

Excerpt from: *The Bread the Devil Knead*, by Lisa Allen-Agostini (Myriad Editions UK, 2021)

When I wake up that morning, oh God, my back and my belly was hurting. But I didn't want to make no noise and wake up Leo, so I bite my lip hard to make sure I didn't bawl out for pain. Slow slow slow I turn on the bed and swing my foot over the side, and get up like if is eggs I sitting on and I feel with my foot for my rubber slippers before I stand up.

It was dark in the bedroom, dayclean still a good hour away. I hear the neighbour cock crowing anyway, as though he watch break. I didn't switch on the light because I living here five years and I could find anything here with my eyes close. I reach under the bed by the ashtray for my pack of cigarettes and lighter, slip them in my duster pocket and tiptoe out the room. When I reach the door, I remember the book I was reading last night before Leo come home. Yes. Look it there where he did fling it by the wardrobe. I bite my lip again when I bend down to pick it up. I close the bedroom door behind me soft soft.

In the kitchen, rubbish was falling out of the old grocery bag in the corner by the back door, and it had a smell like stale fish and cigarette in the air. The stove had a crust on it—split peas boil over on top of the black grease coating the white enamel. I didn't even bother to suck my teeth. I pick up my copper-bottom kettle, shiny, bright chrome, full it with water and use my lighter to light the stove.

As I waiting for the water to boil I sit down and start back reading my book. The table nasty, like the stove. I feel long time it used to be red like the cigarette pack—carmine? A nice word, *carmine*.—but now it just kind of fadey-orangey colour. *Vermillion*. Right in the centre of the table it had a big circle of bright red—carmine!—as though it had a flowerpot on the table

for years and years. But when I move here it didn't have no flowerpot there. Leo mustbe break it.

I light a cigarette and take a long drag. That first cigarette does go straight to my head, every time. I was a little dizzy until I take the next drag. I ash the cigarette in a dirty coffee mug on the table, and the ashes float in the black coffee still in the cup.

The book I was reading wasn't Tolstoy, just some murder mystery I borrow from the library. The detective was a woman who had a bookshop in London. This is how I does see the world: by reading books. I does go to London, Hong Kong, Siberia, even, when I read a book. I does meet all kind of people. Learn all kinds of words. Live all kinds of lives.

Thank God for books.

The kettle start to boil and I jump up quick quick before it could whistle too much and wake up Leo. I stand up by the sink to wash the same cup I was ashing the cigarette in. The rag I was using was a old piece of jersey. It had a print on it that say Prop-somethingsomething-versi-somethingsomething-consin. Property of the University of Wisconsin, it used to say, before the Squezy and Vim fade out the print. It had a million other jerseys like it cut up in pieces. We does use them to wash wares, wash windows, clean the furnitures when we cleaning. Which is hardly ever.

I pick up the sugar pan to sweeten the tea, but the pan was empty. I didn't bother to look for milk; I drink the tea black and strong and bitter. Just like Leo. I laugh inside my head. The tea edge my teeth and burn my tongue.

The woman detective in the book was going to a estate sale in the country to see if she find any first editions and she meet a handsome man in the big old house which part she went. I

was just getting back into the story when the stupid rooster next door crow again and remind me I had to go to work.

Every time I watch that bathroom it does crawl my blood but Leo lie if he feel I cleaning it. He could do what. I don't care. I not scrubbing that moss and mildew off the wall for he lazy ass. If he beat me, he beat me.

I hang the duster on the towel rail, scrub my mouth looking in the mirror but not really seeing the thin, white face, long, straight, brown hair, hazel eyes, the mouth men does call rude. I have a small waist and a flat belly, but right now that belly was black and blue and red and green, depending on what bruises you was looking at: the older ones was lighter; the ones from last night was still red.

Sun now starting to think about coming up. A grayish light was glowing through the cobwebs in the blocks holes high up on the wall of the bathroom. I bathe myself with my rag and some cheap vanilla body wash—real gentle when I rubbing my belly and back—and rinse off under the one tap gushing cold water from the bathroom wall. I had my slippers on still.

I know is really one thing I have that I could count on, and that is my looks. I going on 40 but you would never know it because every morning and night God spare life I does cleanse and tone and moisturize from head to foot. I have special cream for my hair, my face, my hand, my body, my foot. Is not that I vain. I does think of it as an investment. If you had a nice car, ent you would take care of it? Depreciation is a hell of a thing.

I creep back inside the bedroom and, in the dawn peeping through the curtains by the window, I put on my underwears. I does iron on a weekend and so is just to ease out a shirt, a skirt and some shoes from the wardrobe, take my handbag from the kitchen table, stuff the book in it and is gone I gone before Leo could even turn twice.

In this neighbourhood you doesn't have to lock your door. Everybody know you and everybody know your business; so everybody know we didn't have nothing to thief. I push in the back door and walk out to the front yard. My two little neighbours was there already, dragging theyself down the road.

“Happy New Year!” I tell them.

The girl didn't watch me in my eye. “Happy New Year, Miss Allie.” She say it like she eating aloes.

“Ty, you ready for the first day of school?”

He and all watching me funny. “Yes, Miss Allie.” He walk quiet for a little while, and then he hitch up the big big book bag on he back before he talk again. “Miss Allie, last night, my mother say Uncle Leo just like he father—“

He sister jump in one time. “Hush your mouth!”

“But Natalie!”

Natalie hit him one cuteye and grab he hand rough rough and pull him like he is a sack of rice. “Mind your business,” I hear she tell she brother.

Me, I do like nothing didn't happen. I plaster a smile on my face and step up my pace to pass them on the road. “Have a great day!” I say. Is not my place to teach piss-in-tail children their manners.

When I reach the main road the sun was up and the road was busy already. I put out my hand to stop a maxi and one pull up one time, giving a next maxi a bad-drive, fus he hurry to catch this one passenger.

When I sit down in the back seat of the little bus, I keep my knees together tight tight and didn't turn right or left. I could see, out the corner of my eye, a little girl in pigtails and ribbons

watching me with she eye big big. She was probably wondering what a white lady was doing taking maxi. I didn't study she. I pull out my book from my handbag and start to read.

Well, pretend to read.

In truth, I was going down the rabbit hole in my head.

Ever since I was small, when I get licks I does picture myself disappearing inside a black hole. The black hole does swallow up everything, starting with my navel and sucking everything down with it. This morning the black hole pick up the places where Leo cuff and kick me the night before, the places where he hold me down and force me to do what he does call making love, the places with the nasty kitchen and the overflowing rubbish bag and the mossy bathroom and the neighbours talking behind my back and the mud on the road and the cussing maxi driver and the gaping little girl...everything get suck down inside that black hole and I was staring at the page of the book like it was blank or infinity.

The maxi mustbe stop; next thing I know is because somebody shaking my shoulder and saying, "Miss Allie! Happy New Year!"

The black hole close up like water going down a drain.

It was Tamika, a girl I does work with. She black eyes was sparkling and she teeth look extra white when she smile, splitting she dark brown face from ear to ear.

"Aye, but what you doing on this side? Happy New Year!"

I wouldn't say we was close friends, but we was friendly enough for me to know she was living Chaguanas, not Carenage.

She slide in next to me and kiss me on the cheek. As she reach to put she purse on she lap, I spot a little twinkling on she left hand. "Hmmm, like somebody had a very happy new year!" I tell she, grinning.

“Girl,” she say. She hold out she hand and turning it left and right so the little diamond could catch the light. “Curtis and me get engage. Christmas”

“All you set a date yet?”

“Girl, you rushing me or what? No, no date. But I move in by he this weekend.”

“That is why you down here? Where all you living?”

“In he mother house, up in La Horquette.” Tamika skin up she face a little bit. “That woman like she don’t like the best bone in my body.”

“And you know you have plenty bones,” I tell she. I does tease Tamika all the time because she bony and long. She used to be a dancer and she still have the body for it. I try to get she to do some modeling but she was never interested; is only “Curtis this” and “Curtis that”. I used to feel like that about Leo, too, once upon a time. He say he want to carry me out on a evening and like a fool I drop everything: *Leo want me. Leo love me. Leo need me.*

I watch the sea slide by the maxi as we speed down the highway towards the city, listening with half a ear to Tamika chattering away about the engagement and she soon-to-be-mother-in-law and how Curtis was so generous and rayrayray. Even on this western peninsula, you could still see spectacular colours on the water when the sun coming up: a little pink; a little silver; a little blue; a little gold. Waves was washing up on the shore in between the mangrove growing in the water on the side of the highway. A man was bathing a horse in the sea, leading it in by the reins. I feel sorry for the horse. That water mustbe was damn cold at that hour.

“And you?” Tamika jook my waist with she elbow. “What you get for Christmas?”

“Nothing,” I say, eating the pain when she bounce me. That was one of Leo favourite spots, too. I wish I could of go back in the black hole again.

“Nothing? Or you don’t want to tell me?” Tamika, like she was trying to get back at me for the bony joke.

I make up my mind just like that. I don’t know what fly in my head. I never tell nobody about this before but just so just so I decide I go tell Tamika. “You know what? I go show you what I get for Christmas. Leo give me. When we reach in work, I go show you.”

A Bobo Shanti rasta man sitting on the other side of Tamika, he hair tie up in a turban, raise he eyebrow and give we a reproachful look from the side of he eye. He mustbe feel is some sex thing I talking about.

Oh, brother man, if you only know, I tell myself.

*

We come out the maxi with everybody else and join the river of people flowing from South Quay to Broadway. Seven in the morning, first workday of the year, and town was already jumping: little school children ent reaching my hip, weigh down with bags bigger than them, jostling with full grown man and woman, everybody hurrying to reach to school, work, government office or wherever they was going. Tamika in she orange work polo jersey and jeans, and me in my shirt and skirt blend right in as we cross the road by Cipriani statue and walk half-a-block to On the Town. Is two years now I is store manager; Tamika is a sales clerk. We does sell clothes and accessories, mostly cheap Chinese thing we boss wife does order. The wife little on the tacky side, but she bright for so. The clothes does be bright bright bright and a little on the tacky side, just like she.

I unlock the shop, Tamika lock back the street door, and both of we gone in the back by the kitchen. I put on the kettle and put out some cups, and she take out a open tin of condensed milk, the pack of Crix and the small small block of cheese from the little fridge. She cut up squares of cheddar and put about ten biscuit on a plate while I make the tea. This time I put sugar and milk in mine until it was sweet and light. I give she she cup with a spoon and put the milk on the table.

“So what is this big secret thing Leo give you for Christmas?” Tamika sit down by the table and take a bite from she Crix and watch me mischievously; she eyes practically sparkling.

I still standing up by the kettle. I suck my teeth. “Curiosity kill the cat, eh, Miss Tamika.” I pull my shirt out my waistband.

“What is this!” Tamika was squeaking, excited like a little child in a birthday party as she sipping she tea. I feel she figure it was a navel ring or a tattoo I going and show she. She didn’t notice my face was serious like a police in court.

When I unbutton the shirt, she put down she tea and she hand start to shake.

“Miss Allie! What the hell?”

“You see? Leo give me.” I shake my shoulders in a shrug and button back up the shirt. Tamika ent say a word; she just sit down there with she lip quivering and she eye fulling up with water. I sit down and try to eat my Crix and cheese.

Finally, tears rolling down she face, she say soft soft, “You call the police?”

“Police? You joking? What police go do? Say is man and woman business and leave me to get more cutass?”

“No, girl,” Tamika say, in a rush. “Things different now. They does actually help—”

I hold up my hand and stop her right there. “If Leo only knew I call police for her, is even more licks I go get.”

The Crix pack on the table start unfolding for itself as the plastic try to find back the shape it want to be in, even though I roll it and twist it up to make it stay close. Tamika reach and pick it up. She get up and put it back in the fridge with the cheese and the milk. She sit back down. She didn’t say nothing. She didn’t watch me in my eye. All kind of expressions was passing on she face: horror, disgust, sorrow, but then rage settle around she mouth and draw out she eyes to finally look at me. “Why you does stay, Miss Allie?”

“You know that is the first question people does ask?” My throat was dry. I take up the cup with my two hand to keep from trembling and throwing down the tea. I sip some before I talk. I feel like she was accusing me. I hear it from doctor and nurse already, as though by staying I was saying I want to get licks.

“Nobody doesn’t ask, ‘Why he don’t stop beating you?’ As if somehow is a normal thing for a man to beat a woman. Yet it not normal for a woman to stay with a man who beating she? If is the woman fault for staying, not the man fault for lashing she, beating woman come normal, then.”

Tamika still sit down quiet. Water full up in she eye again. She shake she head hard, maybe to say, “No, it not normal.” But she didn’t open she mouth to tell me nothing.

“Anyway, is only now things get real bad,” I say. It was partly true. “When we meet, he was nice! He was sweet. If you see that man. Hard, body for days. And, oh gorm, girl, that smile. A hundred watts he could turn on and off when he want and I ain’t lie, he hook me with he voice. He’s a singer, you know. Voice like butter.” I smile to remember them days.

She shake she head. "I know he's a big famous singer. And he handsome. To look at him you would never know he is a monster, eh?"

That make me jump. "No, Tamika. He's not a monster. He like to lash and he like to..." I study if I could really tell this girl all the thing Leo does do me. But if she react like that when she only see the bruises on my body, she go dead if she know the rest. My turn to shake my head.

"No, he's not a monster," I continue. "But it wasn't always so. He was nice. He take care of me. He put me in house, a real house. I never meet a man who love me so much." I watch she. My eyes was dry. "He still love me," I say confidently, though I wonder if I self believe it.

"And you? You still love he?" she challenge me, looking straight in my eye.

A hard question for so early in the morning. And what is love? I human, I have feelings. I with the man. Of course, I love him. Yet, the way he love me does make me hate myself.

He very imperfect, is true. But how to tell Tamika that, as far as I concern, it ent have no such thing as a good man anyway?

One man I had was *locho* for spite, sitting down there waiting for me to mind him and not getting up to get for heself. One man was under he mother skirt; he couldn't say boo unless he mother tell him say boo. She used to buy down to he drawers for him.

I had plenty horner man, sniffing behind every woman bottom they see. Some boldface exes bring their women in we place and bull them in we bed; hence the "exes". Is not that I vex they have woman; but oh gorm! It have rules for this thing, man.

Another one love he boys more than he love me, liming, drinking and playing football with them like that was he work. He didn't have no time or energy for me when the night come.

All of them used to lash.

Leo have he ways, me ent say no. Yes, he does horn, but so what? I accustom and what don't kill does fatten. As long as he have enough leave over for me to get my share. That share was worth a lot, to me. Even with the licks and the rest of it, when he wasn't hurting me, he was my best lover. For me, that was good enough.

If I still love him? Simplest answer? "Yes," I say. In my head, I tack on, *Sometimes*.

We eat we biscuit and drink we tea and she wipe she face and fix back she eyeliner. We didn't say nothing again. By the time the two next girls who does work with we, Janelle and Ann, come knocking on the door, it was nearly time to open up the shop. I put my hair up in a ponytail and put on some lipstick and slap on a smile. It was eight o'clock.

Libation Suite

i.

with blue soap and a dead woman's bathsuit
i bring a libation to this beach of
hard-packed white sand wracked with sargassum.
i bring this offering to the mother of the waters.
you need an obeahwoman and an offering
to cut a soul tie. i am the obeahwoman.
I am the offering too. mother, sweep me
into your waters.

ii.

*I heard of an aunt who sleeps with a blade by her bed,
who will get up to stop the stranger when he comes.
An obeahwoman could cut, too, if she had courage and a sharp knife.*

iii.

Pound cardamom, clove and nutmeg in ginger paste.
Use a base of coconut oil. Scent it with
Iris and lily. This is the balm to restore
The savaged parts of your heart.
Use it often. Apply generously.

I have not learned the recipes for left-hand dumpling or sweat rice.

iv.

What corrosion declines love to this?

v.

clear waves scroll the hard-packed beach.
sun glints white in perfect blue.
red sargassum, translucent in light, is beautiful.
the seaweed hasn't begun to stink. but
fine black flies smudge the sand.

vi.

A soul tie is a rope and a scar. It
is gnarled and barnacled. It is hardened
love, broken and reformed too many times.

vii.

*I keep a whetstone by my kitchen sink.
Its surface is smoothed and slightly bowed
with wear. Alas, this is not my kitchen.*

viii.

When we raised his altar, he offered
honey, olive oil and white five-day candles:
Sweetness, healing and light.

ix.

He said: *You offer what you want to get.*

x.

the obeahwoman lights a candle
for herself. she prays that the thick, red seaweed
will roll away and leave the sand. that when
she lays her body in the waves nothing will touch her but sea.

xi.

You cannot be tender
When you sharpen a knife in your mind.
Do not meditate on small sweetnesses. Do not
Think of soft looks. Forget the feel of fingers.
Abjure memories of lips and endearing quirks.
You want to think of hard, sharp edges:
His voice in anger; your shame. You want
To think of the edges. Become that sharp.
A sharp knife is made for cutting hard things
That need cutting: a thick piece of meat, say,
Or a dasheen or a rope. Now the knife is sharp.
Now cut. There will be resistance. Cut.

xii.

the obeahwoman pours herself into the water.