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A Cupboard Full of Coats

Written by Yvvette Edwards

Published by Oneworld Publications

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**A
CUPBOARD
FULL
OF
COATS**

YVETTE EDWARDS

A Oneworld Book

Published by Oneworld Publications 2011

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ISBN 978-1-85168-797-8

Typeset by Glyph International
Cover design by Ghost
Printed and bound by XXX

Oneworld Publications
185 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 7AR, England

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It was early spring when Lemon arrived, while the crocuses in the front garden were flowering and before the daffodil buds had opened, the Friday evening of a long, slow February, and I had expected when I opened the front door to find an energy salesperson standing there, or a charity worker selling badges, or any one of a thousand random insignificant people whose existence meant nothing to me or my world.

He just knocked, that was all, knocked the front door and waited, like he'd just come back with the paper from the corner shop, and the fourteen years since he'd last stood there, the fourteen years since the night I'd killed my mother, hadn't really happened at all.

I had imagined that moment a thousand times; Lemon had come back for me. He knew everything yet still loved me. Over a decade filled with dreams where he did nothing but hold me close while I cried. Had he come sooner, my whole life might have panned out differently and it might have been possible to smile without effort, or been able to love. Had he

come back before, I might have been happier in the realm of the living than that of the dead, but he had left it too late and things were so set now I could hardly see the point of him coming at all. Yet there he was.

He stood there in the cold, wet and wordless. He offered no excuses or explanations; no *I was just passing through and thought I might stop by*. He didn't tip a cap or smile and enquire after my health, nothing. He stood there watching me as if he wasn't sure whether I might throw my arms around his neck with a welcoming shriek or slam the front door in his face. But I did neither. Instead I watched him back, till eventually he gave a small shrug that could have meant just about anything.

He had what my mother had always called 'high colour', a black man with the skin of a tanned English gentleman, and like a gentleman, he had always dressed neatly. In that respect, he hadn't changed at all.

His taste in clothes seemed the same a decade and a half later, or maybe he'd just found himself stuck with the wardrobe he'd purchased in his youth. He wore Farah slacks that day and a Gabicci suede-trimmed cardigan with a Crombie overcoat thrown casually over them.

Though the rain had stopped, he was thoroughly soaked through, from his hair – which he had always kept skiffled low but which was longer now: a silver-tinged Afro that was damp and forged into steaming tufts – to the lizard-skin shoes on his feet. But though his clothes were still the same, *he* had aged. There were changes around his face; the crow's feet at the corner of his eyes were wider fanned, the bags beneath

them full and heavy, and his old skin bore new lines. His eyes were red-rimmed, the whites yellowed, the expression intense as he looked at me, already asking questions, talking of things that should be whispered even when alone, and it was me that looked away, looked down, wondering if my own eyes were as eloquent as his, afraid that they might be speaking volumes, scared of the things they might have already said.

I opened the front door wide as he wiped his feet on the mat outside. It used to say Welcome, but was so faded now, only someone who knew what it had said before would be able to guess the word had ever been there at all. He bounded over the step like a cat, lithe-footed. He had always been a good mover, the kind of man you could not take your eyes off when he danced, the kind of man you had to drag your eyes off, period. I closed the front door quietly behind him.

He was in.

He stood inside the hallway looking around. I had done a lot with the house in the time he'd been away. The green doors and skirtings had been stripped. The old foam-backed carpet had been replaced with laminated flooring. The last time he'd been here, the walls were covered in deep plum velvet-embossed wallpaper; now they were smooth, clean, white. I sniffed.

'You need a bath,' I said.

He nodded. I walked up the stairs to the bathroom and he followed. I turned on the taps and the tub began to fill.

'I'll get you a towel.'

I left him in the bathroom while I went in search of a towel and some dry clothes for him to put on afterwards. As guys go,

he wasn't really that big, kind of average height, medium build, but he was bigger than I was, and I knew nothing of mine would fit him, even if he had been prepared to wear it. There was still some male clothing in the wardrobe in my mother's room. Though I had considered it often, I hadn't cleared out her stuff, and her room was pretty much as she'd left it, but tidied, her things neatly packed away, as if she'd gone travelling on a ticket with an open-date return and might come back at any moment. I even changed the bedding every couple of months, though I couldn't say why. It was just me here, and while I often passed time in her room, I never slept in my mother's bed, ever.

Inside her wardrobe I found a dressing gown, maroon with paisley trim, and I took it back to the bathroom with the towel. The door was still ajar, and though I knocked first, I found him stepping out of his underclothes as I entered.

He turned around to face me, making no effort to cover himself. The bathroom light was on and its bright glare permitted neither shadow nor softening. Though only in his fifties, he was headed towards an old man's body: thin and hairy, and gnarled like a cherry tree. His pubic hair was thick and grey. His penis flaccid. I could smell his body above the hot bath steam: moist stale sweat, tobacco and rum. He nodded his thanks for the clothes, turned his back to me and stepped into the bath.

I heard him turn the taps off as I picked up his wet clothing from the floor, and as he lay back and closed his eyes I backed out of the bathroom, pulling the door shut behind me.

*

By the time Lemon came downstairs dinner was ready. Minted couscous, grilled salmon and cherry tomatoes, with spring onions, black olives and yellow peppers tastefully strewn across two large white plates. The dressing gown was knotted tightly around his waist, and his pale legs carried him soundlessly across the living-room floor.

‘You hungry?’ I asked.

He shrugged. ‘You have anything to drink?’

I indicated the bottle of wine on the table, but he shook his head.

‘Water? Juice? Strong?’

‘Strong’s good.’

‘Help yourself. Cupboard under the microwave. Glasses are above the sink.’

In my mother’s day, unless she was entertaining, the double doors at the end of the through-lounge were always kept locked, so that you had to go out into the passage to enter the kitchen. But I kept them open always, and he went through to the kitchen. I heard him opening cupboards, finding the things he needed. He’d always been good in the kitchen; tidy and able. I only just made out the sound of the fridge door closing and I shivered.

Most things, all they want is a little gentle handling.

I refilled my own glass for the second time from the bottle on the table, sipping this one slowly as I waited for him to return. When he did, he was clutching a tumbler filled with a clear liquid that was probably vodka, diluted with water perhaps, or perhaps not. I picked up my fork and began to eat as he sat down and took a couple of glugs from the glass in

his hand. I saw him wince as if he felt the liquor burn on the way down. He glanced at me, read the question in my eyes, and briefly waved a hand in my direction, dismissing it as nothing.

His knuckles were bigger than I recalled, or maybe they just seemed bigger because they were so clumsy wielding the knife and fork as he grasped them tight and started poking around the food on his plate, investigating, unhappy. After a while, he looked at me and asked, 'Ah wah dis?'

My laughter caught me by surprise. He had come to England when he was still in his twenties, had lived here some thirty years since, and normally spoke slowly, his English tinged with a distinctly Caribbean drawl. He was from Montserrat; a small islander. That he had chosen to ask what I was feeding him in that way was an indication of the level of his disgust.

'If you were expecting dasheen and curry goat you've come to the wrong place.'

'I never expect that, but little gravy would be good.'

'You should taste it,' I said, as he pushed the plate away from him into the centre of the table, shaking his head.

'You want some pepper?'

He shook his head again.

I carried on eating. He liked the brown food; brown rice, brown chicken, brown macaroni cheese, brown roast potatoes, the kind of food my mother was so good at cooking, the kind of food I never prepared.

'My wife died,' he said.

'Did she?'

‘Cancer. Five months back.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Wasn’t ill or nothing. Just couldn’t eat. Lost some weight. Went to the doctor’s. Doctor send her straight to the hospital. They open her, look inside, then sew her back up. Wasn’t nothing they could do.’

He swallowed a mouthful from his glass, closed his eyes as it went down, then took another quick swig. He dabbed the sleeve of the dressing gown delicately against the corners of his mouth as if he were using a napkin. He would have seen her hollowed out, skeletal, with even her gums shrunken so her dentures no longer fit. They would have used wax to plump her cheeks out, to give her mouth a fuller, more natural shape, and a transparent liquid tint to make her skin tone lifelike. In the right hands she would have looked healthier dead than when he’d last seen her alive. Though I knew he was married, I had never met his wife.

‘What was her name?’

‘Mavis.’

‘What was she like?’

He shrugged. ‘I took care of her myself. Never put her in no home or nothing. Had to give up my job and everything. Couldn’t manage both.’ He raised his glass again, this time to sip. ‘Must be the first time I touch her, she fall pregnant. Her mum was gonna chuck her out in the street and she never had no place else to go. Must be three months from I meet her, sex her, baby on the way, and we done married off already.’

‘Did you love her?’ The words were out in the open before I’d even realized they’d been in my mind. It was the question

I had wanted to ask him when I was sixteen years old. All this time it had waited, as intact as if it had been embalmed, buried deep inside my memory banks, and I hadn't had a clue.

'Baby was on the way so fast, and she was sick, sick and vomiting till the boy born. Bills was coming like mountain chicken after rainstorm, one after the next after the next. Never had time to roll on a beach, or check a dance till dawn. Never really laugh much...hardly smile. But at the end, I was there for her. Cooked her pumpkin soup. I feed her from the spoon and wipe her chin. I change her nappy and clean her mess. I did that.'

'Did she love you?' I asked.

For a moment, he did not respond. When he shrugged it was as if he considered the question irrelevant. He said, 'She let me stay.'

It was my turn to share, to present my life's summary. His turn to ask random, intimate questions. I waited but he asked nothing. Finally, 'I have a son now,' I said.

Lemon looked around the room slowly, taking in the alcoved shelves filled with books, the comfy wicker chair beside them, the settee that ran the length of one wall, the stereo in front of the window, the TV on the stand above it. There were no toys to be seen. Nothing to indicate that anyone other than me lived here. I had photos but they were not displayed like fertility trophies on my walls.

'He lives with his dad,' I said too quickly. 'He's coming tomorrow. Comes every second weekend and stays.'

He nodded, then stared back down at his glass without the slightest curiosity. I was relieved. I was always braced for the

automatic surprise to that statement, the judging people did of me, their revision of everything they thought they knew about me before, like knowing that one fact put me as an individual into context. He hadn't done that and I was glad. In all the years he'd been away, there were some things that hadn't changed. People always felt they could trust him. That had always been his gift.

'So is that why you came?'

He looked up, eyes narrowed, brow furrowed. I had lost him.

'Because of Mavis.'

He smiled sadly, and shook his head.

'We never talked,' he said. 'About you mum and all that.'

Though I knew we would talk about her, that it was inevitable she would come up, I panicked, standing up even though I hadn't finished eating, reaching for his plate, scraping the untouched contents on to mine, gathering together the cutlery and placing it on top.

'She's been dead for years. It's over,' I said.

'Is it?' he asked, then looked away, down at the floor, wriggling his toes as he spoke, alternate feet tapping the floor like the hands of a drummer sounding a beat. My heart began to pound, the wine spun inside my head and from nowhere nausea rose inside my stomach like a buoy.

'Berris came to look for me,' he said, then added, 'He's out.'

I did the washing-up. Then wiped down the cupboards and the worktop. I cleaned the cooker, emptied the bin, then swept and mopped the kitchen floor.

Lemon was in the living room. Smoking. I could smell it. It was something I had forgotten, the smoking. Him and Berris had both smoked back then and burned incense over it. Benson & Hedges and the occasional spliff. My mother had provided the incense. She had never been a smoker herself. The only other man she'd ever lived with was my father and he hadn't smoked either. Yet, like everything else, she accepted it without a murmur, throwing the windows wide, pinning the curtains back, waving the joss stick around in circles. I closed my eyes and for a second I saw her: small and slim and perfect, arms raised, dancing.

He's out.

He had served fourteen years of a life sentence, a fixed-term punishment with rules and walls that had now ended, and I envied him. Able to begin his life anew, his crime atoned for in full. Blamed and punished, he had served his time, then been freed. Free to visit Lemon so the two of them could talk. Now Lemon was here to talk to me. I inhaled deeply, leaning against the wall, eyes closed, willing myself to calm down, unable to stop the question echoing inside my head: how much did Lemon already know?

I took a saucer from the cupboard and carried it back into the living room. He'd been using his hand, his cupped palm, to flick the ash into.

'I don't have an ashtray. I don't smoke,' I said, handing him the saucer.

He was sitting in the middle of the settee. I moved to the wicker chair opposite and sat there, watching him, waiting for him to speak. He held the cigarette pinched between

forefinger and thumb, took a long, slow drag and opened his mouth to allow some of the smoke to curl lazily upward into his nostrils, before finally drawing it down into his lungs. As he blew out, his rounded lips shaped the smoke into rings and he pulsed them out, one after the next, till the smoke was gone.

The nausea from earlier was still there, like my mother was being exhumed, and in the silence it was getting worse. I was desperate to know what he knew, yet at the same time petrified he would blurt it out before I was ready. It was that fear which drove me to speak first, to start the conversation from the outside edge, the farthest point away from the core that I could find.

‘So how’d he look?’

‘He’s changed.’

I raised my eyebrows, looked up at the ceiling and pursed my lips to contain a snort.

‘Don’t believe it if you want, but it’s true.’

‘I’ve heard that before...’

‘He’s not the only one.’

I felt the familiar stirring of anger, and I embraced it. Had he expected to find me the same after all this time, after all that had happened? ‘I’ve grown up,’ I said. He didn’t respond. Instead he concentrated on putting the cigarette out. ‘So what did he want?’

‘To say thanks for me being his friend.’

‘How touching.’

‘And he asked after you.’

‘Ahh...sweet.’

‘And to say sorry.’

‘Fuck him!’

Lemon raised his eyebrows. His was the old-school generation. It was all right for them to *rass claat* and *pussy claat* and *bomba claat*, but children were expected to be seen and not heard. Even though I was an adult in my own right, I was still a clear generation younger than him. He considered my swearing disrespectful.

‘It’s a bit late for apologies,’ I said.

‘It’s never too late to try and undo the wrong a man’s done.’

‘That’s rubbish and I don’t want to hear it! She’s dead.’

‘I take it you’re without sin?’

Though there was no suggestion of sarcasm in his tone, I felt myself struggling to read between the lines, trying hard to gauge what he knew; flailing. ‘I don’t need any belated apologies from him. Or lectures from *you* on sin.’

‘That’s not why I came.’

‘So why did you come? What is it you want?’

He looked away from me, down at the floor. Now it felt like I was pressuring him, but it was already too late for me to stop.

‘He cried, didn’t he? I bet he bawled his eyes out. He was always good at that.’

‘He wasn’t the only one.’

‘And you listened and nodded and said, “I forgive you”?’

He didn’t answer. Nor did he look at me.

This time I made no effort to hold the snort back. ‘I need a drink,’ I said.

I went back into the kitchen, took another glass from the cupboard and filled it with more wine I did not want. My heart was pounding inside my chest, my throat dry; the hatred I had spent so many years suppressing was back with a thud as hard-hitting as a train. All the walls, the structure, the neatness of my life, and he'd smashed through them with two words casually tossed.

He's out.

I left the wine untouched and stormed back inside the living room.

'You know what, I don't want you here,' I said. 'You'd better go.'

And he said, 'Not yet.'

'You just don't get it, do you? I don't care that she's dead!'

He didn't even glance my way, merely shrugged. 'And me? I never gave a damn that she live.'

I had been running for the last four years. It had come upon me one day, a few weeks after Red had left me. I hadn't worked since I was six months pregnant. That probably had a lot to do with it, because when I was working I was *feeling*. Outside of the cold room, I felt nothing. That particular day, I had finished repainting my bedroom white. It had been cream when I'd started, cream and burgundy, because Red hated white. He said it was sterile, that he wanted to be comfortable kicking off his boots in the bedroom, to feel cosy and warm. Once he had gone, I had no further need for compromise, so I changed it.

I had thought that when it was finished I would feel something; satisfaction or pleasure, even uncertainty or dislike, *anything*, but I didn't. The job was finished, that was all. It was done. I washed the brushes, cleaned out the bathtub, packed the cans away into the garden shed and went upstairs to look at my handiwork again. My relationship had ended and Red had taken my son. My life was my own and I could do anything I wanted, yet I felt nothing. As I stood staring at the walls, searching inside myself for some kind of emotional response, the nothingness suddenly welled up inside me, like a physical mass, so vast and empty and infinite I was terrified. The very first time I went running, it was from that terror, from the possibility of being sucked down into emptiness for ever, and as I ran I discovered I *was* able to feel; pressure in my lungs, pain in my legs, my skin perspiring, the pounding of my heart.

My routine was erratic, I ran when I felt like it, usually five or six times a month. So was my style. It was nothing like that of the runners I grew accustomed to seeing, the ones who regulated themselves, jogged two or three times a week, who did a warm-up first and stretching exercises afterwards, the people for whom the activity was a hobby. I ran like my life depended on it, as fast and as hard as I could. Sometimes, passers-by would look beyond me as I ran towards them, with fear in their eyes, trying to see who or what was pursuing me, trying to work out whether they should be running too. As long as I was feeling, I didn't care.

But that night, with Lemon smoking in the living room, my mother dancing in the kitchen and Berris out, it felt like my

circuits were overloaded. I found myself feeling too much at once to be able to process any of it, and the only thing I could think to do was run.

I left him sitting on the settee, pulled on jogging bottoms and trainers and took off. The moment I closed the garden gate behind me, my feet began pummelling the pavement and I found myself headed towards Hackney Downs in a sprint.

I turned right at the park, intending to follow its perimeter, and raced along Downs Park Road, with the park on my left and the Pembury housing estate on my right. The evening was as dark as night, the weather drizzling again and windy. Icy cold.

I felt it.

Felt the breath in my throat like pure eucalyptus, the liquid droplets in the air against my face and neck, my calf muscles screaming. I focused with all my might on the things I could physically feel, hoping to cork the memories Lemon had stirred up about a time I had no desire to remember, and it worked for about twenty minutes, till I had run more than halfway around Hackney Downs. Defeat came in the form of a piece of paper, a mere scrap, tossed on a wind to land against my hand with a wet slap. I flicked it off immediately and increased my speed, but it was already too late. Suddenly it was impossible not to think of her, my mother, and the choices she had made, to wonder how any woman could ever be so pathetic, could become so weak and passive that she would not raise her own hand to defend herself, even in the final moments when she must have known that if she didn't she would surely die.

*

Too beautiful. Everyone said she was and it was true. With baby-wide eyes and long thick lashes in a perpetual flirt-flutter, and purple-blush lips that parted in a half-moon over even ivory teeth, and high colour so flawless it was as if she had been slow-dipped in a vat of chestnut gloss, lowered and turned and raised by a patient doll-maker, his hands clenched tight around the ebony mass of her kink-free coolie hair – my mother had been a beauty.

She was the only child of a poor, uneducated Montserratian land worker and his semi-literate wife. In an era when it was normal for Caribbean migrants to leave their children behind with relatives as they headed out to the Motherland to make their fortune, with the wild card Hope flapping hard against the ribcage, my grandparents took their daughter with them. Between the three of them, they bore a single cardboard grip, and most of what was inside it belonged to her. Everything I know about them I learned from her, and the sum of everything she said was that they could not have worshipped God himself more than they worshipped the ground she walked on. Full stop.

She was too beautiful to make her own way to and from school at a time when every other child in the country was doing it, or to cook or clean or shop or carry, or even to amass a single useful life skill. So when she was seventeen and my grandparents died, it is hard to imagine what would have become of her were it not for the benevolence of my grandfather's friend Mr Jackson.

Mr Jackson was fifty-three when he took her in. *Fifty-three*. Fair with the tenants who rented the rooms in his house, he

was a shrewd Jamaican migrant who had somehow landed soundly on his rickety old legs. He was gaunt from the diabetes that would eventually finish him off for good, and though half blind from glaucoma he still had vision enough to see that my mother was too beautiful to weep broken-hearted, forlorn in her single bed, *alone*.

Within a year, they were married and she was rescued. It was Mr Jackson who taught her how to be a woman, how to pick good vegetables, the best pieces of meat to buy, how to cut chicken, gut fish, where to shop for everything you needed to make a jug of Guinness Punch.

He took her shopping. Bought her jewellery and underwear, dresses and jackets and shoes that she chopped and changed like a child with a dressing-up box and nothing to do but play. She was too beautiful for anything but the very best and that was all she had because Mr Jackson doted on her.

My mother talked about herself all the time, told me everything about her life as though she were telling fairy tales, talking while she played with my hair or I played with hers, whispering in my ear as she tucked me into bed at night, or on cold nights in her bed as I snuggled into her warmth. About her and my father, how they had been married nearly three years before conceiving me, how by then he'd lost all hope of ever fathering a child. When my mother told him she was expecting, he was both overjoyed and convinced I would be a boy. It was Mr Jackson who called me the name they went on to enter into the *Register of Births and Deaths*, as if it were a real name they had given a lot of thought to, a normal name, borne of love. He said it suited me, not just a girl, but

one who, instead of looking like his wife, resembled *him*; small and dark and demanding, too greedy for my mother to keep on the breast, too noisy for my father to want in their bedroom. After I arrived, he gave up the tenants and bought the house I still lived in, with a bedroom for them, one for me, and a third just in case, then kept me and my mother locked up tight inside it. Away from church and work and parties and shebeens and hard-assed younger men and life.

She whiled away a few more years till Mr Jackson died, cheating me of all memory of him bar one: me sitting on the bed beside him, rapt, listening as he told me a story. What it was about, I do not know. I can barely see him in the memory or recall any detail of the room. The most vivid thing I remember was my excitement, the sheer thrill I felt listening as he spoke. I must have been about three. By the time I was four he was gone.

I had completed a full circuit of the park and was too shattered to run the rest of the way home, so I power-walked, on shaking legs, past the estate and the garages, past the houses and gardens of normal families, back to where I knew Lemon waited. I opened the garden gate and, at the front door, felt my left calf beginning to cramp, so stopped and stretched it, trying to stave off the worst of the pains.

The one thing my mother always said about Mr Jackson was that he was a decent man, that he took proper care of things, including this mortgage-free house that he left to her, which she then left to me when I was sixteen and she was dead. Decent enough to ask no more of her than that she occupy it and dedicate her life to raising me, forsaking all

other men till I had grown up. ‘Grown up’ she interpreted to mean when I was sixteen. It was ironic that I actually *had* grown up then. Sixteen and overnight my childhood was over.

Maybe everything that happened was Mr Jackson’s fault. Had he married someone his own age, he might not have been so obsessed with the idea of other men sleeping with his wife after he was gone. Maybe had she had the chance to live in the real world, she would have picked up a few strategies to stop it killing her. Or maybe if I’d been given a name like Peace, it would have been a self-fulfilling prophecy of a different kind.

But I was making excuses and I knew it. The fact was, I had done what I had done. Made up my own mind and committed myself to a course of action. My blame was my blame and my blame alone. I opened the front door and entered the house, then slammed it shut behind me, as if in doing so it was possible to lock a world’s worth of excuses outside it.

Inside the shower cubicle I scrubbed. Scrubbed my arms and legs, my neck, stomach and breasts. The scent of bergamot shower gel had begun to subside, and my skin reddened in response to what had become an abrasive rub till, eventually, it began to sting. I stopped scrubbing then, standing beneath the coursing water till the hot water went warm, then tepid, then cool, and the sting became a tingle and goosebumps swelled. I withstood the cold till I could bear it no longer, before finally turning the water off.

I slid open the glass door, reaching for the white thick-pile bath towel, becoming gentler with my aching body, slowly

patting it dry. With the towel wrapped around me, I unlocked the bathroom door and stepped out on to the landing, headed towards my bedroom. As I passed my mother's room, the door was slightly ajar. I paused outside it, listening to the silence within before slowly pushing it open and entering.

Inside her room there was a cupboard full of coats. The cupboard had been built into the alcove and was probably as old as the house itself. I went over and creaked open the door. The coats were suspended inside it on large wooden hangers, each one an expensive and beautiful work of fine tailoring, protected individually by transparent dustcovers. I ran my fingers across the tops of the hangers lightly before settling on one, which I then withdrew.

Carefully I raised the cover and examined the coat underneath. It was made from nubuck suede, a long, ankle-length, close-fitting garment, grey-blue like cloudy sky, with diagonal slit pockets lined in cobalt-coloured silk.

A gift.

A small tug, a dulled pop, the button was forced through the hole and the coat was off the hanger. I pushed my arms into the sleeves and stepped out of the towel nest around my feet. Deeply, eyes closed, I inhaled the stale scent of years infused with leather. A surreal dizziness mushroomed inside my head and I swayed slightly, then surfed the remainder of its wave.

I did up every button. My body was a little fuller than hers and the coat moulded my naked shape as perfectly as a second skin.

I walked to the mirror where I examined myself, turning this way and that, moving my legs to emphasize the long slits

at the buttonless bottom of the front and the vented back. I studied my reflection side on, unhappy. I sat on the stool before the dressing table, pulled my damp hair up into a ponytail, picked up her brush and a powder foundation, and started dusting it on.

This was the one thing she had taught me to do well, applying make-up with such proficiency I could even make the dead look like they were dozing. She had let me brush her powder on, allowed me to practise coating her long lashes in sooty mascara, her full lips in glossy plums, while she sat hardly blinking, still as a doll. She had preferred Max Factor, and as I used up the items on her dressing table I replaced them with the same, though for my workbag I chose an assortment of brands that were just as effective on brown skins.

Apart from the foundations, her other cosmetics suited my colour as much as they had hers. I picked a red-bronze rouge, a golden eyeshadow, and painted my lips a metallic mocha brown. Finished, I examined my reflection again, still dissatisfied, knowing the picture was incomplete. I pulled my hair out of the ponytail, pushed my fingertips beneath the surface, down to the scalp, and tousled it from the roots to create more body. I pulled the sides and back up, leaving the top mussy and wild, and held the glamorous style in place with one hand.

I tilted my head slightly, exposing more of my neck, and mirrored in the glass I saw Lemon, just inside the bedroom door, and I froze, watching him watching me. He looked as shocked as if he had seen a ghost. My attention returned to my reflection where I expected to see myself posing, but

instead, after all the years she'd been dead, I found myself face to face with my mother.

I gasped and stood up too quickly, knocking the stool over behind me, then tripping on it as I stepped back, releasing my hair and stumbling. I might have fallen but for Lemon who was inside the room now, close enough behind me that I could feel his heat. He grabbed my arm and held it firmly, steadying me. I turned around to ask whether he'd seen what I had, but when I looked at him, his eyes were as hotly fired as a kiln, and everything I had to say lodged as thickly inside my throat as grief.

'She was beautiful,' he said, slowly raising his hands and smoothing the sides of my hair, cocking his head as if to get a better angle for the view, smiling, but not at me, at something he saw in the distance. *Someone*. 'I never seen anyone as beautiful in my life.'

He held my head between his hands like a ball, moving only his thumbs, stroking my eyebrows from thick end to thin with a slow, hypnotic repetition.

'They have a rock down by Carr's Bay back home. Huge. 'Bout the size of a small house, off the beach, in the water, with some small rocks leading up to it, good size but small-looking alongside the big one; like a bridge. When you on top of the big one, it's like you out to sea. Most times the sea down there was rough, with big waves – if you was in the water could knock a man down clean.

'Don't exactly know how to describe it, when I used to climb out there and sit down, how I felt, 'cept "good". She was

the only person to ever make me have that feeling on dry land. Just to look at her. That was all. Just to see.'

Leisurely, he ran his palms down my neck on both sides, thumbs around the front – if he changed mood they could strangle me – and out, across my shoulders, before returning to my neck. Then his hands moved downwards, over the front of the coat, tracing the swell of my breasts beneath the coat's peach-skin nap. I stepped back.

'No,' I said.

It was his turn to step back. He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked around the room, the floor, the walls, everywhere but at me.

'She wore that coat that night,' he said.

'I know.'

'She was looking out for him the whole night and I was looking at her, feeling like I was on the rock, thinking what a fool he was, knowing he was still but a small fool compared to me, the Fool King.'

So much time had passed since then, almost a decade and a half, yet the details were all there, as vivid as if everything had happened only yesterday.

'He was so angry,' I said.

Lemon nodded. 'I knew he would be.'

'I couldn't talk to him,' but even as I said the words I knew that was not the truth of it. I had not spoken when I should have done, and then when I did, I had lied.

'He woulda never listen. Not them times. Kinda man he was then.'

I pushed hard and the words tumbled out of my mouth. 'I didn't think about her; just me.'

'You was young. You was scared.'

It was the compassion in his voice that made me bristle, the understanding. 'How the hell would you know? You weren't there!'

'You're right,' he said. 'I wasn't.'

'No one was! So don't you ever try and tell me how I felt because I am the only person who knows.'

I turned my back to him and started unbuttoning the coat. Though my hands were shaking, I was impatient to be done. I knew now that he did not know. He was making excuses for the little he thought I was responsible for and he could not have done that if he had even the slightest inkling of the truth. But instead of relief, I felt disappointment. I had been let down. Again.

'We need to talk,' Lemon said. 'There's things I need to tell you. About me. What I done.'

'Save it for *Trisha*!' I answered, securing the towel around my body before taking the coat off. I retrieved the hanger from the bed and fed the coat back on to it, pulling down the cover, putting it back into its space inside the cupboard. 'She's got time and sympathy. Have you not noticed I'm a bit lacking on the touchy-feely front?'

'Yes,' he said, 'I have.'

Another day, different circumstances, and the sincerity of his voice to my rhetorical question might have made me smile. I had hoped he had known and had still come anyway.

It had to be him. He had always been the only person who might understand; my only hope.

‘You can sleep in here,’ I said. His eyes moved around the room, with its flower-patterned walls and old-fashioned furnishings in sharp contrast to the other rooms in the house. I’d had to replace the original carpet because the stains had been impossible to remove. Otherwise, her bedroom had been as carefully preserved as a crypt. ‘Unless you’re scared of jumbies?’

He gave a single nod and suddenly I was exhausted.

‘My son’s coming in the morning,’ I said. ‘You’re gonna have to give me space. I can’t do that and...this. It’s too much.’

He nodded again.

‘My son comes first,’ I said and felt a blush rising. I wondered why I had added those words and whether he had seen through them. ‘I’ll see you in the morning,’ I said, and left.