

Last One Standing by: Ghaiesha Legrand


“Stay with me,” a desperate voice implores, slicing through the haze. I blink, struggling to discern the figure kneeling beside me. It is my brother, the one who remained steadfast as his boss shattered my pubic mound with two merciless bullets.

“Stay with me, please,” he pleads once more.

“Why? What’s happening?” I whisper, my voice barely audible, a faint rasp escaping my lips. As he urgently lifts me, blood pools beneath me, staining the pavement in a macabre display. The question hovers in the air, as he quickens his pace, gently placing me in the back of a waiting truck. With deliberate movements, he climbs in beside me, and with a sudden jolt, the truck lurches into motion, leaving the unanswered query lingering in the air. Images flicker through my mind: heated arguments, shattered expectations, crowds gathered on either side of the street with lush vegetation dancing in the heated wind behind them, fingers pointing, voices exchanging explanations of things I struggle to comprehend.

I’m quite perplexed by the heightened sense of panic around me. I’m conscious of having been shot, yet it hasn’t been overly distressing. The sensation is akin to receiving a forceful punch to my genitals. Describing the experience of being shot in this particular area eludes me. Have you ever been shot?

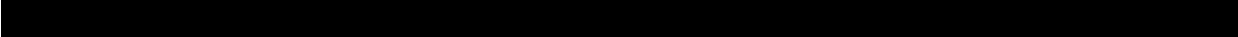
Allow me a moment to collect my thoughts. I have this rhythmic pulse of a dissonant buzz invading my ears. It’s such a nuisance.



You seem concerned. I'm not, actually. It's rather peaceful here. Or, it used to be, at least. Nestled amidst verdant hills and caressed by the gentle breeze of familiarity, it used to be a place where the heartbeat of a small city echoes through its tranquil streets like a melodic whisper. Here, life used to flow at a leisurely pace. Time lingered in the company of neighbors who were more like family. It used to be a place where one wandered through its narrow alleys, a place where one found an array of vibrant colors adorning quaint homes, where laughter danced in the air and the aroma of home-cooked meals wafted from open windows. It used to be a place where the rhythm of daily life was set not by the ticking of clocks but by the gentle hum of conversation and the laughter of children playing freely in the streets. Community was not just a concept but a way of life, where neighbors lent a helping hand without hesitation and celebrations were shared by all. Here, peace wasn't just a dream; it was a tangible reality, woven into the fabric of everyday existence.

I know that you are but a creation of my desperate and fading consciousness, so you should know what I'm rambling about.

Come! This river is my favorite place in the city. Did you know it is known to be the longest in the country? It follows the twists and turns of the valley. It is such a healthy environment, surrounded by foliage, moss, solid mountains, and giant maple trees, where I often read and appreciate the most minor things with great pleasure. You see...I am not alone. I am never alone; cows, horses, and birds enjoy drinking and cleaning their feathers, riding themselves off parasites.



Pardon me. I can't quite figure out why everything keeps fading to black on me.

Do you mind if I strip down? I just love swimming in the nude. There's something liberating about it, you know? Who cares if my breasts are like grapefruits at eighteen or if they've got a bit of sag? I'm all about embracing my bare breasts and letting my frizzy hair dance in the wind. There's nothing like the sensation of dashing between these slippery black stones – it's pure bliss.

Do you see how the crystal-clear water thunders down from the ledges, throwing up bubbles? I love throwing myself under the waterfall because it forms a veil covering me. I also feel protected by it. Do you find that silly? Don't answer. Your response is inconsequential. Let's sit here at the edge of the rock.

Yes, I am shivering, silly; I am quite cold.

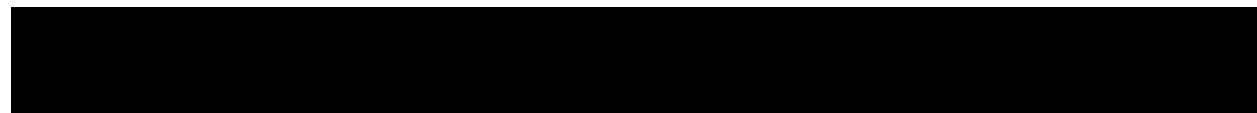
Close your eyes. I love closing mine and hearing the massive amounts of water on the move.

I'm Faith by the way. What's your name?

Yeah, you can chuckle a bit; it's a silly name. Blame it on my late Grandmother, who was a real devout soul. Just about a month before my mom gave birth to me, Grandma packed her bags and moved to the U.S., where she got the name. The thing is, I don't think she nailed the spelling. I only found out later and had to go through the whole rigmarole of fixing it on all my papers.

You probably also bear a unique name, either peculiar or exceptionally beautiful. It's such a pity that I'll never know.





“Sir? Sir? I'm sorry, but we're unable to admit your sister right now. The hospital is on strike, and we don't have the necessary equipment or materials to provide proper care.”

“What do you mean you can't admit her? She needs help!”




“I understand, sir, but without the essential resources, we can't guarantee her well-being. It wouldn't be safe for her to stay here.”

“But she's in pain! She's dying for fuck's sake! She needs medical attention now!”

“I'm truly sorry for the inconvenience, sir. Perhaps you could try another hospital nearby. They might be able to assist her.”

“This is unbelievable. Are you fucking new here? This is the only hospital in town.”

“I wish I could offer more help, sir. Please know that we're doing everything we can to resolve the situation. In the meantime, I recommend seeking assistance elsewhere for your sister's sake.”



The scene unfolds in chaos as I watch my brother, gun in hand, pressuring a nurse. I shift my gaze to catch his attention, pulling his left pant leg from where he placed me on the cold floor.

"Oh, so you suddenly know how guns work? What? Is that you being a man?" I whisper urgently.

"I'm sorry, but I need you to admit my sister immediately. She needs a bed, oxygen, treatment—everything," my brother demands, ignoring me, his tone strained yet determined.

"Yes, sir," the nurse responds, her voice shaky as she hurriedly instructs another staff member to assist my brother.

We enter the weathered and weary building that seems to sag under the weight of its inadequacies. Faded paint peels off the walls like memories slipping away, revealing the scars of years gone by. I am used to the oppressive atmosphere, a blend of antiseptic odor, vainly attempting to mask the underlying stench of decay.

We traverse the reception area, cluttered with worn-out chairs, creaking under the collective weight of anxious souls waiting for a sliver of hope. I was here yesterday with my ailing father surrounded by frayed curtains, more patches than fabric, hung limply, failing to shield the occupants from the prying eyes of an indifferent sun. He passed away here yesterday, cradled in my embrace.

I know I am dying right now, and it is not due to my internal and external bleeding; my hope dims with each passing hour because these walls, a microcosm of systemic neglect, encapsulate the struggle for health in a world that had forsaken those who could afford it the least. So, please forgive my pessimism, for I know the often-overworked staff, clad in faded scrubs, navigating the makeshift maze of humanity, their wearied expressions reflecting the daunting task before them. The absence of any equipment nay modern medical technologies renders their efforts a

Sisyphian endeavor, pushing the boulder of health crises uphill with antiquated tools and limited resources.

Have you ever found yourself contemplating your own mortality?

I confess that I've wandered down that unsettling path countless times. Rest assured, I have never contemplated self-harm or suicide. The reasons elude me, whether a product of sheer boredom or the persistent companion of insomnia. Residing in what's acclaimed as the world's first independent black nation that continues to exact a toll for daring not only to emancipate itself but also to inspire others toward freedom from slavery doesn't ease the burden; so, my mind ventures into the realm of the morbid.

Are you aware of the situation in my country? I understand if not, given that your own country likely has its own issues to contend with. Allow me to provide a brief overview. In essence, the country has been grappling with the aftermath of the assassination of its last official President, allegedly orchestrated by the President of the States to install a puppet regime as always. Since then, there has been a surge in banditry, leading to a four-year-long wave of kidnappings, brutal killings, eating of dead flesh live on social media, rapes, unprecedented inflation, leading to famine all over the country, and other atrocities. The country has transformed into a danger zone for both locals and foreigners, rendering it a place few would deem safe to be. The decline from its former status as the Pearl of the Antilles is truly disheartening, isn't it? Despite the fervent prayers of my late mother, who tragically fell victim to a stray bullet during the initial turmoil, and the collective prayers of our church communities—be they Catholic, Christian, Jewish, or

otherwise—and the hopeful prophecies of countless prophets and prophetesses forecasting the country's resurgence, the grim reality persists.

In the seldom quiet hours of the last four years, I've imagined myriad ways I's probably meet my end – the swift, the gradual, the tranquil, the bizarre, and the arduous. From the grim notion of being consumed by flames after being kidnapped, to the chilling image of one of these gangsters tightening their grip around my neck, and even the unsettling fantasy of drowning. I've played out scenarios where I succumb to stray bullets like my mother, imagining the excruciating pain of a belly shot or the swift release of a bullet to the head, presumed to be instantaneous and painless. My thoughts have drifted to more unconventional fates –electrocution, a haunting recollection of childhood memories that I will refrain from getting into, or the sinister allure of poison, where I envision torment in my final moments. Never has the notion of departing from this world in this filthy hospital due to a bullet in my pubic mound ever crossed my mind. Isn't that rather absurd? My brain is perhaps more twisted than I often thought.

My last memory of this hospital dates back to the tender age of seven. It was a consequence of my unchecked sweet tooth, resulting in a dental abscess that wreaked havoc on my left cheek. The unsightly manifestation caught the attention of my school principal during a playful recess with friends. Prompted by the concern, my mother, an educator at a different institution, was summoned.

I know the thoughts that might be crossing your mind right now. It's not fair to brand my mother as neglectful. I had concealed my ailment adeptly to continue attending school, an environment I

cherished for learning new languages, delving into chemistry – though practical application eluded me – and my fascination with history. Ah, the history lessons, often tainted by the selective truths dictated by those in power, sculpting narratives to suit their agendas.

The day of the surgery remains etched in my memory. Lying on the operating table, clad not in the standard blue hospital garb but in a white shirt and my underwear, I was a witness to the needle puncturing my skin. The doctor, acknowledging my stoicism, labeled me as tough as nails before darkness enveloped my consciousness.

Upon awakening, I found myself in a room shared with an eclectic mix of individuals – women who had just given birth, men wounded by bullets, others nursing broken limbs, individuals who had recently experienced the loss of their legs as a result of diabetes, and some enduring simple stomachaches, all hanging by the sterile water supply and nasal cannula. We were a motley crew confined within the same space with no privacy, conversely to what I often saw in American movies with hospital scenes. My mother, unaware of my impending surgery, arrived unprepared, lacking a change of clothes or bed linens. In a resourceful move, she procured two vibrant towels adorned with oversized green flowers – one pink to drape over me and the other a yellow makeshift bedding on the cold hospital floor. That night, she nestled beside me, embracing the hope that a better tomorrow awaited us.

Our stay at the hospital extended to a week or so, a duration surprisingly short given my swift recovery, which defied the doctors' expectations. During that time, a relentless three-day downpour engulfed the town. The initial night brought chaos as the hospital succumbed to

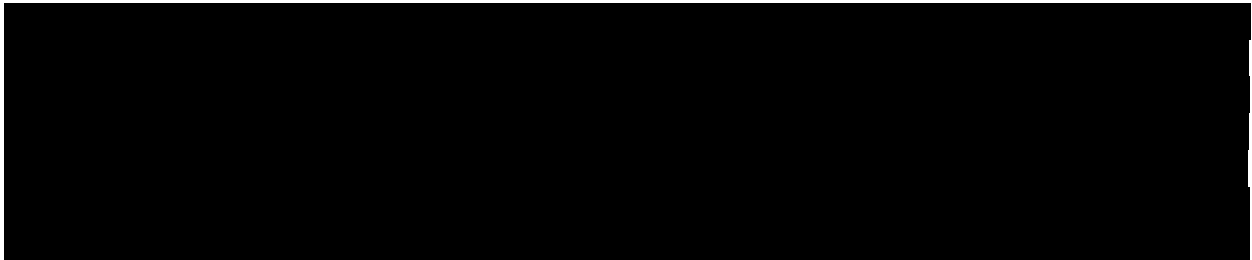


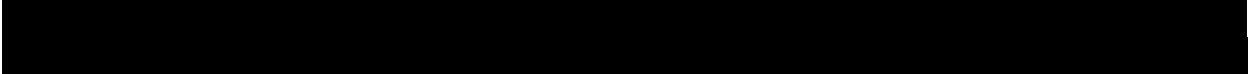
flooding, compelling patients to stay awake, fearing the rising water levels. Despite my willingness to share my bed with my mother, its limited size has made us both uncomfortable.

Upon my discharge, financial constraints loomed large for my mother, rendering even a motorcycle beyond our means. My brother was eighteen then and carried me on his back for seven miles on foot in a display of immense kindness. So, you see, there was a time when he chose me, shielded, and nurtured me. I can't fault him for choosing himself this time, believing that yielding to that vile, uncouth, and uneducated gang leader meant choosing survival for us both. How absurd. How can that be considered living?

Our destination was the other side of the town's longest river, rendered impassable for motorcycles due to the recent heavy rain. Only after crossing the river did we find a motorcyclist willing to take us home.

Once home, my mother addressed the issue of my bad tooth. The dentist recommended a diet of liquid meals, unaware I had already resumed eating rice secretly. I craved something less boring. Remarkably, I returned to school after a mere seven days. Little did I anticipate that fate would bring me back to that hospital, bleeding once again, but this time with an irreversible outcome.





I drifted away for a moment there. Apologies. Here I am, pondering what emotions you harbor for me now. Pity? Sympathy? Do you consider my decision foolish? Would you have acquiesced to his demand for intimacy, had you been in my position?

No means no, doesn't it?

Amid my current plight, nothing cuts deeper than the words of my brother, attempting to coerce me into yielding to his boss.

"You're no longer a virgin. Your body count is so high it would have devastated our mother to know. And now, suddenly, you're acting like a prude, refusing to save your own damn life by giving in?" he shouted, his plea unfolding on the side of the road where his boss had compelled me to join him.

My brother and two cousins bore witness to him callously firing two bullets into my pubic area, aiming for my vagina, an egregious act driven by his anger over my unequivocal refusal to engage in intimate relations with him in the presence of his subjects. It would have been a revelation had he possessed the knowledge to identify the specific anatomical location where he shot me. However, judging by his demeanor, he did not strike me as the type to possess such knowledge.

Defiantly perched on a motorcycle, he brandished an M16 rifle with misplaced pride, oblivious to its proper nomenclature.

"Do your worst," I shouted at his horrid visage, my defiance echoing in the face of an impending tragedy.

I don't hold them accountable, not even my brother, for failing to protect me. The rules dictated that the boss and subordinates became one's sole family upon voluntary association or coercion at gunpoint into the gang. They would have faced dire consequences if they had spoken out in my defense instead of persuading me to comply with their boss's demands. It boiled down to a choice between their survival and mine. They opted for self-preservation, and so did I.

The street became an unwitting stage for a confrontation, with onlookers witnessing the interaction between myself and the notorious gang leader responsible for rendering half the country uninhabitable over the past four years, prompting countless individuals to abandon their homes, families, friends, and livelihoods. I, too, had fled to the north side of the country, but I returned briefly during the summer to be with my ailing father as is expected of a daughter.

The motive behind his decision to shoot me remains uncertain—whether it was an assault on his wounded ego, an attempt to set an example for the women witnessing our exchange, or both. If the latter was the case, I struggled to comprehend the rationale, given his history of violating women over the past years. Every woman, regardless of age, already harbored a fear of him. From the moment he intercepted me, I sensed the inevitability of my death. Hence, though misdirected towards me rather than the assailant, my brother's plea held an understandable desperation. The fear in the eyes of onlookers on the street was palpable as they judged my steadfast refusal to yield.

My refusal wasn't rooted in prudishness or a sense of superiority. It declared my right to reject, even if it jeopardized my life. Observing the young women around me, I understood their silent desperation, clinging to life despite its grim realities. In a world where everyone is willing to sacrifice their hearts, bodies, and souls for survival, I stood firm in my refusal while others held onto the hope that life might improve, awaiting approval for the humanitarian parole program launched by the U.S. President a year ago.

Perhaps it was a lack of options, a sense of unwavering patriotism, or both, but my circumstance leaves me with no alternative but to endure life in a devastated country. Here, the toll is grim, with thousands perishing daily, falling victim to kidnappings, rape, and ruthless coercion into joining gangs. In some cities on the north side rose a powerful wave of vigilantism, leaving the government on the sidelines, refusing to succumb to fear, adopting a bold stance by retaliating with lethal force, and lynching gangsters when they attempted to seize control. This stark contrast deepens my bewilderment about why my town failed to mount a similar resistance. The absence of any attempt to fight back leaves me grappling with understanding why they insisted on pressuring me to surrender.

Here I lie, life slipping away within the bleak walls of this desolate hospital, a victim of a gunshot to the most intimate part of my being. So, you see, I am not seeking your pity or sympathy, for I would have made the same choice time and time again. I am not cut out to live in fear.

