajee, Kavi's father also works in the fishing industry and has been called away to work.

I cannot sleep tonight. Although Maa slapped only my face, I feel as though my whole body is aching. Ela, as usual, apologizes. And like always, I tell her it is not her fault. But I let her make it up to me by helping me flat-iron my hair the following evening.

We tell Maatajee that the pastor's wife thinks we need an extra choir rehearsal, and that is why we won't be home for dinner tonight. Ela is really going to watch Bollywood films at a friend's house, and I will meet her after my dinner with Kavi and his mother.

Staring at the massive Kumar house, I find my walking pace slow down as I get closer to the front door. Although bright yellow is my favorite color, seeing the underarm stains on my new blouse tells me I should have worn something darker. But I am more than assured by the hug Kavi gives me as he welcomes me into his home. Unlike our house, the lights are turned on inside the Kumar residence well before the sun sets. Dinner is already set on the table as I go inside, and Mrs. Kumar, a more Indian replica of Maatajee, looks like she just stepped out of one of Ela's Bollywood films. Kavi has her smile.



All throughout dinner she smiles at me. I begin to talk more freely with Aunty Vijayata, because her friendliness leads me to believe that we have known each other for years. We talk about school and me being a twin, and how mixed children often feel unwanted by our society. I can tell by the way she encourages Kavi to speak, that she has never slapped him for disagreeing with her. Kavi even tells her of our plans to marry, and Aunty Vijayata's genuine smile never falters. "I see why you want to marry this one," she says to her son. And I fantasize about Maatajee being more like Aunty Vijayata. As if she also has my mother on her mind, Aunty Vijayata's voice suddenly grows softer.

"What is your mother's maiden name, Padmaja?" I look at her red lips and perfect teeth as she talks to me. Her golden *nath* attaches at the piercing on the left nostril and extends in a half-circle to the piercing on her left ear lobe.

"Tailevu."

"Is your mother Padma Tailevu?" Oh no. Please Degei, don't let her turn out to be as close-minded as Maatajee.

"Yes, Aunty."

"I knew her once. We were best friends. You are beautiful, just like her." Apparently Maa did not feel the need to tell me that the love of my life's mother was her childhood friend. Aunty Vijayata, on the other hand, was more than happy to tell me my mother's history.

My mother – Padma Tailevu – and Vijayata Prasad grew up together. Padma's first boyfriend was also Vijayata's brother. Although Padma's mother

was Indian, by government standards Padma was one hundred percent Fijian because her father was *kai Viti*. Unfortunately for Padma, she was labeled a “half caste,” or half breed, and Vijayata’s brother would never shame his family by marrying a half caste. But Padma would later marry a different Indian boy – a Singh – and they would have two daughters, Ela and Padmaja.

My name is Padmaja, daughter of a half caste.

I do not know how to take in the night’s information. Maatajee knows how much it pained her to be denied love just because she was half Fijian. And yet she tries to deny me mine? And I’m even less Fijian than she is. I rapidly walk to Ela’s friend’s house, a bit surprised by the chilly island air. At least my armpit stains will dry. Ela is already saying her goodbyes when I meet up with her, and we walk the rest of the way home. It is almost ten-thirty when we arrive, and the smell of ripe dates and whole wheat flour tells us that Maatajee is baking scones for tomorrow’s breakfast. Though the oven is on, the cold air follows us into the kitchen.

“How was choir practice?” Maa asks with her back towards us.

“Fine,” says Ela.

“Okay,” I say. Maatajee turns around to acknowledge us, distractedly looks past our heads, and continues to knead. I linger in the kitchen while Ela leaves to get ready for bed.

“Maa?” I watch her fold the dates into the dough.

“Padi, go to bed.”

“Maa, I need to talk to you.” I imagine my body as the dough, oozing slowly between her fingers, hitting the kitchen counter, only for her to pick up and pound again.

“Can’t it wait until tomorrow, child? Mummy is busy.” I suddenly realize that if I don’t tell her now, I will lose all courage.

“I went to Kavi’s house tonight, Maa. His mother, Aunty Vijayata, told me about you and her brother and her racist family. I’m really sorry that happened to you. But she’s different and she thinks I’m beautiful, Maa. And Kavi and I are getting married next year before he leaves for school.” I close my eyes after my sudden burst of words, and try to relax my cheek muscles to soften the blow of the hand that is sure to come...old, sticky-dough hand that is sure to come.

“Maa?”

“Go to bed.” She is done kneading, and now molds the dough into perfect spheres, placing them gently onto the already buttered baking pan. Each sphere has the same measurements – one-quarter dates, three-quarters everything else. Without the dates, the scones will have no taste. Without everything else locking in the moisture, the dates will shrivel up and die. It is said that the gods never die, but that their souls pass on from generation to generation. I am not a god. I am Padmaja, a breakfast scone.

“Maa, please, just look at me. I am going to marry Kavi, but I want your blessing. Maatajee, I need your blessing before Kavi asks Pitajee when he gets

back.” My voice quivers as I whisper that last sentence. Maatajee places the pan of scones in the oven. She rubs her stomach as she turns around to face me.

“What do you need my blessing for? It is clear that you have already made up your mind to marry that boy.”

“That boy is Kavi Kumar! He will be eighteen when we marry, the same age Pitajee was when he married you.”

“Don’t you dare raise your voice at me, girl. I will not be disrespected in my kitchen, *accha*? I told you to go to bed. Sleep will clear this nonsense building in your head and you won’t end up in a marriage you regret.”

“Like the marriage you are in with Pitajee?”

Maatajee looks around the kitchen for something to throw at me. I bite my lower lip, afraid of what she will do. I taste blood – warm and salty – my Indian and Fijian blood. Unable to find anything in arms reach, Maatajee strides over, raises her right arm, and hits my head. And as suddenly as that violent swing ended, she regains her composure. Her breathing quiets down, and her eyes slowly move from my face to the window.

“Go to bed, Padmaja.” Maa turns back to her scones.

Frustrated and dizzy, I wipe away the Judas-tears forming in my eyes. I will not allow them to betray me tonight. How can I both hate Maa and want her marriage blessing at the same time? How am I still standing when I have this splitting headache? Room, stop spinning. Legs, stay strong. Gods, help me...

The hard tile feels cold on the right side of my body, and I realize I have fainted. I forget about my other side until I feel a hand on my cheek. I recognize

that hand very well – Maatajee. But something is different. Whereas moments before that hand resonated with anger, this hand is a little softer. It lingers longer. I look up into Maa's face and wonder how the Judas-tears managed to get into her eyes as well.

“*Maaf keejiyega, Padi.*” I'm so sorry. “It is getting late and all will be better in the morning.”

The look she now gives me, the way she cradles me in her arms, makes me want to believe her. I want to believe that she truly is sorry for hitting me, and for wishing I looked more Indian. I want to believe that she will take me with her and Ela to India this November. I want to believe that she finds me good enough to marry Kavi. So I smile up at her. And she smiles back. But Maatajee pats my head and gently stretches out the curls of my hair, slowly trying to pin it tight and straight, just like Ela's.

My name is Padmaja, and I am the other daughter of the Lotus.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Her Colorful Coats

“*Kushe, Mama. Aw yu du.* Hi, how are you? It’s Essie. I’m heading over to visit the kid. Wanna grab a bite to eat afterwards? Say, one-thirty? I’m thinking the L&L Drive-Inn on Liliha Street. I’ve been craving barbecue chicken all week. Ask Dad if he wants to come too. Call me back.”

I stopped expecting my Sierra Leonean mother and father, or anyone else, to pick up the phone on days like this. Especially my mother, who didn’t have the excuse of being a college professor like my father. As far as I knew, she was off shopping for fancy dresses or shoes and beaming at the sound of the final Rs the sales clerks accentuated when talking to her – “Is *there* anything else I can do *for* you, *dear?*”

Even when I was in the middle of telling a joke, Mom would remark in *Krio* – the Creole language of Sierra Leone – “Look at my daughter! She tells jokes like an American. *Yu na Amerekin titi.* You’re an American girl.” Unlike my mother, Dad paid attention to the content of my stories, never criticizing my inclination towards my native tongue, never expecting me to be anything else after raising me here in Hawaii, America’s last stolen state.

My mother used every opportunity as some sort of life lesson. “At least he had a proper burial,” she had said to me at my son’s service. “There are many people back home who did not. *Boku people den de na Salon.* The rebels cut off

their limbs, and scattered their bodies. At least you buried a whole son here in America.”

But if the way I mourned kept people at bay on days like this, then I didn't want them around anyway. I didn't need to prove to anyone that I was slowly getting over it because I no longer cried excessively when I visited my baby. And with no one around, I didn't have to guard myself in the event that I accidentally made a touchy comment that left folk feeling awkward and hesitant to say even a single word. Besides, I was always unusually pleasant on days like this. The warm, Honolulu weather refused to let me suffocate in my own self-pity. The birds and crickets cradled me to sleep with their soft melodies; the breezes blew trade winds filled with promises of love from first-time visitors to our islands. But the thing I enjoyed the most on days like this was the sun. It was always perfect, never too strong or too hot on these days. Its' beams kissed my lips, kissed the grass, flowed down every blade and root into each pocket of air in the dirt, trying to warm my own son sleeping underneath where I lay, just out of my reach.

My mother had fought with me at the time Aaron and I were discussing names for our son, saying that it was inconsiderate to name my first-born only after my father-in-law Ezekiel, and not also after my own father. But Dad was just as easy-going as ever when I told him that our second son would be his name sake. “Your next son will be a Joseph? *A gladi*, o! That makes me very happy, Esther.” Like most Sierra Leonean-Americans, Dad and Mom were always mixing *Krio* with English. Once in a blue moon, I would try and do the same. But

Mom would tell me that I was too harsh with the language and that my inflections were off.

“But don’t give your second son a coat of many colors,” Dad continued. “From when he is small, tell him that he is the main Joseph – the husband of the mother of God. *Yu sabi mi?* Do you understand? Tell him of this great honor.” We didn’t know at the time that I would never get the chance of passing down my father’s name.

But in the meantime, on a beautiful day like this, I would enjoy the time I had with my oldest. “You can’t catch me, Mommy!” Ezekiel called as he ran to take cover behind a dying banyan tree. My husband Aaron and I knew that our first born would bring pride to his namesake and everyone else who still lived on the Navajo Indian Reservation in Flagstaff, Arizona where Aaron was from. He and I met in college, and got married right after we graduated from Northern Arizona University. I now smiled when I saw that Zeke looked tall and black like me, with his father’s wavy shoulder-length hair. A grass-stained wife-beater with surf shorts were Zeke’s choice of clothing, and as he continued to run barefoot in and out of the shade, I felt so proud that he was mine. He was my child, and he had gotten so much bigger and older since the last time I saw him, six years ago.

Just as I was about to catch hold of my Ezekiel, he turned around and threw a tiny water balloon at my face. I woke with a start as I wiped a rain drop from my eye with only the back of my left index and middle fingers, forgetting that I no longer wore my wedding band and engagement ring, and that I didn’t have to worry about mistakenly scratching my face.



Before I got too wet, I got up from the grass and said a quick goodbye to my baby. Maybe it was a good thing that no one joined me when I came to the gravesites. When it rained, people mistook the droplets on my face for tears, analyzing my every move, mistaking a hiccup for a mournful gasp. “It’s fine, guys, I’m fine,” seemed to be my mantra. Although lately, it was only directed towards my mother and father, the only ones left.

“If you’re fine, then act like you’re fine,” Mom would reply. Dad would just put his arms around her shoulders and tell me she didn’t mean it. “Am I invisible, Joseph?” she’d say as she welcomed my father’s embrace. “I’m right here, and I meant what I said. Every word, I meant it.”

“Mom, I’m almost there. The rain kind of caught me off guard. Is Dad with you?” I said as I stepped into my pine green Honda Accord. I tried to close my door quietly so that she wouldn’t know that I was only leaving the cemetery now. It’s not like I was far away or anything. It took about five minutes to get from the Nu’uanu Cemetery to the restaurant. And as I searched frantically for my Bluetooth, I coughed into the phone so that Mom wouldn’t hear me start the engine.

“*Mekes, mi pikin.* Hurry up, my child. It’s almost two o’clock, your father still isn’t here, and he’s not answering my calls. He’ll probably pick up if you call him. Tell him *duya, mekes.* Please, hurry up.”

“Okay, Mom I will. He’s probably meeting with a student or something.” I barely managed to get out the last word before she hung up. She was always

doing that, ending a conversation before it was over by waving her hand and leaving the room. Even over the phone Mom always had to get the last word in. And my father was patient enough to let her.

My father was a biology professor at Fourah Bay College in Freetown, Sierra Leone when he met my mother. He was almost twenty years older than her, but until recently, age had hardly been an issue in Sierra Leone. After Mom got married at seventeen, she and Dad decided to leave Sierra Leone in order to live a better life than their parents did, as well as escape the impending civil war. Dad's father, my grandfather, had saved everything he could in order to send his sons to study science in England. In the fast changing world, Dad wanted to do one better. When Mom was still pregnant with me, Dad was granted permanent residency in the United States of America, on the condition that he teach and study science at a university. He was given three states to choose from – Maryland, Georgia, and Hawaii. Later that year, I was born in the Queens Medical Center, right in the heart of Honolulu.

Despite the age difference, Dad and Mom both took turns playing with me in our backyard. Since Dad was usually busy at work, Mom watched me run around at the beach with my friends. Holding on to their Sierra Leonean traditions, neither one of them ever set more than a foot into the ocean. “*Salon* people *no de go na wata!*” Mom would say when I'd beg her to come and join me. “Sierra Leonean people don't go in the water.”

But the main images that come to mind whenever I think about Dad are his enormous crater-like dimples on both cheeks, something I only inherited on my right side. Mom said that that is where he kept all of his secrets, and since I was the only one that kissed Dad's cheeks, I was the only one who knew his secrets. "Your father doesn't tell me half of the things he tells you," she'd say when Dad still hadn't made it in time for dinner. But the only secret I knew was that up until Mom, Dad had never been with another woman.

"I've never loved anyone as much as I love you and your mother," my dad always said. "A man is not a man until he has married a woman and become a husband. A woman is not a woman until she has raised herself."

"*No men am,*" Mom would say when Dad spoke in parables. "Don't mind him. He's just showing us how smart he is. Next time he says that to you, you ask him, 'Why should a woman raise herself if she has a mother to do it for her?' You ask him that, *yu sabi mi?* Do you understand? Tell him that. And when he has an answer, come back and tell me." But I didn't need to ask him that. I had started raising myself since I realized I would never raise a child of my own.

I tried calling Dad again but it kept going to his voicemail after a few rings. I gave up trying to reach him and sent him a text message instead: "U COMIN? UR WIFE'S MAD AGAIN. LUV U."

The L& L Drive-Inn looked more like an apartment-turned-barbecue that ran from a Chinese woman's kitchen than an actual "drive-in." By the time I got there, the ever-changing weather of Honolulu brought the sun out again, and as I

pulled in to the parking lot I noticed my mother in a pink, purple and silver West African “costume” sitting at one of the red-painted metal chairs in front of the ordering window. It was strange at first to see her dressed up so much. After all, she only wore her two-piece Sierra Leonean outfits to church or weddings or other occasions she deemed special. She hadn’t even worn a costume to the memorial service, choosing to wear a simple black cotton dress she bought on sale from Old Navy days before we buried Zeke.

“*Yu luk bad*” was my mother’s greeting as I walked towards her. Dad had decided to speak both English and *Krio* to me while growing up so that I wouldn’t have a “thick African tongue” keeping me from excelling in my academics, especially since Hawaii’s population of Sierra Leoneans at the time was approximately three. Whenever I tried to respond back to her in *Krio*, she told me my inflections were off, or I wasn’t using the right word because I was too “*Amerekin*.” What did she expect after giving birth to me in the fiftieth state?

So when my mother told me in *Krio* that I looked horrible, I replied in English. “Thanks, Mom, you don’t look like crap yourself,” I joked. I didn’t bother hiding my disapproval at her choice of clothing.

“No. I said you look *bad*, Esther,” Mom said as she ignored my stares.

“It was a joke, Mom.” Fine, then. If she wasn’t going to tell me why she was so dressed up, I wouldn’t give her the benefit of asking the question. I was sick of having either to beat around the bush or be direct with her. Why couldn’t she be more like Dad? Before even knowing how to word a question, my father always knew the right thing to say, or when not to say anything at all.

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Aaron and I were both twenty-one when we married, and he agreed to move back to Hawaii with me after graduation. “He knows he has a fine, fine *uman*, Aaron does. And a fine woman you have grown to be, *mi pikin*,” Dad said at the time. “When will you give us grandchildren?” I didn’t have the heart to tell them that Aaron and I had already agreed to wait for a while until we began procreating. Well, I had convinced Aaron that children would only get in the way of us having sex when we wanted to, how we wanted to, and where we wanted to. Rather reluctantly, Aaron signed on to the plan. He came from a large family of proud Indians and since he was the oldest son, he was expected to start having kids soon, much to the delight of my own parents who believed that children were the natural outcome of marriage.

Still, I tried putting it off as long as I could. But three years later, I found myself four months pregnant, and I hadn’t a clue as to how I got there without seeing the signs. I was still getting my period – only not as often and for only a shorter number of days – so at first I was in shock when the doctor told me I was pregnant. “I’m on the pill,” I rattled on and on like the carefree young adult I no longer was. The recent moodiness, hunger pangs and weight gain – which I assumed were the direct results of my mood swings and over-eating – now all made sense. There was a baby growing inside of me, and I hadn’t even noticed.

“It’s going to be okay,” Aaron chanted as he rocked me back and forth, holding on to me tightly as I sat half naked on the examination chair. He didn’t know that I could see his expression from the mirror mounted on the wall beside

us in the examination room. Although his words and demeanor tried to let on that he was just as worried as I was, his face told me another story. I saw only joy in his eyes. And at that moment, I knew that having this baby would be the best thing I would ever do. My parents were outside in the waiting room, and from the shouts and tears they let out, I regretted holding back this happiness from my family for so long.

“Praise Jehovah!” became the song of my mother and Aaron as we all drove back to my house in my mother’s silver Dodge Durango. Mom and Aaron took the excitement to a whole new level, yelling and screaming out made-up songs while Dad and I just nodded and smiled. As I held onto myself in the backseat, Dad – who had asked Aaron to sit up in the front with Mom – never said a word. He looked out of his car-door window in complete silence, never taking his arm off my shoulders. I followed his gaze to the darkening sky above, and I too, for that moment, was content with counting the palm trees as we drove by.

As the sun continued to dry my clothes in the outdoor dine-inn, I told Mom that I would order for her. Mother, like Aaron, was a creature of habit. She had one favorite item from every food joint that she ordered every time – *all* the time. So I told Mom to sit down and relax in her flamboyant outfit and I’d order for the both of us. Dad would just have to get his food to go. I ordered Mom a small plate of teriyaki steak, two scoops of white rice, and cabbage on the side. Normally each plate came with one scoop of rice and another scoop of macaroni salad.

But Mom hated any type of pasta, and didn't care much for potatoes either – “Give me rice and *cow bele* and a *gladi, o!*” All my mother needed was rice and some stewed beef intestines and she was good to go. I ordered for myself the barbecue chicken I had been craving – which happened to be Aaron's favorite L&L dish – and I regretted my choice the moment I bit into the dryer-than-usual meat. I ate all of the macaroni salad though, my favorite part of Hawaiian plate lunches. Mom talked most of the time we ate, asking me how the grass looked at the cemetery, what flowers I decided to take this time, and other questions that prevented her from saying the words “dead” and “babies.”

“Where is Aaron?” she finally asked. “I haven't heard from my son in a while.” The truth was that I had told Aaron we needed space, and that he had moved out of our house almost two weeks ago. As far as I knew, he was sleeping on the couch of one of his coworkers who lived in Haleiwa, clear across the other side of the island.

We were both in our kitchen, fumbling with spoons and coffee mugs we ate our cereal from, when I told him we needed I break. “Essie, Goddammit, be reasonable,” he had said as he slammed a spoon down on the countertop. “You're just having a panic attack. This is when we need each other the most.” He choked up a bit when he said “most,” and I almost felt sorry for him. I mean, I did feel sorry for him. He had lost too. And he was the one who stood beside me throughout all the appointments of trying and failing to remain pregnant again and again. He even wrote the thank you cards to the people that “couldn't make

it.” Aaron was more than my husband. And as cliché as it sounds, he was also my best friend. I wanted to ask him for forgiveness for the stupid thing I had just suggested.

“Baby, I’m sorry,” was all I could say before he took the milk carton out of my hands and wrapped me in his arms.

“It’s okay. Just don’t say stuff like that to me, alright? Not when you haven’t taken your loony pills.” He added the last part jokingly because he knew how much I had fought with our psychiatrist on taking antidepressants. What woman wouldn’t be a little sad from time to time after failing to stay pregnant?

“I love you,” Aaron added quietly. I shifted my head in the crook of his neck just enough for him to loosen up his grip a little. As I tilted my head up towards his, still holding on to his shoulders, eyes closed, I remembered our wedding vows – “...to have and to hold...in sickness and in health, till death do us part.” And as I opened my dark eyes, I expected to see his lighter ones staring back at mine. Instead, they were staring down at my stomach, the empty womb that would never give him living children. Death had already begun to part us.

The motion of my arms dropping down from his shoulders startled Aaron and forced him to return my stare. My knees almost gave way to the regret I saw in his eyes. I cleared my throat and quickly blinked before I dare let another tear fall in front of my husband. “I love you too,” I said as I turned away from him, thinking of all the babies I had lost, especially Ezekiel – the first and only one of them to reach the third trimester before unhooking from me forever.



“Early pregnancy bleeding,” is what the doctor called my spotting when I first found out I was pregnant. “It’s not uncommon,” she had assured us. But almost seven months into it, she declared my pregnancy a miscarriage. Six years and four more miscarriages later, I knew that my uterus was never going to be able to keep a child. And I knew that despite what Aaron had said, he would never look at me the same way again. How could he? All I saw when I looked down at my too-flat belly were blood stains. So much blood. We didn’t even bother washing out the stains on the bed or carpets. With each miscarriage came a fresh set of linens, covering up feelings of death and sadness too new for our old marriage to handle.

“I’ll help you pack your bags,” I had said, unable to see Aaron looking at me that way anymore. I went up to the attic to bring out the suitcases we took to Mexico on our honeymoon, almost nine years before.

Since I couldn’t tell my mother the truth in the public setting of an outdoor restaurant, I lied to my mother about my husband. Divorce was an unthinkable offense, and since Aaron and I were only separated, my mother didn’t need to know I had kicked him out of the house. “Aaron’s out surfing today, Mom. You know him, always being mistaken for a local boy. I mean, he looks more Hawaiian than I do. And he wasn’t even born and raised here!”

Mom laughed at that and said, “That’s because you’re an African woman, my *pikin*. Here in Hawaii people bake for hours in the sun and still they will never

be as brown as you.” As Mom continued to talk and eat, I smiled at the thought of what my father would say if he were here. At the dinner table, Dad always said that he could tell how good the food was by how much people were talking. And the less people talked, the better the food was, because they focused all their attention on their plates in front of them.

Mom always vocalized her agreement, as the three of us licked our bowls and fingers clean. And she was the only one allowed to cook in our household. With the delicious West African delicacies of cassava leaves, groundnut stew, and okra soup, I didn’t mind being chased out of the kitchen to “share more secrets” with my father, as my mom put it. I hadn’t eaten a meal at home in years, but I’m sure she still cooked for my dad. At least, he didn’t complain about her not cooking to me. Now, Mom noisily reached across the red metal table and ate my leftovers.

“People are starving back home” was her excuse for cleaning my plates. “You make me fat, eating your leftovers. *Yu sabi mi?* I’m gaining weight because of you, do you understand?” I remembered eating food from those same fingers that my mother now sucked dry. If it wasn’t for Dad, I would’ve continued eating with my own hands well into middle school.

“Thank God, Dad taught me how to use a fork and a knife,” I said as I looked around at the people staring at this strangely adorned black woman across from me eating with her hands at a public restaurant. I rolled my eyes as I took in the other customers’ stares, as if to apologize for my mother’s behavior

with a look and a shrug of the shoulder. But what took me off guard was my mother's reaction to what I had just said.

"I taught you how to use utensils, Esther, not your father." I couldn't tell if she had said that matter-of-factly or out of anger.

"No, Mom," I said as I let out a hesitant laugh. "I remember sitting at the dining table with the knife in my left hand and a fork in my right hand. But Dad told me I cut with my right, and stab with a fork in my left, so I switched them." I mimicked my words with the white plastic utensils on the metal table.

"How could your father have taught you that if he wasn't even at home?" There was no mistaking *that* tone. "He isn't even home for dinner most of the time, what with his busy schedule at the University. And I'm the only one here having lunch with my daughter, see? Not him." All her talk of starving relatives back in Sierra Leone, and my mother had been starving herself, here in America, for her husband's attention, and for mine.

"Mom, I didn't mean...I meant that..." I managed to say, as I tripped over events in my childhood that I remembered differently than my mother.

"I saw you roll your eyes. Do you think I'm invisible, *mi pikin*?" In a way I was glad that my mother had cut me off before I continued stumbling over my words. The question took me off guard, and allowed me to focus my thoughts and form an answer which I truly meant. And as my mother abruptly stood up and started walking away from me, before even hearing my answer, I didn't feel like letting her have the last words. Not this time.

“I only think of you the same way you think of my children, Mother!”

Although worrying only moments before what strangers around us thought of my mother’s eating habits, I yelled at the top of my lungs, not caring who all was staring at us now. “Why are you wearing that ridiculous outfit on a day like this, Mom? You couldn’t even dress up for the funeral, and yet you wear this...this *costume* on a normal day like this?” She didn’t turn around as I allowed my rage to spill over. But I got up and followed her all the way to her SUV, and pulled her left shoulder back, forcing her to look at me.

“*Wetin yu de du?* What are you doing, Esther? I will not be embarrassed in front of these people, *titi*. *Yu de mek lek u kres*. You’re acting crazy, girl.” But I wouldn’t let her get away so easily. I was tired of her saying that my father and I shared secrets and had this amazing relationship, yet she did nothing to try and change it. It was always words with her, never actions.

Except now. Why was she wearing that stupid costume? “Mom, *a beg yu*, what’s the special occasion? Please, just tell me why you decided to wear that today?” I remained standing there as she stepped into her van. Just when I thought she was about to drive off, she let her window down.

“Today is the fifteenth of June,” she said. And my mother drove away, leaving me shaking in the ninety-six degree heat, having lost the battle to get in the final word. I had forgotten the due date of my first child, the only one who developed inside of me long enough to be able to be identified as a boy or a girl, the only one I had bothered to name.

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That night, I didn't remember the son I held only in death, or my other children who were too small to christen. In my dream, my father was the only one who ate with a fork and knife. Mom and I ate with our hands, and sucked every finger until they were clean and wet with our spit. My father told us that the food was good, and Mom and I nodded and smiled in agreement. "It is very good," she said. And we ate enough for our starving relatives.

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