Clean Linen

At one point does chance takes the face of a cycle, she thought. To take it a step further, when is it logical to classify a series of unfortunate events as a generational curse? This, this stream of consciousness, filled with murky water of the realization that she'd never know the answer to any such internal inquiries, led to a door—a locked memory. She could hear shouting through the crack, strained, like you lost your voice two days ago, and you didn't sip warm citrus and honey tea to soothe your vocal cords.

"Sonya, are you okay, do you need a break?" the woman across from her, probing her with questions, asked. Her face was unusually inviting, pretty, ageless—the type of face that didn't peak in high school. Skin that would never droop, never need tightening. Her eyes were soft and if you looked into them for too long, you'd be fresh out of secrets, and you wouldn't feel foolish for giving in.

"Yuh, I'm good. What chu say?"

"I asked if you can recall how you handled watching the abuse your mother received at such a young age?"

She started to lie, as if creating your own narrative would make it truthful. Besides, the past can't be changed, this lady would never know, and she wouldn't have to open a chapter of her life she bolted shut. But, she could feel water leaking from the crack inside of her.

"I didn't. We neva mentioned it—'specially outside our house. My pops would always tell us, 'what happens in this household, stays in this household.' It was like it wasn't even going on."

The therapist quickly stole a glance at her watch, hoping Sonya wouldn't notice—she did.

"You didn't handle it. That is okay, you were a child. Moving on is a normal response to trauma."

"I wouldn't go on to say it was trauma, ya know," Sonya responded.

"The fact that you are unable to recognize the abuse of your childhood as trauma is a symptom of trauma, of post-traumatic stress disorder, even."

The mention of it sent her swirling into the past: sitting on the concrete landing of their porch, creating false narratives to guilt rip the elderly into paying two dollars for fifty cents of candy, avoiding her dad in the drunken nights, begging for her dad under the sobering sun.

"Sonya and Sam sitting in the tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G," said Megan. She was smaller than the rest of the kids in the neighborhood, but her voice wasn't. She had a response for everything.

"Shut yo mouth!" Sonya shouted. The rest of the kids joined in, running in circles around her until all she could see was a blur of snagged teeth and stained, holed, tee shirts. She pushed past them, knocking Megan down, and ran into the house.

"I thought I told y'all kids to go outside?" said her dad. He was sitting in the dining room, in the middle of a conversation with his best friend: the one you call brother, the one your mom calls son, the one your children refer to as uncle.

"I was, but they play too much," Sonya responded. She rushed to the kitchen, and opened the refrigerator to grab a bottle of water, but, "wash yo hands!" said her mother. She quickly lathered her unmanicured hands with soap before rinsing them under hazy cold water sputtering from the rusted faucet. Not only that, but she could hear what the grown-ups were talking about.

"She rather be up under them welfare wealthy bitches than with her own Nigga," said her uncle.

"That's da problem with these broads today—they wanna be niggas," her dad responded. "They don't wanna run a household." At this, he guffawed, hearty and full. She could listen to him chortle all day long, but it'd never last long until the tightening of her ribs from uncountable fits of laughter was replaced with a different ache, from an angered source.

She gulped the bottle down in seconds, water dripping over her chin and dampening her shirt.

"Sonya! Can't you act like a lady?" her mother chimed in.

She threw the bottle in the trash and then added a comment in with the men, "maybe that's all they know how to be like…"

They both looked at her. She tried, but failed, to label their look. Though she knew it wasn't in agreement with her comment. Her dad, in particular, twisted his lips and looked down at her, as if disgusted to have raised such an image that was incongruent with femininity, an image that questioned the notion of patriarchy before she could grasp the ramifications of the term.

"Stay outta grown folks' business," said her dad.

"You bored?" her uncle asked. She nodded her head. "Where all your dolls at? I know you ain't too old for dolls." He smiled brightly, giving in to his inner longing for children as a means to keep his own youth.

"Ion play with no dolls, Uncle Pooh!"

"Why not," he asked. "Isn't that what little girls do, play with dolls? Polish their nails? Gossip about lil' boys?"

Sonya? Sonya…

She was back.

"I asked, how has your childhood abuse given birth to your current state of abuse acceptance?"

She sighed—what was she even there for? If she knew the answers to all these questions, then surely she'd just talk with herself. She found herself checking the clock hung high on the far wall.

"Ion know," she replied, shrugging her shoulders. Her heel began to rise and fall in a rhythm. She became ultra-aware of her surroundings as if her body was foreshadowing something.

"What about your mother? Was she a support system for you growing up?"

Sonya curtly sliced the woman's gaze. The woman sat back in her seat. "I told you, don't you ever mention my mama. I thought we agreed to that."

"Well, yes," the woman responded, "but I thought I'd-"

The door handle hit the wall on Sonya's way out. She clenched her chest, and the weight of hooves in the Kentucky Derby ran amok inside of her. Abuse—mama, trauma—mama, quarreling—mama, loving strength—mama. Suddenly, she accepted the maternal image in her mind as her mother: she welcomed the scars, she praised her stretch marks, and colorized the now faded newspaper remnants she gathered over the years to formulate a portrait of a mother to appease the self-pity of her having one so fractured. Did it work? If insanity is doing the same thing over again and expecting a different result, would burning down the stately homes of her childhood, which she invented in her mind, bring about a cure? Then again, the obvious: if one is, in fact, insane, then who's to say they are accurate in their proclamations of their newfound sanity?

She blew out the flame, spitting to douse the fuel within the glass casing. Overhead, the sun melted into the faraway waters, passing the fading torch to the cratered moon. The traffic lights were

now a glowing neon, and she could taste dew in the spring air of April. Kids ran wildly ahead of lampposts flickering alight, bare feet and naked in the signature. She was there, running behind the boys, who were exhausting their lungs from eluding grandsons whose grandmothers they had terrorized at the bus stop hours earlier.

Outside her home, she took a deep breath and checked her eyes in the rearview mirror to ensure they were dry.

"Mama," he let out as she instantly looked to the back seat. Nothing. But that smell; clean linen and cotton: the scent her mother used to spray around the house after someone left the bathroom; but that taste: cocoa and butter, lumpy as the hot cereal her mother would make when she could get up early enough to cook something similar to a breakfast for the kids; but that radiant sensation of warmth: mama wrapped around her shoulder, protecting her from a switch late at night. She was crazy, she didn't get enough sleep the previous night, she was hungry, and Mama always said a hungry heart, mad mind—mama always said…

"Da hell yo ass been all night?" she was greeted with as she entered her house. "Man can't even come home to a hot meal—shit's crazy."

"It's leftovers in da fridgerator," she quietly added.

"Don't nobody want leftovers all da time, Sonya, goddamn." She could feel her muscles tightening. Where once was discomfort testing her restraint, now familiar temptation strummed the strings of her patience like Alice Coltrane on the harp.

"Mike, we only had leftovers twice this week. I'm tired aight, it's food in the fridge."

"You ain't gon heat it up for me?" he demanded, leaning on the wall as to await an imminent explosion—only, the smirk on his face indicated he controlled the detonator. He wore that honor proudly as a Boy Scout in the early 70s. "Ain't your mama taught you better than dat?"

"Come on now, you know I am about my mama."

"I'm just saying, ain't that's what yo mama 'sposed to teach you, some kind of home training or some shit? I mean, what else is she there for?"

She took off her shoes and retreated to her room, and there, on the dresser in a dollar store plastic bag: a clean linen air freshener. Mama? The sky was a pauper version of Starry Night—how much is authenticity? Has she not paid her dues?

Mike entered the room, and the stars were stolen as his words splattered paint onto a full canvas. She asked him to drop it, but he had something better to do, right?

"Who you talking to?" he shouted. The pipes within the structure rumbled and burst in her mouth as plasma. She coughed up the clot as the sensation of a thousand bees stung her eyes and one hundred bulls rammed into her cheek and ten giraffes kicked her gut. Darkness. The only matter in existence, patterned phosphines appeared as a pious rendition of Van Gogh's magnum opus took shape. Then, the rich taste of cocoa on her tongue. Then, the savor of clean linen. Then, the comfort of arms embracing her.

Mama?