Also by
SAFIYA SINCLAIR

Cannibal
Catacombs

HOW TO SAY BABYLON

A MEMOIR

SAFIYA SINCLAIR

37INK

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The names and identifying details of some people depicted in this book have been changed.

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For Ife and Shari and Cataleya
and
She who is yet to come

Sun a-shine but tings noh bright,
Doah pot-a-bwile, bickle noh nuff,
River flood but water scarce yaw,
Rain a-fall but dutty tuff!

—Louise "Miss Lou" Bennett

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down,
yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.
We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.
For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song;
and they that wasted us required of us mirth,
saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

—Psalms 137

Caribbean reality resembles the wildest imagination.

—Gabriel García Márquez

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Author's Note

Memory is a river. Memory is a pebble at the bottom of the river, slippery with the moss of our living hours. Memory is a tributary, a brackish stream returning to the ocean that dreamt it. Memory is the sea. Memory is the house on the sand with a red door I have stepped through, trying to remember the history of the waves.

In telling this story, I have followed my river all the way down to the sea, treading as closely as I could to my memory of the people, places, and events that shaped my life. Outside of my family, most of the names and identifying characteristics of the people who appear in this book have been changed. May each of you find your way back to the water.

Prologue

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
—Emily Dickinson

Behind the veil of trees, night's voices shimmered. I stood on the veranda of my family's home in Bickersteth in the small hours after midnight, on the lonely cusp of womanhood, searching for the sea. My birthplace, a half speck of coastline hidden by the tangled forest below, was now twenty miles away in the dark. When I was a girl, my mother had taught me to read the waves of her seaside as closely as a poem. There was nothing broken that the sea couldn't fix, she always said. But from this hillside town fenced in by a battalion of mountains, our sea was only an idea in the distance. I pressed my face into the air's chill and listened.

Out here was the bread and backbone of our country. The thick Jamaican countryside where our first slave rebellion was born. These mountains tumbling far inland had always been our sanctuary, hillsides of limestone softened over time, pockets of caves resembling cockpits overgrown with brush, offering both refuge and stronghold for the enslaved who had escaped. Echoes of runaways still hung in the air of the deepest caves, where Maroon warriors had ambushed English soldiers who could not navigate the terrain. The English would shout commands to each other, only to hear their own voices bellowing back at them through the maze of hollows, distorted as through a dark warble of glass, until they were driven away in madness, unable to face themselves. Now more than two centuries later, I felt the chattering night wearing me mad, a cold shiver running down my bones. A girl, unable to face herself.

The countryside had always belonged to my father. Cloistered amidst

towering blue mahoes and primeval ferns, this is where he was born. Where he first communed with Jah, roaring back at the thunder. Where he first called himself Rasta. Where I would watch the men in my family grow mighty while the women shrunk. Where tonight, after years of diminishment under his shadow, I refused to shrink anymore. At nineteen years old, all my fear had finally given way to fire. I rebuked my father for the first time, which drove him from the house in a blaze of fury. What would happen to me once he returned, I did not know. As my siblings and mother slept inside, frightened and exhausted by the evening's calamity, I paced the dark veranda, trying to read the faint slip of horizon for what was to become of me.

As I stared past the black crop of bush into the night, the eyes of something unseen looked back. Something sinister. A slow mist coiled in the valley below. The air shook across the street, by the standpipe where we filled our buckets with water when the pipes in our house ran dry. There, emerging from the long grasses, was a woman in white. The woman appeared like a birdcatcher spider ambling out of its massive web. Her face, numb and smudged away, appeared to me as my own face. I stood unmoving, terrified as I watched this vision of my gray self glide down the hill toward me, cowed and voiceless in that long, white dress. Her head was bowed, her dreadlocks wrapped in a white scarf atop her head, walking silently under the gaze of a Rastaman. All the rage that I burned with earlier that night had been smothered out of her. She cooked and cleaned and demurred to her man, bringing girlchild after girlchild into this world who cooked and cleaned and demurred to her man. To be the humbled wife of a Rastaman. Ordinary and unselfed. Her voice and vices not her own. This was the future my father was building for me. I squeezed the cold rail of the veranda. I understood then that I needed to cut that woman's throat. Needed to chop her down, right out of me.

There, I could see where these fraught years of my adolescence had been leading—with each step I had taken into womanhood, the greater my hunger for independence. The more of this world I had discovered, the more I rejected the cage my father had built for me. There, in her frayed outline, I saw it, finally: If I were to forge my own path, to be free to make my own version of her, I had to leave this place. If I were to ever break free of this life, I had to run. But how would I ever find my way

out? How would I know where to begin? Here, in the same hills that had made my father, now sprung the seed of my own rebellion.

I was being called to listen to what the land already knew. To unwind the hours that led to this catastrophic night, I had to exorcise the ghost of its making; I had to first understand my father and the history of our family. To carve my own way forward, I had to first make my way back. To where the island's loom and my family's yarn made one knotted thread. I had to follow until I could find just where this story's weaving began: decades before I was born, before my father was born. Before he had a song for this strange captivity, and a name for those he longed to burn. And before I learned too well how to say it.

Babylon.

I
BUDGERIGAR

A cage went in search of a bird.
—Franz Kafka

1

The Man Who Would Be God

Look to Africa for the crowning of a Black King, he shall be the Redeemer.

—Marcus Garvey

Before the music came the rain. Familiar and relentless, its torrent lashing hard and showing no signs of slowing, falling for hours on the heads of the hundred thousand Rasta bredren who had overrun Kingston's Palisadoes Airport, waiting since the first horn of dawn's red-letter arrival, praying for the storm to finally break. Some came barefoot, came on crutches, came by the truckload with whole families and tribes, framed with thick manes of dreadlocks flowing about their faces, sprouting wildly, or piled into crowns atop their heads, everywhere a black shock of overgrown beards and a loud ululation of tongues. Each was fueled by a higher purpose from bredren to bredren, and the sea of worshippers sprawled beyond the sight line. While some Rastas packed into the upper gallery of the airport for a better view, the more resourceful bredren among them climbed the air traffic towers and scaffolding, some scaling the few poinciana trees, every single bloom and broadleaf shaken loose in excitement. The Rastas pushed dangerously against those barricades of Babylon, tentatively eyeing the officers armed with bayonets as they flashed the heavy rain free from their dreadlocks. Their hopes buzzing near-electric, they watched the sky for the first glimpse of the Ethiopian airliner that carried the man they believed to be a living god, the emperor Haile Selassie.

On this damp April morning in 1966, the acting prime minister and his party studied the scene before them in disbelief. Settling above the gathered flock like its own heady stratosphere, a thick fog of ganja smoke hung

on the air. The ministers expected some Rastas to attend, but they did not anticipate that every single Rasta on the island would pack natty to natty into Palisadoes. No visitor to Jamaica had ever received such a welcome; no dignitary or celebrity, not even Queen Elizabeth II, who had visited only a month before, was greeted with such jubilation. The minister's party had laid out a red carpet for the Ethiopian emperor, and cordoned off reserved seating for VIPs, all of which was now occupied by unbothered members of Rastafari, necks craned skyward, studying the thundering sky. The Rastas outnumbered the police officers more than ten to one, and while the PM's delegation had rehearsed an elegant ceremony for the emperor, I can imagine now their panicked huddle, trying to decide how to improvise a welcoming ceremony against the eyesore of these loud and unkempt madmen chanting unintelligible edicts about Jesus being a Rastaman.

This rambling legion of Rastas came from as far away as Negril's westernmost point, from the shores of Lucea and Savanna-la-Mar, the banks of Milk River and Black River, from Oracabessa, and the remote eastern villages near Port Antonio and Morant Bay, down from the verdant hills of Cockpit Country and the scarred mountainsides of Clarendon; they traveled hundreds of miles from the seaside coasts of Ocho Rios and Montego Bay. Dressed in regalia fit to meet their deity, the faithful were emblazoned in holy garb, flanked head to toe in the roaring red, gold, and green of the Ethiopian flag, the adopted symbol of Rastafari, worn by Rasta bredren in dashikis, rain-soaked tams, and military insignia, and Rasta sistren in ankle-length whites, bright scarves, and tasseled headwraps. The weather did not stop them from devoutly waving palm fronds and dancing, trance-like. Here and there they lifted portraits of His Imperial Majesty, carefully painted giant pictures of His coronation, or stenciled passages of Christ's resurrection from scripture as evidence of Haile Selassie's validity. Many lifted banners and signs sky-high, bearing messages to their Messiah:

WELCOME TO OUR GOD AND KING

HAIL TO THE LORD ANOINTED, GREAT DAVID'S GREATER SON

UNTO THEE WILL I PRAY ALMIGHTY

JAH COME TO BREAK DOWNPRESSION TO SET THE CAPTIVE FREE

Voices could be heard chanting the psalms of Rastafari, as loud kette-drumming rumbled throughout the airport. Now and then a cry of *Jah! Rastafari!* bellowed out from the crowd, causing a boomerang of rallying cries of *Jah! Rastafari! Jah! Rastafari!* to crack and roll across the mass of bodies like a wave. Hallowed Rasta elders from the Mansion of Nyabinghi blew the curved war-horn of the abeng, the sacred instrument of the unconquered Maroons who fought and defeated both Spanish and British colonizers. The horns' groans shook the warm, wet air.

These were the nation's downpressed and downtrodden; outlawed and persecuted since the Rastafari movement's creation in 1933, when a visionary street preacher named Leonard Percival Howell heeded Marcus Garvey's call to "Look to Africa for the crowning of a Black King," who would be the herald of Black liberation. Howell followed Garvey's arrow back to the Motherland and found Haile Selassie, the emperor of Ethiopia, the only African nation never to be colonized, and declared that God had been reincarnated, walking among them in the form of a Black man, born Ras Tafari Makonnen. From the man came both myth and mountain, a seismic cultural shift that made the Rastafari a lasting colonial threat. It was a movement that hardened around a militant belief in Black independence inspired by Haile Selassie's reign, a dream of liberation that would only be realized by breaking the shackles of colonization, and unifying the African diaspora. And though the Rastafari movement was nonviolent, they were the nation's black sheep, feared and despised by a Christian society still under British rule, forced to live on the fringes as pariahs. These were the involuntarily landless and homeless, their encampments sacked, their fields burned by a government in service to the Crown. When Howell built Pinnacle, the largest-ever Rasta commune and a peaceful self-sustaining society, the British government razed it to the ground, staunching the movement's message of unity and Black independence. They were the unemployed and unemployable, the constant victims of state violence and brutality, the ones the government jailed and forcibly shaved, the ones brutally beaten by the police. In 1963, when a group of Rastas refused to relinquish the farmlands they lived on to government seizure, Alexander Bustamante, the white prime minister then, ordered the military to "Bring in all Rastas, dead or alive!" This triggered a devastating military operation where Rasta communes were

burned island-wide in a weekend of terror, where more than 150 Rastas were dragged from their homes, imprisoned, and tortured, and an unknown number of Rastas were killed.

For decades they had been maligned as boogeymen, as madmen, as the monstrous Blackheart Man—a bloodthirsty caricature invented to scare children away from the Rastafari. They were kicked out of their homes, abandoned by their families, turned away at every door. So, when Rastas read the biblical accounts of Jewish persecution and strife, they recognized a similar suffering in their own tribulation. From those psalms of Jewish exile came the Rastafari's name for the systemically racist state and imperial forces that had hounded, hunted, and downpressed them: Babylon.

Babylon was the government that had outlawed them, the police that had pummeled and killed them. Babylon was the church that had damned them to hellfire. It was the state's boot at the throat, the politician's pistol in the gut. The Crown's whip at the back. Babylon was the sinister and violent forces born of western ideology, colonialism, and Christianity that led to the centuries-long enslavement and oppression of Black people, and the corruption of Black minds. It was the threat of destruction that crept, even now, toward every Rasta family.

But on this day, Babylon could not stop the Rastafari. On this day, they moved in a fervor of hope. They came to be heard, to be seen, to be legitimized. Today they came to witness God look Babylon in the eye.

In defiant contrast to the prim-starched suits and pearls of the welcoming delegation of Kingston uptowners, and in disobedience of the governor-general and the acting prime minister's calls for decorum, the Rastas continued to dance and chant.

When God come, the rain will stop! they yelled. *When God come, the rain will stop!*

All kept pious watch for his plane in the blackened sky.

According to Rasta folklore, what happened next was sudden. Like a scorched wind out of Eden, seven white doves burst out from the clouds, and behind them emerged the first silvery tip of the airplane. The plane was white and bore a streak of red, gold, and green, with the roaring Lion of Judah insignia emblazoned in the middle. As the first glare of sunlight

reflected off the emperor's approaching plane, illuminating the entire Kingston sky, the rain instantly stopped, and the tarmac at Palisadoes erupted in an ear-splitting roar of pandemonium.

Like a battle cry ripped from some epic poem, a charged howl of voices ululated across the airport as men propelled themselves over the stunned heads of soldiers in a damp stampede. Rastas flattened the VIP area and trampled the PM's red carpet with mud as they tried to get a closer view of the landing plane. Hearts thundering, heads floating light with unreality, they danced as if this was the first day of their known lives. All were speaking in tongues, singing fevered spit-fueled chants of *Hail the Man!*, *Lamb of God!*, and *Black man time now!* Their day had come. And when the plane's wheels finally touched down, one hundred thousand Rastas charged the tarmac, running underneath and around the taxiing plane, with disregard for the moving wheels or still-in-motion propellers. They rose with a singular purpose, in zealous pilgrimage to swarm and crush the silver bird from all sides, hungry for a chance to touch the Black hand of God.

Believers surrounded all sides of the plane. "God is with us. Mek me touch the hem of his garment," they pleaded. This was as close as they would ever get to Zion, the Rastafari's name for both the promise of liberation and the soil of Africa, to where they believed it was their destiny to repatriate. Rastas leaned on the wheel of the emperor's plane, smoking ganja from giant chalices, chanting *See how God stop the rain! See how God stop the rain!* Fearing for his safety, Haile Selassie, seventy-four years old then, did not exit the plane, and instead waited on the tarmac for nearly forty-five minutes. Some Rastas began to stir with doubt. Unable to convince Haile Selassie to disembark, and concerned for the emperor's safety, the PM had no choice but to enlist the help of a Rasta leader, Mortimer Planno, who boarded the plane with his hands shaking. The words that passed between Planno and His Majesty are cloistered, a lost relic. Planno returned and beseeched the crowd to calm.

At last the emperor's airplane door opened. When Haile Selassie finally stood in the doorway and studied the screaming sea of believers before him, he wept.

Rasta bredren, sistren, and children cheered and waved beyond his

bleary eyes, as His Imperial Majesty descended the plane's stairs and waved back, regally, his hand moving ever so slightly. At the last step, instead of walking on the half-cleaned red carpet leading to his waiting motorcade, Haile Selassie stepped instead onto the muddy ground of Kingston town. This caused the Rastas to erupt into even more deafening cheers and chants of *Jah! Rastafari! Hail the Man!* To them, this was stark evidence of his humility, that his first footstep on Jamaican soil was on the very same ground they walked upon, and not on Babylon's red carpet.

The scripture, in the end, would write itself. Among the crowd waiting out the day's rain on the island was a young singer named Rita Marley, who prayed all day for a sign of the emperor's divinity. When Haile Selassie's motorcade went by her in the jampacked Kingston street, he looked her directly in the eyes and gave a nod, waving his hand, where she saw the mark of a black stigmata in the center of his palm. "This is the Man!" she screamed. "This is Him!" By the time her husband, Bob, returned a few months later from Delaware, where he had been visiting family, she had grown her dreadlocks and set them both on a path of staunch devotion to Rastafari, believing they should spread His Imperial Majesty's message through music.

So went the benedictions of the living God, hailing his presence through Kingston from his motorcade, where all along the roads the crush of onlookers spilled out into traffic, manifesting myriad gospels and good old-fashioned Jamaican folktales. Each account was more outlandish than the next, with signs and wonders to be gleaned from every action. Most infamous was the tale of what Rastas believed were miniature coffins disguised as cigar boxes that Haile Selassie gave the PM's delegation—evidence of the edict that *Babylon must fall*—versus the seven gold medallions he gifted the Rastafari leaders: plain-as-day proof of his approval of Rastafari. Stranger still was the fervent belief that it was the emperor's cigar-coffin that caused the acting PM's subsequent death a year later from a brain hemorrhage.

When the emperor, who was an Orthodox Christian, finally sat down with Rastafari leaders, he told them very plainly he was not God. But his message, instead of deterring them, was widely seen by Rastas as irrefutable proof that he was in fact a living god, because only God would be capable of showing such humility. Only God Himself would deny His

divinity. Somewhere on the emperor's last rail stop in the town of Montpelier, in the countryside where my father was born, I imagine the radio of his train car playing reggae's future ragged and discordant tune. On this journey, perhaps the emperor recognized himself in the long claw of history, saw himself caught between the weight of being the heir to the Solomonic dynasty and the true freedom of being Chosen as the Messiah. What did it mean, after all, to be the living answer to the fraught question of Black survival?

Speeding along with Haile Selassie through the Jamaican countryside, my lifeline curves back on itself. I imagine the emperor quiet, observing from the royal coach of our now-defunct passenger railway, passing the crumbling green towns of the island's countryside, lush and Edenic, discovering with surprise his own image painted on the modest shacks, on the sides of schools, his golden lion roaring unexpectedly from another humble shanty, then another. As I grew up, his stern and silent face would become as familiar to me as a grandfather's. His portrait would be gilded and exalted in the many rented homes of my childhood, every detail of his life more closely known to me than prayer. How serene he seemed, this man whose existence would come to unstitch my family. Hurtling along with the man who would be God, on a railroad that no longer exists, in a country that nestled its dark ache in me—the moment is ephemeral, illusory. I, too, am searching for a sign.

Before my father came to believe he was God, a man named Haile Selassie walked here, among the same blue ferns he did, following that one blue note between rock-steady and the clink of the country river. Haile Selassie's visit, eventually forgotten by most Jamaicans, would shepherd a generation of Rasta bredren to birth whole gospels in the emperor's name, and my father would become the most devout among them. And though he was only a toddler when the emperor visited, Haile Selassie's influence would take staunch roots in him, irrevocably changing the course of his life, and my family's life with it. Long after the emperor boarded his holy airliner and waved against the cheering hordes, he remained with us. His message stalked the wet leaves and salty palms of my youth, growing until he was a colossus, wading out to the sea where my mother was born,

where I was born. Long after his own people rejected him in a coup, he was still here, at the airport next to the tiny fishing village of White House where my family first made a life. His flame burned alive in my father, who was god of our whole dominion, who slept with one watchful eye on my purity and one hand on his black machete, ready to chop down Babylon, if it ever crept close.

2

Domain of the Marvelous

We lived by the seaside until I was five years old, in our tiny fishing village called White House, which belonged to the fishermen of my mother's family, her father and grandfather. Hidden just beyond the margins of the postcard idea of Jamaica was our little seaside community, a modest hamlet shrouded behind a wall of wind-gnarled trees and haphazard cinder blocks, a half mile of hot sand browned from our daily living and sifting between bare toes, glittering three hundred yards in every direction to the sea. Our village was impossible to see from the air, unless you knew exactly how to catch this pinprick of shantied blue, and just as hard to find on land. Down a little dilapidated lane, shrouded with hibiscus shrubs and poinciana trees drumming the car roof, was our tucked-away cul-de-sac, named for my great-grandfather's house, which he painted white himself when he first came to this beach almost a century ago. Here there was no slick advert of a "No Problem" paradise, no welcome daiquiris, no smiling Black butler. This was my Jamaica. Here time moved slowly, cautiously, and a weatherworn fisherman, grandfather or uncle, may or may not lift a straw hat from his eyes to greet you.

Here, my mother and I drew our first breaths in salt-air and measured our seasons by the sea breeze. From the village entrance, at certain slant angles, the sea's view was obscured by small wooden houses, no more than thirty in total, modestly crafted by the men who lived here, men who died here. My family lived in close quarters and knew the subtle dialect

of each other's dreams. Under a zinc roof held together with sandy planks and sea-rusted nails, we lived in the shrinking three-bedroom house my grandfather had built with his own hands. I shared one room with my parents and my brother Lij, who was two years younger than me, all four of us sleeping on the same bed, while my newborn sister Ife, who was four years younger, slept in a hand-me-down playpen next to us. My aunts Sandra and Audrey shared a room with my cousin, while my grandfather and his nineteen-year-old girlfriend slept with their three young daughters in their own room. Somewhere in this house, or the next, is where my mother keened her first cry, and my grandmother keened her last.

Along this cluttered shoreline is where my uncles anchored their boats, handmade and brightly painted, bearing names like *Sea Glory*, *Morning Star*, and *Irie Vibes*. Most mornings I watched for hours as they patched up their fish traps made with chicken wire, scaled buckets of fish to sell, or arranged them on large ice blocks for roasting later over a coal fire. Our little half mile of sea often fed the entire village—fishermen hauling heavy, glittering nets filled with sea turtles, dwarf sharks, red snappers, bonito, and the sweet flesh of a conger eel. People from all over Mobay—our nickname for Montego Bay—would come to buy fish, shouting and haggling at this makeshift market for our riches fresh from the sea. Then came the meager scavenge of the hungry and curious: children, ducks, and mongrels waiting for a bone, a bite of flesh, a fish head to suck on. When the smell of cooking wafted through the wooden walls and floorboards of every house, the villagers would gather around the Dutch pot, mouths watering.

Whenever my mother's sisters fell down on their luck, or one of them got pregnant, they returned from the sweltering inland cities to the beach, packing into the always-warm house with the red polished floor that stained my bare feet crimson, our breath rising and falling with the waves outside. We had no electricity, no running water. With the windblown houses and ramshackle beach, indoor plumbing was a luxury, so none of the houses in the village had bathrooms. Instead, all the villagers shared a pit-latrine, about three hundred yards away from the farthest house. Children were not allowed to use the latrine, since we were in danger of falling in, so we were each tasked to keep a plastic chimmy in the house instead, emptying it into the sea every morning. My parents showered

outside in the sand in one communal shower hastily built with thrown-away plywood, while my siblings and I bathed in basins set down close by, next to a standpipe in the yard.

The sea was the first home I knew. Out here I spent my early childhood in a wild state of happiness, stretched out under the almond trees fed by brine, relishing every fish eye like precious candy, my toes dipped in the sea's milky lapping. I dug for hermit crabs in the shallow sand, splashed in the wet bank where stingrays buried themselves to cool off. I slept under the ripened shade where the sea grapes bruised purple and delicious, ready for sucking. I gorged on almonds and fresh coconut, drinking sweet coconut water through a hole my mother gored with her machete, scraping and eating the wet jelly afterward until I was full. Each day my joy was a new dress my mother had stitched for me by hand. She and her sisters each had a distinct laugh that rang out ahead of them like happy sirens wherever they went, crashing decibels that alerted the whole village to their gathering. Whenever the sisters sat together on the beach talking, I clung to their ankles and listened, mimicking their feral cackling, which not even the herons overhead could escape.

I never loved any place more than this. At night my mother read to me by the light of a kerosene lamp, upon which I, born stubborn and accident-prone, would often burn my hands. Each scar on my body became a fixed reminder of what was lost, what would never grow back—the hairless scar on my left eyebrow that I got from falling off the tiny bed I shared with my parents, the burn on my temple from the lit mosquito coil I dragged down on my head, the bites from mosquitoes that grew to giant itching wounds, pocking my legs, or my tender mouth, shattered from a fall on paved concrete, where my tooth had ruptured my gums. For months after that, my mother had chewed all my food and fed me from her mouth like a bird. "You were born too sensitive for this world," she told me, as I sucked my thumb and pawed at her long dreadlocks, listening to the rushing pull of the waves.

My father was not from the seaside, so he never felt at home at White House. He was a man who lived among fishermen but did not eat fish, adhering in all ways to an ascetic Rasta existence: no drinking, no smoking, no meat or dairy, all tenets of a highly restrictive way of living the

Rastafari called Ital. Already at twenty-six his thick beard and riverine dreadlocks gave him the wizened look of an augur whose tea leaves only foretold catastrophe. Some days he would bring his guitar to the sand and belt out his reggae songs, forecasting the impending peril of Black people with a stormy austerity that must have seemed misplaced at the seaside. There was no time for idling with Babylon on the prowl, he would warn, often trapping villagers into long talks about fortifying their minds and bodies against the evils of the western world. "For a weak mind is ripe for the worms of Babylon," he would caution, slowly sharpening his look into a gaze that could overcloud the sun. A gaze that my siblings and I would later come to know all too well.

Even at this young age I knew that my parents were unusual. They were the only ones at White House who had dreadlocks, and the only people I had ever heard call out the name of Haile Selassie in reverence, though it would be some time before I questioned why. Most days my father journeyed far away to the hotels lining our coast, where he played his reggae music for tourists, his guitar and dreadlocks heavy dreams slung over his back. When he was gone, my pregnant mother spent her few free hours while my baby brother slept scouring the beach for empty conch shells, or chopping mounds of almonds to make a sugary confection called almond drops to sell to tourists, supplementing the family's income. Before he left for work, my father would always stoop down, hold me eye to eye, and warn me to stay away from the sea. I promised him that I would. As the light grew longer with the passing months, I grew more curious, roaming ever closer to the boundary of the shoreline, away from my mother's watchful eye, testing how far along our beach I could go.

Firstborn of four, I had claimed this beach as much as it claimed me. As a toddler I would wade into the shallows to wash my chimmy with my mother, while the steady clamor of Concorde jets shrieked across the sky, their white contrails crisscrossing our blue. Each one an iron bird, a bird of Babylon. Nearly two decades after Haile Selassie's silver jet had departed, I had grown accustomed to the constant roaring of planes leaving from the airport next door, a place forbidden to us. Next to the airport, looming along the borders of our village, were hotels with high

walls made of pink marble and coral stone, flanked on top by broke-glass bottles, their sharp edges catching the light in cruel warning: To live in paradise is to be reminded how little you can afford it.

Those high fences first went up in 1944, four decades before I was born, when the government spent years paving our wetlands to build an airport next to the village, while more and more hotels crept up on either side of us. Each new hotel they built was larger than the last, until the resorts resembled our still-standing colonial houses and plantations, many of which served as attractions and wedding destinations for tourists. This was the fantasy tourists wanted to inhabit, sunbathing at hotels along the coast named "Royal Plantation" or "Grand Palladium," then getting married on the grounds where the enslaved had been tortured and killed. This was paradise—where neither our history nor our land belonged to us. Every year Black Jamaicans owned less and less of the coast that bejeweled our island to the outside world, all our beauty bought up by rich hoteliers, or sold off to foreigners by the descendants of white enslavers who earned their fortunes on our backs, and who still own enough of Jamaica today to continue to turn a profit.

But my great-grandfather would not sell our little beachside. He held on to his home, even as the hotels grew grander on both sides of the village, even as we lived deeper and deeper in their shadow, until eventually the coral reefs he fished in blanched and disappeared, his livelihood gone. Now most of Montego Bay's coastline is owned by Spanish and British hoteliers—our new colonization—and most Jamaicans must pay an entrance fee to enter and enjoy a beach. Not us. Today, no stretch of beach in Montego Bay belongs to its Black citizens except for White House. My great-grandfather had left the land title and deed so coiled in coral bone, so swamped under sea kelp and brine, that no hotelier could reach it. This little hidden village by the sea, this beachside, was still ours, only.

Living at the seaside meant wonder and danger arrived frequently on the same wind, tugging at me from the horizon. Like an eager kite, I was constantly drawn to danger. The first time I disobeyed my father and walked into the sea alone, I was four years old. The afternoon heat was perishing. My father had already left for work, and my pregnant mother was sweating somewhere out of sight, bathing my baby brother in the

same red plastic basin she'd use to hand-wash our clothes, or bending over to feed her own baby sister, her father's newest newborn, who she'd delivered from his scared teenage girlfriend on our bedroom floor only a month before. While cooling down under the palms outside in the sand, I spotted something glinting in the water, caught under the sun's glare. Calling me. I slipped away from the shade and walked to the shore.

I stood barefoot at the water's edge and watched the waves heaving, its million eyes glittering, staring down the blurred horizon where I was forbidden to go, and waited. I waited for my mother's familiar grasp, to be pulled back to the safety of the sand, waited to hear a grown-up screaming for me to get away from the water. But no voice came for me, except a strange echo on the wind, sweeping sweet nothings in my ear.

Hello and *I love you* said a reedy voice from the sea, speaking the kind language of a small child, and so I stepped in, first one foot in the sinking sand and then another, warm sea froth snaking around my tiny ankles, then rising quickly to my knees. It didn't matter to me that I didn't yet know how to swim. I turned one last time to look at our house—my grandfather's house—a hundred feet away, crouched small on the sand, sun glinting off its zinc roof, the ripe almond trees on either side, and saw no one reaching for me, so I threw myself quietly into the rollicking waves.

The seawater rose to my chest, the waves splashing against my torso, my dress clinging frantic to my skin. Salt water filled my nostrils and mouth as I kicked my arms and legs uselessly, my body sinking in slow motion, my hands reaching up, reaching out, and feeling only sea, touching nothing and nowhere but the darkening blue below.

What I remember next was red. Red shirt, red in the water. Blood. Suddenly my mother's arms were around me, lifting and gasping, and the world unsealed itself and sang every song in my ear. My mother held me tight, too tight, and screamed my name. Against me her body was warm and wanted, her pregnant stomach firm. I could hear her heart pounding in my ear, the world quiet, the world loud again. She sobbed and looked into my face, darted between my eyes, touched my head, counted my fingers, kissed them, and sobbed and sobbed.

"Are you okay?" she cried, breathless. "Are you okay? Are you okay?"

She had briefly gone to the latrine, missed me when she came back, then saw me out in the distance bobbing in the water. She had flown to me from hundreds of yards away. As she dashed, something in the sand had ripped through her bare foot, a broken bottle or old tin can, and now she bled all over the sand, all over me. She didn't seem to notice or feel it, as she touched me gently here and there, pleading, "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay," I told her, with what my mother has described as an unnatural calm, before I slipped my wrinkled thumb into my mouth and sucked, looking away from the horizon. I placed my head against her heaving chest, relieved to gulp the rush of air, and breathed when she breathed.

She never told my father about my near-drowning, I discovered nearly three decades later. They had both wished for a Rasta family for so long that she could not bear to name the danger we'd only narrowly escaped—danger that my father soon began to foresee in every corner. My mother didn't want to upset him, or perhaps she didn't want to stoke his worst fears. So began our first secret, mother and daughter, our own little creation lore, cloistered as a clamshell around us. This was the first time my mother had saved me from my own calamitous devices, but it would not be the last.

Months later, down our half-mile strip of coastline, under the scattered shadow of a palm tree, you could find her still clasping me on that shore, weaving the tale of my glorious rescue from drowning, rewinding each family tale like a pop song, like myth. This is how she taught me to read the sea. Almost every afternoon, after my father had picked up his guitar, kissed me goodbye, and trod out again to face Babylon at the hotels, I would follow my mother down the sandy path that led to our secret beach, studying those old waves foaming and hissing, as she showed me how to look into the water and find its rhythm. Our history was the sea, my mother told me, so I could never be lost here. And, if I listened closely enough to the water, it would always call me home.

I played with her dreadlocks and listened, watching the day's surf rush in with my head nested against her chest. I asked her to tell me the story of how our lives began, again. She would take on a peculiar glaze

and look out beyond me whenever I asked this, retracing the threads of my birth story so frequently that it had become her own origin myth. I was always moved by the way she began. "If I never had you, I would have been a beach bum," she said, walking me out into our languid history, neck thrown back, her laughter naked and familiar. She would say it began under the gaze of a white Catholic nun. Or it began with a rainy afternoon, a catch of fish, the warm grasp of a hand. It was here at White House, in my unlikely arrival, that my parents' journey into Rastafari began.

3

Fisherman's Daughter

If I stand on my tiptoes and peer hard enough into my family's past, I can see the tea-black leaves at the bottom of my mother's rusting tin cup. My parents were both born in the wail of rebellion in 1962, when Jamaica first gained independence from Britain, and found each other eighteen years later in 1980, two parentless teenagers searching for some higher purpose. They'd always felt outcast, their burdens singular, driven by a profound belief that they were different. Chosen. Years later, while retracing the history of my family's journey into Rastafari, I would eventually come to understand that my mother felt called because she wanted to nurture, and my father felt called because he wanted to burn. Somewhere in between her hope and his fire, there was a united belief. A miracle.

My mother was born with six fingers on each hand, and constantly probed for anything good. Her mother, Isabel, had died unexpectedly from a botched black-market abortion when my mother was only four, leaving her all but orphaned at White House. Her father would disappear without warning for long stretches at a time, abandoning my mother and her many siblings, most of them younger than twelve, to the mercy of the sea. While my mother's half-siblings from Isabel's side were sent to live with relatives scattered in other houses along the beach or in faraway parishes after Isabel died, my mother and her younger sister Audrey—her only full-blooded sibling—were dropped off at the doorstep of her father's current wife and left to contend with their eleven half-siblings from his