

# VILLAGE WEAVERS



A NOVEL



MYRIAM  
J. A. CHANCY



TIN HOUSE / PORTLAND, OREGON

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First US Edition 2024  
Printed in the United States of America

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Manufacturing by Lake Book Manufacturing  
Interior design by Beth Steidle  
Cover design by Beth Steidle  
Cover art: adapted from *Helianthus annuus*/Hans Simon Holtzbecker

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Chancy, Myriam J. A., 1970– author.  
Title: Village weavers : a novel / Myriam J.A. Chancy.  
Description: Portland, Oregon : Tin House, 2024.  
Identifiers: LCCN 2023046077 | ISBN 9781959030379 (hardcover) |  
ISBN 9781959030522 (ebook)  
Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.  
Classification: LCC PR9260.9.C43 V55 2024 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20231002  
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023046077>

Tin House  
2617 NW Thurman Street, Portland, OR 97210  
[www.tinhouse.com](http://www.tinhouse.com)

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*for Didine*

*for Gaby*

Then I may tell you that the very next words I read were these—“Chloe liked Olivia . . .” Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF,  
*A Room of One's Own*

And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful  
and multiply and fill the waters in the seas,  
and let birds multiply on the earth.”

—GENESIS 1:22

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# SIMBI CALLS

SISI, PORT-AU-PRINCE, 1941

Momo tells Sisi that her village is a place so small and insignificant that it cannot be mapped. If it were, it would not even be a dot; it would be a speck, impossible to see with the naked eye. It is a place one finds by following waters and springs that erupt from the ground miraculously, teeming with unseen life.

They are both sitting on woven stools, low to the ground, but Momo towers over Sisi. Momo is enveloped in a voluminous white housedress. She reminds Sisi of a goose in one of the books of fairy tales that her sister, Margie, reads to her from at night. The white of the dress tucks around Momo's roundness like a second skin. The paleness of the cloth sets off the mahogany brown of her protruding arms and neck in sharp contrast. Momo's neck has many folds in it, as many folds as decades she has lived on this earth.

Sisi pours a scoop of purplish kidney beans from a large burlap sack into a smaller bag, then hands it to Momo to close with a piece of twine.

"Do you know what a riddle is, Sisi?" Momo asks.

"No," Sisi answers.

"It's a question that has an answer difficult to find."

"Like when Mami wants to know if she will get enough orders for dresses in the spring to keep us here?"

Momo smiles. "Something like that, but harder. I think that my village is a riddle."

"Your village is a question?"

Momo laughs. "No, but many say that my village does not exist. Yet every year there are girls who come to us from the village, to stay with us. They are coming from somewhere, no? Not a nowhere place. My village is so small they say it does not exist, but it might be the most powerful place on earth."

Sisi frowns. Is Momo's story a riddle too? She watches as her grandmother's hands close the bags Sisi has filled with beans, swiftly turning the twine over and under their gaping openings and pulling it taut into a pucker of fabric, ready to be taken to market.

"We are people of the Simbi, Sisi, of the river gods. People will try to convince you either that they don't exist or that they are evil, but they do exist, and they are not evil. Do you want to hear more?"

Sisi sits awestruck. The best part of any day is this time, when she tries to help Momo as best she can before going to bed and Momo tells her a story. Sometimes the story is a memory; at others, a tale she heard and remembers from her village; and at others, like this time, it will be a story about the *mistè*, the mysteries, the *lwa*, the gods.

"Where I come from," Momo says, "deep, deep in the interior of Haiti, there are flat areas that give way to forests and rivers, gullies with springs, waterfalls. There is plenty for everyone but not a lot of work, which is why we leave that land and all its natural riches to come and toil in the city we find ourselves in now. If we had work, we would never leave, understand?"

Sisi nods, saying nothing, not wanting to interrupt Momo, because saying something can lead Momo to thinking about something else.

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“Because of the rivers, the forests, there are also snakes. They are mostly harmless, but some are magical. The snakes are the Simbi coming onto dry land to see what we are up to up here, checking on us to guard us from foolishness, occasionally to warn us. The Simbi cried for a long time during the years that the invaders came from the land above to carve ours up, to tell us where we could and could not go. The snakes poured out of the earth and some of the riverbeds dried up until those men left, but nothing was the same after this. The Simbi warned us, but we did not listen.

“When I was a girl, not much older than you are now, I was the one who went to fetch water from the spring to bring back to the household. I did this every morning, early. I carried the water on my head like my mother taught me to, and I was told to be careful lest the Simbi come for me.”

“Come for you? I thought they were protecting you.”

Momo wags a finger in the air above them, the twine trailing down it like a wan flag. “The Simbi are capricious. They are hungry spirits that like little children, especially if, like you, they are *clair*, untouched by the sun. Luckily, I sunned myself every day, soaking up the rays and making my skin deep, dark brown like the earth, and the Simbi just let me go by every day, most days. Some other children were said to disappear, never to be recovered. Once, the Simbi took an old blind man, but they returned him, eventually, after restoring his sight.”

“A blind man who could see?”

“Yes. When the Simbi take you, they return you with the ability to see, sometimes to see things no one else can, that you could not see before.”

“I wish you had been taken. You could tell us about the unseen things.”

“I don’t know that we should wish for this: it is a lot of responsibility.” Momo stops her activity to think.



Sisi waits. Momo takes up the twine and gestures to Sisi to continue filling the small bags between them from the burlap. She wants to take them to market in the morning. “There was a girl in my village who disappeared by the springs once. They said that the Simbi took her but gave her back because she was blessed by the sun. When she returned, she could read the people’s dreams. She could heal the sick with her knowledge.”

“How can you know if the Simbi come for you?” Sisi asks, filled, unexpectedly, with dread.

“You don’t have to be afraid, Sisi.”

“How do you know, Momo? How do you know they won’t come for me?”

“Well, I cannot know, but what if I told you that that little sun-touched girl that the Simbi took and returned was me? What if I told you that the Simbi released me so that I could tell you that you have nothing to fear?”

“I don’t believe you,” Sisi says doubtfully. “You don’t read dreams.”

“Don’t I?” Momo stops to think. “I don’t, do I? But have you ever asked me to interpret your dreams?”

Sisi shakes her head, no. “What do they look like, the Simbi?”

“No one knows if Simbi are male or female. Some will tell you that Simbi are men, others will tell you Simbi are women. But there are many Simbi, and who knows which Simbi anyone thinks they might know? But I want to tell you about Simbi Andezo, Simbi Two Waters, because I think that she, he—well, maybe we should say ‘they’—will be your destiny. Simbi Twin Souls.”

Sisi’s eyes widen even more.

Momo continues, “Simbi Andezo governs the waters, those of the sea before us and those of the rivers that course through the mountains behind us, forming the waterfalls and all the streams that travel through the land to nourish the rice and

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grain fields that feed us. Andezo watches over every creature that comes into contact with the waters, making sure that they do not drown or come to harm, unless a greater force wills it, a force greater than the Simbi. The Simbi are invisible and work in secret in the waters, but you can feel them doing their work of watching and protecting every time you step into the water—but watch out! If you come to *see* a Simbi, they might enchant you.”

“Enchant me? How?”

“Do you think that a Simbi might want you?” Momo teases.

“I don’t know,” Sisi replies, “but maybe I don’t want to find out!”

Momo laughs a deep, guttural laugh. Sisi loves Momo’s stories about the *lwa*.

“Well,” Momo continues, amused, “they have long hair like you, Sisi. They sing like the people do in church, like angels. But beware the siren’s song. Simbi can save you or enchant you, but only rarely do they do both at the same time.”

“Like the Simbi did to you?”

“Like they did to me. Because the Queen of Sheba is my invisible patron saint, a woman dark like me. But the important thing I want you to remember is that Simbi Andezo gains strength from the union of two forces, two sources of water, like twins. All the waters pour from the land into the ocean, but the ocean would be nothing without the rivers that feed it. And, like the Queen, you must not give yourself to the first person to come your way. You must ask them questions, find out who they are. Like the Simbi, you must test the waters, make sure that they are pure of heart.”

“Pure of heart,” Sisi murmurs.

“Yes, like you.” Momo taps Sisi’s chest. “You, in here. If you listen to the Simbi but do not fall under their spell, they can teach you how not to fall for the wrong people, the wrong friends, the wrong mate, you understand? You see me here, by myself?”

“You’re not alone, Momo. You have Mami and me and Margie.”

“Yes, that is true. But you see that I make my way without a *menaj*, is that not true? And your mother sees your papa maybe once a week, but he does not live here, is that not true? We are sources of water for each other. We are like the Simbi.”

Sisi looks into Momo’s face, hoping she can read the answers to the questions Momo’s story stirs in her. But Momo’s face closes like the setting sun. The night’s darkness deepens.

“Enough storytelling for today,” Momo says, all of a sudden looking tired. She pushes the finished bags together and closes the burlap against the remaining purplish beans. “I’ll finish this in the morning. Thank you for helping, Sisi. You are a good little helper. Go find your mother, and then off to bed for you.”

Sisi does as she is told, then climbs into her bed, where she listens to the murmurs of the house.

As she falls to sleep, the noises swaddling her—her sister’s breathing, the shuffling of Momo in her room, her mother’s pedaling of the sewing machine into the night—become like lapping waves beneath a pier. She imagines the Simbi swimming by, having made their way down from the gullies in the valleys, the streams in the forests, the waterfalls, the springs carved out by their snakes. She imagines the Simbi calling out to all of them in the house, to warn or to enchant them with their sirens’ call.

# PART I



## BIRDS OF A FEATHER

## SISI, PHOENIX, 2002

WHEN THE PHONE CALL THAT INTERRUPTS HER PLANS comes, Simone is missing her older sister, Margie, in a way that seems without proper measure, in the home she built for herself and for her daughter, Emma. Simone could have gone anywhere, as long as she was sure that Emma wasn't too far behind, and Margie could find her easily. She picked Phoenix for the name, for the sun, figured that it was a place where anyone could remake themselves. She planned to move farther north of the city, at some point, to find a place nestled somewhere in Sedona. She and Emma loved to get away to the copper-rust hues of the rock formations there, but the red of the soil reminded her of the island where both she and Margie were born but didn't return, because there was so little left there for either of them, so she stayed put in the condo. Ten years ago, she began to tell people, when asked, that she was native to Arizona, like a saguaro. She wanted to grow old in the desert and, like the saguaro, have her skeleton repurposed for shelter. When the three of them were together, Emma and Margie laughed when Simone told this lie to strangers. They reminded her that she was more raven or owl, making her nest in the hollow of a dried-out saguaro limb, or a fox, sucking its flesh for water, crossing the desert.

The phone rings, and for a moment, lost in thought, Simone imagines that it will be Margie on the line. As she looks outside, a yellow butterfly comes around the bushes on her walkout patio and advances toward the window that separates her studio from

the outside. It taps itself lightly against the pane of glass, twice, and Simone's heart lights up: a message from Margie.

It is with this thought in mind that she picks up the phone, not expecting to hear the voice she does on the other end, looking at the yellow butterfly, thinking of home.

There is a pause Simone does not know how to fill, followed by Gertie's torrent of words about the distant past, the need to pass on information, to make sure that all concerned have all the pieces of the puzzle in hand, et cetera, et cetera. Simone listens to Gertie say that she is ill. She listens, but none of the information comes together. Her whole life is a struggle to reassemble strangely shaped episodes, pieces of a jigsaw turned out of their box, making little sense until each piece has found its place in the whole. She is tired of puzzles, of puzzling.

By now, Simone has weathered her own health scares. She always had an urgent sense of the need for vigilance, to look out for herself, for Emma especially, since Emma's adoption was closed and her daughter never showed any strong desire to know much about where she came from beyond Simone and Scott. For the most part, biology was not something that their family of three thought a lot about. Instead, Simone opted for what she called a "set of best practices." She took Emma in for her recommended milestone checkups as a toddler and took herself in for all the recommended exams throughout her life and ensured that Scott did the same, when she had influence, before things started to fall apart. The fragile state of her marriage kept her from returning to Haiti, which was in its own vulnerable state. She longs to go back to Port-au-Prince, to pilgrimage to the Rue Bonne Foi to see if the house in which she and her sister were raised is still standing. The last time she saw the house, it stood leaning forward into the shadowed street, boarded up, like so many houses were throughout the port area before their owners departed, as they had, for foreign shores. At that time, all she

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could think as the car barreled past was *Peyi la, li krasé*—the country is crumbling. Peasants who traveled from rural areas with all their hope in two hands came to make a go of settling in the bloated capital. Many had set up stalls to resell items made abroad or themselves fashioned artisanal objects to sell on the side of the road to tourists, a diminishing currency in the capital. The country was always on a slippery slope, descending, no peaks and valleys, no possibility of rising from the ashes.

Simone listens to Gertie tell her about her current health issues, the cancer that it is hoped was eradicated with a total hysterectomy. Simone imagines the pain, winces inwardly as she listens, though she doesn't utter a sound, no words of consolation. She can't muster them, she who is so used to cajoling and consoling. Maybe it is the surprise of hearing Gertie so many years since they last talked; maybe it is the shock of being spoken to about intimate things, as if they were still what they once were to each other.

Her thoughts stray from Gertie on the phone. She thinks about when she discovered, with Scott, that they wouldn't be having any children of their own; she'd wondered at the time why a total hysterectomy had not been an option. She'd wanted *everything* taken out. She'd wanted to become neutered, neutral, to be somehow beyond the stage of life in which the hope of conceiving, of birthing a child, resided. Then there was Emma, all curls and sunshine, gingerbread brown and carefree at two years of age. They fell in love with her and then fell back in love with each other; it had been that simple, and the anger at her empty womb evaporated. She took comfort in the fact that she didn't have to think too much about her period anymore, that there was no chance that she would fall pregnant accidentally. She went along, as most women did, with the exams every two years, and early, in her midforties, she went into perimenopause and that was that. She was relieved that the process was all over by the time she hit

fifty, relieved that Emma's presence made her feel whole, though she knew she shouldn't have needed that. Emma's brown skin and her own almond tones made it plausible that she was her biological mother. She doesn't correct strangers when they assume.

Her mind returns to Gertie still talking on the other end of the line. Simone wants the conversation to be over, to get back to her work. It would be convenient if old age could be just that, unburdened with illness, operations, Simone thinks.

"Is Manuella with you?" Simone musters the effort to ask, to break her silence, to say something, anything, so she won't come across as cold as she feels.

"Yes, yes, she is," Gertie scrambles to respond. It is clear from the exhilaration in her voice as she answers that she hopes Simone has more questions, that her quiet reflects shock at the news. It doesn't seem to occur to Gertie that her voice alone, not the news that it carries, is shock enough.

Simone realizes that she is caught up in the stress and panic of the present moment. She thinks solely of how things were left after what, in the end, had been a disastrous trip back to the island—not to Haiti but to the Dominican Republic—a little more than twenty years prior. After that, they rarely spoke. Their river of conversation turned into the odd drip from a badly plumbed sink. She should never have gone on that trip. So many things had gone wrong.

It's too late, Simone is thinking, when Gertie cuts in. "Are you there, Sisi?"

"Yes," Simone responds, but she is, in fact, far away. "Can I call you back?"

Gertie pauses. "Yes, of course." She blunders apologetically. "It's been so long. I wasn't thinking. I just thought I should tell you what was happening with me, in case—"

"We're no longer children, Gertrude. You don't need to try to protect me. I'm taking care of myself."



“Yes, yes, that’s true.”

They both listen to the echoing chasm between them.

Simone breaks the silence. “I’m glad that Ella is there. I’ll call her when I have more to say so as not to disturb you. She has my number, doesn’t she?” She stalls. “Or she can text me with your results . . . if you want to share them.”

“You won’t be disturb—” Gertie says hurriedly, but Simone doesn’t hear the end of her sentence though she can guess after it: she has already put the receiver down.

Simone wants to move on, to return to her drawings and paintings, simpler things. Gertie is not a simple thing, simple person, simple anything. There is, first of all, the matter of their mothers. Simone can’t remember Gertie’s mother speaking to her own at church, for instance, which was the place, outside of school, where most families met, if they did at all, although it is true that Gertie’s mother was rarely in town. Once Simone saw the inside of Gertie’s house, she suspected she knew one reason for the wedge between them. Unlike hers, Gertie’s home was refined, modern. Gertie’s had running water and toilets that flushed; they used rainwater barrels only in cases of emergency. Water wasn’t brought in from a well. The reality of this difference struck Simone as a child like a slap in the face once Gertie stopped talking to her, seemingly overnight. Until then, they had been the best of friends, inseparable from the moment they met in first grade.

Despite their differences, their estrangement, and physical distance, Simone recognizes, reluctantly, that Gertie is her oldest friend. Maybe “friend” is pushing it since they haven’t been in touch for decades. How can she reconcile having known Gertie most of her life with Gertie’s call now? They are both old. What would be the point of renewing the connection?

Simone smolders with indecision. She is perplexed by the phone call, angered that it was not the voice she hoped to hear,

will never hear again. Angry that, at the same time, even as she hung up the phone on Gertie, she had a desire to undo her action, pick the phone back up again, erase the years she has gone without hearing that voice she knows so well.

When she was a child, Gertie's voice made her feel safe, welcome. Simone came to resent it the moment it disappeared in what seemed an irrevocable betrayal of their friendship. She doesn't know if she has the trust in her to spare, to reopen this door.



PORT-AU-PRINCE, 1941

The first time Simone meets Gertie, she is drawing quietly at her desk when Gertie comes up behind her, breathes down her neck the way a child does, without self-consciousness. Simone flicks her ponytail across her neck and down her clavicle toward the warm breath cascading over her shoulder, as if to push Gertie away. She will forever be pushing Gertie back: it is instinct.

*“Sa w’ap fè la? What are you doing?”* Gertie demands. *“Se you pou! Are you drawing a hen?”*

A hen? Simone is drawing a rooster, the one Momo keeps in the backyard and covets as if it were made of gold. There are hens, too, of course; they strut around the deep end of their yard in their golden plumage, with reddish combs and equally reddish, fleshy jowls flapping from their beaks as they hold their heads high toward the sky. Embarrassed, Simone covers her drawing with crossed arms—hoping that Gertie will go away. They are seven. It's as if she has been in school forever.

Simone is bored by the rituals of getting ready for school, walking there with her older sister, attending the classes, reciting, taking dictation, waiting for others to muster up the courage to answer the teacher, waiting for something to happen.

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Nothing ever happens. But here is something—no, someone—who might disrupt the boredom, yet out of reflex, Simone wants her calm restored.

“*Ou ka we yon poul lakay mwen,*” Gertie offers, undeterred. “I live not far.” She points toward an imposing house across the avenue from the school, an old gingerbread house that was probably erected there in the days the island was a French colony. “You can see hens and a rooster there.”

“OK,” Simone mutters. She wonders if Gertie will really take her over to her house, and when.

She doesn’t have to wait long. Gertie comes up to her during the lunch break, when everyone has eaten and is playing in the schoolyard, waiting for classes to start up again for the afternoon. “*On y va?*” she asks in a whisper, not waiting for an answer, motioning for Simone to follow her.

It is Simone’s first year of school, and the thought of escape has not yet dawned on her, but perhaps she would feel differently if she lived across the street and could go home to see Mami and Momo, curl up to have a nap whenever she liked. Sitting in place for long hours isn’t her idea of fun, and no one pays attention to her because it is known that she is a charity case. No one has to say a word. It is written on her clothes, the wear of them, the faded blue and red of the school colors and the restitched hems telltale signs that they are hand-me-downs, that her family cannot afford new school clothes for her every year. Some of the uniforms were her sister’s, others offered by the nuns. Her mother lovingly repairs them so they look like new, but still, the other girls point out which were theirs whenever they can. *Look, she’s wearing my skirt, my jumper, my dress,* they titter. Simone pretends not to hear. The other girls assume that she is at the school as the ward of a wealthy benefactor, but the reality is that her mother and grandmother make sure that all the school fees are paid, even if they have to work into the weekends to make extra money to

send Margie and her to what are considered the best schools in this part of Port-au-Prince. It never bothered Simone before. As her mother always said, if you can get three generations of use out of a piece of clothing, you should, and there is no shame in making do with something that has been owned by someone else.

They too pass on to others what they can no longer use. When any one of them gets a new pair of shoes, Simone's mother makes sure that they look to see if they have a pair that they can give away. They make sure that the shoes they are giving are scrubbed and polished. After everyone goes to bed, the house boy—who is not a boy at all but a young man who guards the house, does odd jobs, and cleans the yard morning and night but doesn't go to school anymore—sets them in a row, as if on display in a store, against the brick of the outside wall at the front gate beyond the house. The next morning, they rush to the wall and find all the shoes gone as if angels have come and taken them back into the heavens to shoe the errant spirits that Momo says walk at night. Simone imagines the shoes making their way across the city, leading new lives. That's why she didn't think she would mind wearing the hand-me-down uniforms to school. But when the other girls point and whisper about the faded colors, she feels a shame she did not know she could possess.

Gertie leads Simone around the long porch that girds the entire first floor and into the concrete yard sloping away from the porch behind it. There, they find many hands at work preparing the evening meal. They watch as frowning women with wrapped hair and wide aprons tied around their waists move through the yard with baskets against their thighs or stand guard against large silver cauldrons set atop burning pits. Those cooking on the open hearths make requests of the others, who scurry to find the spice, herb, or vegetable requested, which is then placed into a gently simmering pot. Two of the women sit on a stoop below

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the porch and split open fresh bean pods, using their skirts to make bowls of cloth in which they catch the oval legumes before twisting the edge of each side of the fabric to gently tip out the contents into a wooden bowl. The beans are then gathered by a heavysset woman Simone assumes is the head cook, as she goes in and out of a kitchen below the house and seems to orchestrate the movements of the household workers as a conductor would a symphony. Simone has almost forgotten why she is there when Gertie points with her free hand across the yard. "There," she says, "there's Marguerite."

Simone startles at the mention of her older sister's full name. She follows the tip of Gertie's finger and sees a gathering of hens on the other side of the yard, pecking at a patch of yellowed grass. The hens are undisturbed by the human activity animating the yard as they gather their own meal.

"That one in the middle, the one with the golden throat." Gertie points once more. "That's Marguerite. She's mine. She came out of an egg, and I've had her ever since."

Simone is astounded. A hen all her own. She is impressed. It is funny to think of her sister as a hen, but Margie is often distracted, as hens are, busy at her own occupations all day long, dreaming about the day she will leave Haiti. The coincidence makes Simone feel closer to Gertie, as if the hen's name being the same as her sister's connects them somehow. Might they really become good friends?

"Let's get closer," Gertie says, dragging Simone around the circumference of the yard toward the brood of hens.

As they are about to reach the hens, Simone catches a blur of light blue flashing past them. The blue is a shirt and in it is a boy larger than them both and at the end of one of his arms is a cutlass. The blade glints from the glare of the midday sun. The boy swings the blade over their heads. Simone screams, and Gertie lets go of her hand. Simone holds up an arm above her head, to

protect herself from the blade, then hears a sound like a gust of wind being cut through and a thwack as it meets flesh and bone not hers. She hears a screech, then a squawk, the flap of wings. The acrid smell of chicken droppings wafts up as the hens scatter, then a wet sprinkle falls onto her raised forearm like dew, like a rainfall announcing itself, drops falling from the sky tentatively, one by one, before a storm. Simone lowers her arm and sees the boy with the cutlass chasing down the headless chicken.

“*Poukisa ou pa te pwan li, timoun?* Why didn’t you grab hold of it?” one of the women in the yard is yelling at the boy. “*Pral gen san toupatou, tou-pa-tou!* Blood everywhere!” she exclaims, as she continues shucking green beans into her bowled skirts. “*Ou pral netway sa, ou tandem, ti gason?* You’ll be the one cleaning up, boy, not me.” Then she spots Gertie and Simone. “*Ti moun, vin ici.* Girls, come here,” she says, “*vin ici.* Here,” gesticulating for them to get out of the fray, out of the way of the house boy, who is going about his work frantically, as if he has never done it before. Later, Gertie will explain that he is new to the household. He, of course, didn’t know that one of the chickens was hers and was to be spared.

The boy is ignoring the woman, trying to catch the headless bird, which runs out of steam, falls over, shudders, and gives a last, futile kick of its feet into the air.

“He killed Marguerite,” says Gertie matter-of-factly.

Simone is speechless, dazed. Marguerite is a chicken, not her sister. Gertie doesn’t seem heartbroken over the loss. Simone draws a deep breath. Just a chicken. But doesn’t naming a chicken mean that it has value, like family? Simone can’t bear the thought of losing anything she holds dear.

“He could have taken another one.” Gertie frowns, both hands fisted against her hips. “That was my chicken.” The other chickens have flailed away from the scene and are hiding in the taller grasses along the back fence of the yard, as if they have seen all

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this before, know that one day, it will be their turn. Simone feels for them. Better not to be named, she thinks. Gertie shrugs. "I'll have to get another one," she says.

A woman approaches them from the top of the yard. She is wiping down her skirts so that they fall about her like rose petals in rough layers that contour her rounded hips. "*Kisa wap fê la?* What are you doing here?" she reproaches Gertie. "*E kiyès sa a ye?* And who is this girl? *Li gen san poul sou li.* She got blood splattered on her. *Vin isi pou'm ka ede'l.* Come here so I can help her with that."

Simone lets herself be stirred by Gertie and the woman to a spigot at the back of the yard. There, the woman shows her the blood splatter, little red flecks that fan across the arm she held up above her head. "*Sa pa fê anyen.* No worries," the woman says. "*Yon ti benediksyon.* It's just a little blessing." She smiles. She is missing her two front teeth, Simone notes, making her seem much younger than she is. The missing teeth comfort Simone. She smiles back, but she is ready for the afternoon to be over.

"Don't worry," Gertie says, patting Simone's free arm. "We're going right back. They won't even know we left." She turns to the woman. "*Nou pral tounen lekòl to dwat.* We'll go right back to school."

The woman makes a noise as if she is sucking her teeth, but it comes out a whistle. "OK," she says, as if she is used to Gertie doing what she likes. "*Se pa mwèn ki manman ou.* I'm not your mother."

Gertie laughs with her head back. Her laughter is high-pitched and throaty, Simone thinks, rising out from her diaphragm as if she were a red-throated tody, the little birds distinctive for their bright green heads and the long, fine beaks they use to retrieve small insects from flowers and leaves. Todies chatter in clumps close to their nests and make a lot of noise.

When they have nothing else to do, they clean their feathers in such a way that it sounds as if they are strumming the teeth of a hair comb.

Simone knows she will remember that first laugh emanating from Gertie's small body forever. She will remember Gertie smiling and laughing raucously, and later, much later, she will marvel at the discovery that emerald green is, indeed, Gertie's color, deepening the nutmeg brown of her skin to a warm, reddish-amber tone. Seven-year-old Simone is simultaneously awed and mortified: two feelings she will come to associate with Gertie always.

By the time they leave the yard, three more chickens have been slaughtered for dinner. Business associates of Gertie's father are coming to the house that evening, along with Gertie's mother, who is being driven in from Léogâne to stay into the weekend. Everything must be perfect now that the mistress of the house is descending. When she isn't in Port-au-Prince, Gertie explains, everything is much more relaxed, which is one of the reasons no one pays much attention to what Gertie does or doesn't do, except when her oldest sister, Andrée, comes around, as she always does, to check on things, though she has a family of her own now. Gertie is much younger than her other siblings, some of whom, like Andrée, are married and out of their parents' homes. Simone's home life, by contrast, is so much quieter, busy but quiet, money tight and dinners lean. There are rules to follow: Mami and Momo see after that. There are no luxuries like seaside or mountain homes, holidays away, or dinner parties for business associates.

Simone and Gertie return to the schoolyard in a hurry and slip into the games underway. As soon as they reappear, Gertie's friends act as if they have never truly seen Simone before when Gertie introduces her as "Sisi," a nickname that Simone is called only at home and that she hasn't shared with Gertie. It is



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a nickname she will carry all her life, in spaces in which no one knows of her connection to Haiti, even less of her connection to Gertie.



Sisi thinks about this as she changes out of her school clothes that night and spots a fleck of blood at the bottom of her skirt hem. It is almost imperceptible, a round droplet against a red thread. She goes to the bathroom basin and tries to rub it out, but the red outline of the droplet becomes more pronounced, clear against the blue of the surrounding madras. Only she will know that it is there: no one else will notice. She stuffs the dress into the dirty clothes bag that hangs on a peg by the side of the door of the bedroom she shares with her older sister: it will be cleaned and fade in time, but she will not forget.

That night, Sisi refuses her grandmother's grilled pork, a dish that takes three days to make and longer to plan for since meat is not cheap. She hates to refuse it but all she can think about as it is served is the spray of blood against her forearm that midday in Gertie's yard, how the droplets turned into pink rivulets against her skin as the cook in the yard wiped down her arms with a kitchen cloth until the hairs on her forearm glistened in the sun, the futility of the hen as it fought for a life already taken.