

# SHADOWS OF THE IVORY

*Rebuilding a Life Lost Half a World Away*

Maryline Roux

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## OVERVIEW—

In 2021, an article in the *Washington Post* indicated that “more than 33 million Americans—about 1 in 10 – identify as being of two or more races, a number that grew by nearly 25 million people in the last decade,” according to the 2020 Census. Multiracial people make up the fastest-growing demographic in the country. *Richard Alba, a demographer and professor of sociology at the City University of New York* describes the mixing of different races as a “*new force in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America.*”

*Shadows of The Ivory* is a memoir narrating the story of a bi-racial woman—Maryline Roux—born in a poor village of West Africa in *Cote D’Ivoire* (Ivory Coast), where the elephant is the symbolic emblem of the country for its source of ivory, stolen in the past, and still today for trade purposes.

For almost the first two decades of my life, my first year in *Cote D’Ivoire* has remained a secret. Years of relentless questioning brought no answers. Instead, like an old Hollywood movie line, the only clue offering an explanation of my mother’s relinquishment of me was an exchange of goods—a rifle and a sewing machine my French father gifted to my African maternal parents leaving me growing up thinking I had been tossed aside and traded like elephants’ tusks.

Most believe that a mother is the most important woman in everyone’s life. Numerous experts have recognized the separation between a newborn baby and its mother as one of the biggest traumas in life.

*Africa smiled a little when you left. We are in you, Africa said. You have not left us, yet.*

It's been far from being "*La vie en rose*". The world is full of ghosts with dreams to fit in. *Shadows of The Ivory* emphasizes, through my story, the importance our birthplace, roots and culture play.

The United Nations Children's Fund (*UNICEF*) counts an estimated 153 million children who are orphans worldwide. About 135,000 children are adopted each year in the United States. Recent organizations such as 23andme and Cri Genetics have helped millions to reconcile with their pasts. *The DNA market doubled in 2021 for the fifth year in a row*. Almost four decades ago, no such institutions existed. In *Shadows of The Ivory*, I embarked on a quest, once I reached my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, to find my biological African mother. With only minimal details, the name of my mother—Therese Yei meledje—and the name of my birth village—Vieux-Badien—I wrote a letter to the Embassy of Ivory Coast located in Paris.

Today, after traveling through three continents in the last 55 years, I want to help my African village and honor my African mother with the sales of my memoir. The numbers speak for themselves, there's a need, there's a cry, there's a collective need for nurturance, now, and for the years to come, here in America and around the world.

Howard Thurman in his quote, "*Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive,*" reveals a universal truth about each and every one of us. It took me 37 years to travel back to my birth country and even longer to feel my African mother's love. The idea of this memoir came to me 17 years ago and required years of work. *Shadows of the Ivory* bears a unique voice. I believed in my psychological fight; I want to connect with my readers on a personal level and from the heart since I believe that emotions foreground what is real about humanity.

*NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental illness is the nation largest grassroots mental health organization. With more than 320 affiliates nationwide*, numbers seemed to indicate the existence of a growing movement. However, we are stuck. Still today, the need for mental health is associated with weakness, and the Covid era is not helping. The Brink, pioneering research from Boston University shared in a recent article in October 2021 that, "*Depression tripled in the early 2020 months of the global coronavirus pandemic. Now, they're even "worst." [sic]*" Today, there is an urgency with the plague of suicides we are seeing and the young adult age group is a deep concern. *Shadows of The Ivory* wants to inspire and uplift the readers. With my unique story, I hope to help those who struggle and feel fragile mentally. I feel blessed to still be alive today—I have a story to tell . . . if you let me.

## **BIO—**

Jennifer Rogers, a talented blogger, named one of the top 80 Travel Photography Blogs of 2021, described me as an incredible writer with an even more incredible heartfelt story to tell full of hope, endurance and love after having only read a few excerpts of my memoir on my website.

I was born in West Africa, raised in France and moved to the United States after marrying my American husband. I studied Business & Marketing at the Chamber of Commerce of Paris. Seventeen years ago, the idea of writing my memoir blossomed after losing my biological African mother just a few months before meeting her for the first time, almost four decades after my birth.

I am a 55-year old French native yoga teacher, based in Colorado, who has been called a *Renaissance woman*. I began to compete in my late 30's in triathlons and track and field championships. I stood on the podium in my first heptathlon at 50 years old at the World Games in New Zealand. After attempting to make the Ivory Coast team at the 2012 London Olympics to honor my African mother, I decided to scale peaks in the mountains of Nepal.

Incapable of reading notes, I took up singing and performed at Carnegie Hall and at L'auditori, in Barcelona, in Gustav Malher's concert recorded on radio. I am a self-taught artist and was selected in 2019 to be part of an exhibition at the Boulder Museum. My freewheeling style landed me as a freelance writer at N2 Publishing where I wrote 50 stories for the River Talk Magazine.

If you want to read a couple of excerpts from my memoir *Shadows of The Ivory*, visit my website at [www.marylineroux.com](http://www.marylineroux.com) where you can also sign up to pre-order my book.

#### **AUDIENCE—**

In the past nine months, my Instagram account has tripled. You can access the account through the tab linked to my memoir on my website where you can also pre-order *Shadows of The Ivory*. So far, I have gathered 300 pre-orders from readers from all over the world. I believe that that number will keep growing once my memoir is featured on Jennifer Rogers's blog (Jen Rogers33.com) and on her Instagram account where she has 19.6 K followers. The built-in market for *Shadows of The Ivory* is substantial and international with a potential market in 3 different continents. My memoir covers a thematic overview on subjects discussed in the past, occurring in the present and that will continue to develop in the future.

Future readers are excited about discovering a memoir that reads like a disguised novel, combining authenticity and drama. Twists in the story keep the readers on the edge of their seats. There's also a space to be found where the readers can identify with some of my issues, and feel uplifted with compassion and empathy throughout the book.

Readers buy memoirs expecting to be moved by a true story they can in some ways relate to; each story becomes a contemplating window they feel inclined to open or to keep forever closed. The audience for this book is broad – multi-racial individuals, mothers, outsiders, adoptees and adoptive parents, the population suffering from mental illness and pretty much anyone around the world hurting from the effect of Covid affecting their well-being in the form of depression and anxiety. *Shadows of The Ivory* will attract women and men, young adults, parents and grandparents.

33 million Americans identify as being of two or more races. In 2019, in France, mixed marriages represented 15.3% of the population compared to 6% in 1950; more than 1 marriage in seven. I am half African and half Caucasian; I'm also French and American. The void of my biological

mother growing up is a universal void many have endured in their lives in their own ways. The readers are looking for suggestions to cope with their own stories and perhaps be inspired to look after their own secretive pasts.

*Today, most statistics available about adoption are being gathered by private organizations such as universities and foundations, according to the Adoption History project written by the University of Oregon. In 1970, the United States experienced the century-long high point of 175,000 adoptions—those are the adoptees of my generation. Approximately 5 million Americans alive today are adoptees. The first traces of adoption can be found as far back as ancient Rome, under 5<sup>th</sup> century AD Roman law, according to [adoption.org](http://adoption.org). It is estimated that between 1953-1962 roughly 15,000 foreign children were adopted.*

Adoption is a phenomenon of the past but also very much present today with no legitimate reason to change in the future. Organizations available to search for lost family members have been on the rise in the last decade. Discovering ancestors and rebuilding family trees is becoming a new trend often discussed during big family gatherings and dinners.

*Shadows of The Ivory* is not just a story I want to share with the world. I plan on creating the Therese Yei Meledje Foundation in honor of my African mother and building up additional foundations to help my African village, Vieux-Badien, to help them out of poverty with the profits of my memoir.

## COMPETITION—

*Angela's Ashes* and *The Liar's Club* are two notable memoirs featured in the best 50 memoirs list of the past 50 years. *Angela's Ashes* is described as a book that did perhaps more than any other to cement the 1990's boom in memoir writing. Five years later, *The Liar's Club* reinforced this idea of the modern memoir boom era. Bookstores for the most part have small sections reserved for memoirs and autobiographies where the celebrities' life stories are dominant. There are as many stories as people in the world, some more captivating than others, nevertheless, each life is personal. The list includes a variety of memoirs with different topics and themes written by men and women from different backgrounds and upbringings.

*Shadows of the Ivory* is the second memoir relating a story linked to the Ivory Coast. A memoir came out on March 26, 2021: *A Gazelle Ate My Homework: A journey from Ivory Coast to America, from Africa to Black, and from Undocumented to Doctor*, where the author Habib Fanny, unlike me, spent his childhood in Ivory Coast then later crossed continents, encountering many trials before becoming a doctor.

Apart from being a memoir written by a first-time author, *Shadows of the Ivory* is a fascinating tour de force compiling the experience of recurrent traumas, childhood blur, adoption dilemma, abuse, identity theft, abyss slip, love loss, redemption and forgiveness. Entertainment Weekly wrote: *Understanding life is as hard as living it* in reference of Jeannette Winterson's memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*, one of the best 50 memoirs on the list of the past 50 years. In my memoir *Shadows of the Ivory*, I found my unique voice over the past two decades, peeling

my very own skin one layer at a time. With courage and thirst for the truth, I confronted my fears over the years. Rewinding the past, I reopened scars that knew how to bleed.

And why not? The New York Times wrote: Heroines are defined not by their wounds, but by their triumphs.

**Complementary memoirs on search of a secretive past include:**

*Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*: A memoir by Jeanette Winterson (Grove Press, 2012, \$14.99). Featured as one of the best memoirs on the 50 best memoirs list of the past 50 years. Jeannette is also known for her internationally best-selling first novel: *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruits*. Her memoir is the story of a woman's quest for happiness and the redemption of her painful past. A wake-up call takes Jeannette on a journey in search of her biological mother after growing up in a north England industrial town with her fanatic adoptive mother. A witty and daring memoir similar with my search for heritage, identity, lost mother and missing love but different with its location and upbringings.

*A Gazelle Ate My Homework: A Journey from Ivory Coast to America, from African to Black, and from Undocumented to Doctor*: A memoir by Habib Fanny (Thorntree Press, 2021, \$17.95). Habib spent his childhood in Ivory Coast and escaped later on the *corrupt post-colonial* atmosphere known to Ivory Coast. His journey takes him across different continents where he endured poverty before accessing the complex system of American education. An enlightening and informative story of an immigrant for the 21st century. This is the only memoir I found related to Ivory Coast.

*The Return*: A memoir by Hisham Matar (Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2017, \$12.52). Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and named one of the best books of the year by The New York Times Book Review, *The Return* is a universal story of a son in search of his lost father, kidnapped by the Qaddafi brutal dictatorship regime. Held in a secret prison in Libya, Hisham will never see him again, but he never lost hope that his father might still be alive. For more than two decades, Hisham is haunted by his father's ghost figure. A memoir endowed with a detective novel flair, in which the author returned to his homeland in search for truth in the name of love. Hisham with his distinctive prose transports the reader to the Middle East to face his grief and the reality of his father's fate and to realize that there is no grave and no records.

*All You Can Ever Know*: A memoir and National Bestseller by Nicole Chung (Catapult, 2019, \$12.00). Nicole, a premature baby, was placed for adoption by her Korean parents. Raised by a white family, she struggled with prejudice and racism, and embarked later in life in a quest for identity and self-discovery. With complete honesty, Nicole approached with compassion the subjects of adoption, race in America and the importance to question the truth about our pasts.

*Memorial Drive*: A memoir by Natasha Trethewey, winner of the Pulitzer Prize (Ecco, 2020, \$12.59). Named one of the best books of the year by The Washington post and NPR, poet Natasha Trethewey wrote a provocative memoir narrated with elegant and poignant prose. "Child of miscegenation", she navigated through the upsetting history of the South and "what it means to live at the intersection of America's struggle between blackness and whiteness." Following her mother's tragic death, Natasha explored in depth the experience of pain, loss and grief; similar

topics are addressed in *Shadows of The Ivory*; however, unfolding differently. *Memorial Drive* portrayed with singular beauty the enduring love between a mother and her daughter. *Shadows of The Ivory*, on the other end, describes an endless longing between a daughter and her biological mother that tragically never came to term.

### **SPECIAL MARKETING AND PROMOTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES—**

Talented blogger Jen Rogers was named one of the top 80 Travel Photography Blogs of 2021 and interviewed by Vantage Magazine. Wonders Within Reach named her one of its California “travel experts” for go to travel tips and inspiration and her work was featured on the Southern California Writer’s Association Members’ Showcase.

We decided to collaborate to promote my upcoming memoir *Shadows of The Ivory* on Jen’s blog: [www.jenrogers33.com](http://www.jenrogers33.com). Jen’s motivation to start this blog originated after being inspired by the pouring response she received from her large number of Instagram followers.

I am also connected with Romain Esteban, a French Photograph/storyteller, voice of the Podcast “Les Minutes Photographiques”. Romain is known for his hearty and warm voice you can listen to on his [linkr.bio/lesminutesphotographiques](https://linkr.bio/lesminutesphotographiques), or on his Instagram gallery where he has 32.3 K followers. I wrote *Shadows of The Ivory* with the idea and the potential to be published in France and Africa. I love to travel and promoting my memoir in America and internationally is something I am looking forward to with anticipation. As a yoga teacher for the past two decades and a former soprano singer, I feel comfortable talking in public and I have sung in front of large crowds.

My initial community count includes a large number of Masters athletes from different running groups including the USA Track & Field page liked by 477K athletes, and a significant number of Kait yoga teachers from all over the world with whom I attended continuing education over the past 3 years. My Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn accounts have also grown in the past couple of years.

Friends have told me: *Your story would be an amazing movie*. I can see it being played in my mind and it would be filmed in Africa, France and the USA.

On the writing side, I am also developing a book of poetry, *Velvet Thunder*—a collection of original poetry works. Several poems are featured on my website in the poetry book tab. A third book project is forming in my mind about the Native Americans.

### **MANUSCRIPT SPECIFICATIONS—**

Manuscript status: 15 chapters out of 19 are completed (Three are attached in this proposal as sample chapters).

Special features; The manuscript will be complete at 140,000 words (280 single-spaced, manuscript pages). It will also contain some illustrations.

Anticipated manuscript completion date: Approximately three months after receiving a commitment from a publisher.

## OUTLINE—

The manuscript is divided into six distinct parts—

### Part I—First Cry and Its Wounds

**Chapter 1:** *My Mother Shadow*

**Chapter 2:** *The Cut*

**Chapter 3:** *A Bad Wind*

In Part I, the reader is transported straight into our short meeting in the womb. It is a reflection of my distant memories and unseen relationship. Mothers and babies separated at birth are the only creatures capable to be aware of this immense void. This bond can't be duplicated, neither can the pain and the grief. My memoir's narrative attempts to make us—my mother, Therese Yei Meledje and myself—as visible as possible despite our abrupt separation. In the 2nd chapter, an inevitable transition must happen. I traveled alone to France, not a toddler yet, toward an uncertain future; my dad, Yvon Soulard, stayed behind. Africa turned into a vague souvenir that will sink further down over the years while living with my adoptive family in France. Therese Dube is my Godmother, the sister of my biological French father. First, I go from one family member to the next in the Southwest of France, lost in some strangers' arms until my Godmother, her abusive husband, Jacques, and their two sons, Patrick and Jean-Marc adopted me. There, not too far from Paris, my life overturned; this new world is cold with only white faces in it. *Bad Wind* reveals my French dad's journey and the rare moments we shared before the wind decided otherwise.

### Part II—Chased by the Storm

**Chapter 4:** *Darkening Skies*

**Chapter 5:** *Breathless*

**Chapter 6:** *Truth is*

**Chapter 7:** *The Wind Never Lies*

In part II, through a series of events and numerous flashbacks from my early life, the reader will sense the storm beginning to form. The reminiscence of the past is constant because I reached a dead end which is different than reaching an intersection where choices are available. In the chapter *Breathless*, I do not hesitate to take along the reader to the abyss with me where no help can be found. It happened in 1989 in France, but it could happen today to any individual, teenager, parent, brother, sister, lover, gay, lesbian, marginal, nerd, black, white, mixed, Hispanic, Asian, vaccinated, unvaccinated, everyone and anyone. The Covid era has been and still is overwhelming for many of us. I crashed three decades ago, not a car crash, but the explosion of a lifelong internal suffering. I entered the world of loneliness with no characters, no names, no hands to reach: *Le Neant*—just bruises all over, on my skin, under my skin; a disease that had spread over the years, ignored. This memoir is a hand thrown life preserver to help those breathless to and drowning to stay above water. During my dark descent into the abyss, I compare myself to the heroine Ourika in Claire De Duras' novel: "*The story of a black child rescued from slavery and brought to France who believes herself to be like the aristocrats who raise her until she discovers racial*

*difference and racial prejudice.” Ourika is based on a true story; a best-seller in the 1820’s and the first novel set in Europe to have a black heroine. In chapter 6, Shadows of The Ivory reveals a secret unknown to me, hidden for decades.*

### **Part III—The Light in the Tunnel**

**Chapter 8:** Providence

**Chapter 9:** *Le Chateau D’Aveny*

In fear, we freeze and nothing moves once we’re stuck in ice. Picture some dense fog; it’s impenetrable—how to move through it when we can’t see? By taking a step forward and letting fate sail the boat. According to Aristotle, everything happens for a reason; to help your entelchy (the realization of your potential). In part III, a myriad of coincidences shaped my life. Darkness is left behind; a new light seeped through, dim at first, playing hide and seek like a young child. Then, in 1991, the Gulf War stopped the course of events’ alignment and destiny took me to a new continent after marrying my American husband, Patrick Roux.

### **Part IV— “It’s in the roots that a tree greatest strength lies”**

**Chapter 10:** *Back to My Roots*

**Chapter 11:** *The Only Way Out*

**Chapter 12:** *Faith Renewed*

At last, I had to face my fears following the unexpected death of my African mother. The ‘*Shadows of The Ivory*’ floated in my life for too long. The time had come to travel back to my birthland where secrets are kept. Life sometimes has no mercy. It waits for a while, or it seems that it does until it has enough and sentences our inability to grasp the opportunities we’ve missed. Steps are there to be climbed, one by one and there’s only one direction. Timing is everything and if one believes in God, one knows he’s never too far. For a civil war to erupt on the only week I picked to travel to my birth country in 38 years, defied the odds. With no other choice than facing the danger, my French nationality and my light brown skin forced me to hide from violent rebels killing, rioting and raping. I never reached my village. But I met my African family, my half-brother Ede, my youngest half-sister Delphine and all my siblings, uncles and aunts. Those who knew my mother, talked to her, touched her, loved her, admired her. I found her again through them.

### **Part V—At Last I Know What a Ghost is**

**Chapter 13:** *A Ghostly Funeral*

**Chapter 14:** *The Return*

In part V, a decision has to be made if I want to find closure. Time is often our best friend when we need to process grief, until we realize how we get clever at hiding the pain. *Shadows of The Ivory* is a memoir about transparency where everything comes to light, regardless of the promised aches. At last, I will travel back to my birth village, Vieux-Badien, with Jeff, the priest responsible for mission trips at my church and a few other members. Forty-two years had passed since I was taken away from my mother. An ocean between two souls will open itself, and an



invisible reunion will take place in the most mysterious way. There in the village, villagers prepared a celebration for months in advance as if a queen was about to return.

**Part VI— “There is a spiritual realm that is available to all who find its many entrances.”**

**Chapter 15:** *Higher Realms*

**Chapter 16:** *Perhaps I Can*

**Chapter 17:** *Adrenaline*

**Chapter 18:** *Closer to the Sky*

**Chapter 19:** *Eternity*

“*The sky is not the limit, our mind is*”. In the last part of my memoir, I reached a new summit. My return to my African birth village awakened the need to go after the impossible, or what seemed impossible. In those new quests, *Shadows of The Ivory* linked decades of silence and longing between shadows with unique fates. In the process, I managed to unveil my own shadow to find my lost identity. And there I found me: the competitive athlete, the risk taker scaling peaks in Nepal. Hope in this memoir is the reader’s best companion. At some point in the story, it hung by one thread; but don’t we all hold our breath during our lives until we dive, unfettered, free at last to circumvent adversity and to believe in the mysteries of eternity.

**SAMPLE CHAPTERS—**

## ***MY MOTHER SHADOW***

*For I am my mother’s daughter and the  
drums of Africa still beat in my heart.*

—*Mary McLeod Bethune*

Darkness surrounded me.

I bloomed—eyes shut at first—in a new world that appeared to be safe.

Enveloped in a watery cave, I floated in a warm fluid. Was it the Nile or the Ganges? I did not know, but I knew it was sacred. A pounding sound rocked me—it let me believe in a time that knew no beginning nor end. In this new landscape, time passed—life’s rhythm gave me no choices; I had to keep up with it.

I explored this strange bubble from one somersault to the next, defying gravity with ease. I was giggling, until I felt a gush of liquid: a cascade causing strong vibrations in this cave I called home. Immersed in this mysterious environment, I was able to feel, hear, taste, see, and touch.

Over nine months, I grew.

No human being can understand this intimacy in its integrality, even less remember such proximity; it remains the most miraculous bonding of all time. But the present never forgets—it holds the most precious memories of each of us. Whenever this memory crosses my mind, I purse my lips, more envious than angry, facing the idea of my own mother spending time with the concept of time: the present. It spent nine months with her, with my mother, the woman who held me tight in the chamber of her prenatal land. The present felt her pain, listened to her doubts, believed in her hope and hid behind her fears. The present contemplated her, contemplated me, contemplated us; but I can’t remember this brief time in utero, and believe me, I have tried. Often, I’ve closed my eyes straggling in the dark to marvel at the vision of her nest—a short glimpse of the fetal atmosphere would have been enough.

*Was I asking too much?*

*Why our brand-new brains formed in the womb could not forever imprint this incomparable intimacy?*

I imagined, decades later, an image of my miniature body inside Therese Yei Meledje’s belly. Two arms, two legs, a head with dark eyes, and an umbilical cord that kept me secured to the most important person in my life. I felt the rhythm of her heart and the beats of her pulse. I loved that her heartbeat never stopped and drifted me into sleeps. I could not retrieve the past so trusted my imagination. I imagined the smell of her skin, exhaled scents of exotic flowers only found in *Cote D’Ivoire*, the land of my birth. Africa’s proximity to the equator is one of the reasons for those endless magical skies. “The sun slowly disappears like a red fireball on the horizon and baobabs cast long shadows. Night falls in the land of the giants.” The baobab tree has always intrigued me. Its symbolism description: power, longevity, presence, grace and strength embodied the perception I have of my mother. Her grave laid in front of a baobab, until they removed the tree a few months ago, robbing her, in my eyes, from her symbolic image. The

baobab's flowers open at night; often, the flower's buds bloom around sunset, and petals, once ready, unfold within seconds and fall within 24 hours. The flower is white but can vary in color. The unusual flower dangles from the branches on long stems. Some say that the baobab flowers are stinky while others describe them as tart; I like the latter as I can picture my mother tasting like rhubarb, sweet and sour when mixed with sugar or like white nectarines, my favorite summer fruit. Baobabs can live for a thousand years and I thought my mother could too. The tree is also known as "Tree of life" and when I hug trees in nature, at many occasions, I hug my mother and feel the years of absence.

My mother used to sway her hips and dance barefoot in the dirt. I learned that villagers circled Therese Yei Meledje while she danced free in the heart of her village (mine, too). I imagined my little body nestled inside her while she squatted in the fields and worked under the blazing sun in the unforgiving heat known to Africa; I suspected my presence inside her only made her hotter. My memories of my mother are sparse but I believe I have a legitimate reason to hate the heat.

I was able to perceive the murmur of her voice. Words sounded distant, covered by the underwater landscape I lived in. Perhaps she talked to me when she reached a point of exhaustion, standing in the fields cutting the crops, her face covered in sweat. She had long elegant hands. *Did she use them to smooth the curve of her belly when I poked her with an elbow or a knee asking for attention?*

Often, I traveled back, letting my mind wander to the time of the two of us. Scenes appeared, I just had to close my eyes. After a long day in the field, the only meal of the day was prepared on the floor in front of the house of my mother's parents. Attieke filled wide and large pans waiting for the fish to be grilled on a different fire. Smells mixed with the humid air lingered and floated in mid-air. My mother wiped the sweat on her forehead holding her belly with the other hand. I felt the heat of her palm through her light dress still wet from the labor in the field. Exhausted from picking crops with my weight in the way, my mother had to help with dinner, regardless. Once everything was ready, her siblings sat on the floor, plates on their laps. They scrutinized the food still in the pans, their fingers ready to grab what they longed for during the entire day. My mother sat on the floor too, with grace, and managed to cross her legs with her strong back erect. She was quiet knocked by the demand of the workday.

My mind invented places and people from the past. I created a kingdom that was only mine, where Ivoirians lived in a village I barely knew. I knew I would never be able to stare at her walking through tall grass or dancing on dirt paths. But who knows, once back in our village, the call of the drums might bring back the shadow of her eternal dance.

The body of my mother was incomparable. Inside of her womb through the darkness, I learned how to feel. The transition newborns experience from the womb to the external world has been described as one of the most intricate miracles our bodies perform. The light blinded my eyes, because so far, my world had been about obscurity and moments of illumination—the sun passing through the dark skin of my mother’s belly. I kept my eyes closed; I was not ready.

I spent two hundred and seventy-six days with Therese Yei Meledje; my mother and I were one, inseparable, until November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1966, the day of my delivery—the beginning of the end between an illiterate African village girl and her first baby.

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I yearned for my conception to be the result of deep love, especially during my adolescence. I had no references so I was free to imagine romantic scenarios I had read in books and watched in movies. Lost in reverie, I built a story I craved to own, but no matter what story I came up with, the same question resurfaced once the dream faded . . .

*Did my biological mother and father love each other?*

I knew I was not planned—there’s no such thing as a planned pregnancy in African villages. But, I wanted something incredible between my mother and my father, a love that burns the skin, a love that can’t wait for the next embrace: passion, yes, that thing.

*Did they feel it? –who wants to be born just because of sex?*

I did not have the answer and it bothered me from the time of my first love’s experiences until today. The difference today is that I’ve understood that I will never know.

I wondered what my dad liked about my mother. She was attractive—I know this with certainty—a sultry, curvy, laughing young woman, who spoke her mind and danced freely. She exuberated passion and sensuality. But I hope there was more to it. *Did she hide the way I do? — behind some sort of mystery my dad hoped to solve, reading her like a thriller’s enigma.* I wanted to believe that. Who could tell me otherwise? Adopted children have a buoyant imagination. They have to create a world and build foundations to their stories shaped like pieces of Swiss cheese.

My father was handsome and young, but 10 years older than my mother. She was poor. Dad was a French chemist running a plantation in a small village of west Africa. *What did you feel Papa?*—attraction, lust, loneliness. Did you need companionship, romance, friendship?

No closure is available. I wandered for much time expecting to find answers to questions I could never solve. The members of my African family knew some aspects of my biological parents' story, but only my parents' hearts hold the truth.

If my dad had decided to work in Indochina, rather than the Ivory Coast. I would not be sitting at my desk writing this memoir. I knew that Yvon Soulard was smart. In Paris, he studied chemistry for two years to become a chemist. I believe Dad had what it took to attend *une Parisienne Grande École*, but his father, my grandfather Jean, had nine children to care for; his sons had to find jobs and his daughters had to find husbands—this was the only path during those scarce times. There was no money to send his children to university.

Upon graduation, my father picked a destination out of the ordinary: *Cote D'Ivoire*.

I suspect he wished to escape his conventional French life. In the mid-sixties, for a white man to move to Africa and be the rare white employee in the area required courage. I remember my Dad the way little girls do; he was more charming than any Prince Charming I watched on television or read about in books. His eyes were brown and had this distinct *noisette* (*hazelnut*) color. To this day, hazelnuts are my favorite nuts. I remember spending entire mornings picking them in the yard of the house where I grew up. The hazel tree stood on our neighbors' property, but some branches leaned over our fence, and in season, *les noisettes* continued dropping down for me to pick. To break them with a nutcracker was another pleasure. Naked and shell-less, I let them pile up in the bowl until I could no longer resist. I started with one, then gobbled up many to savor this unique flavor I truly relished.

A smile can tell us a lot about someone's true nature. Dad's smile lightened a room wherever he entered. It shined from his heart. I also remember his seasonal embrace. It fulfilled my need for love when he returned from Cote D'Ivoire during French holidays. I can't remember if my dad's natural scent was musky or more like tobacco lingering from his clothes, but I knew then and I know now that his arms held me with an unequivocal love. This embrace I wished I could feel again and again and again—like a scratched record—is within me the way my organs are part of me; an antique with dust nobody can remove. Decades stand between the close-up of my dad's face and my eyes. I remember the marks on his face, fine lines and small bumps from his temples to his chin on each side of his visage I loved to touch to feel closer. A period of bad acne marked him forever, or perhaps his internal scars decided to show up in the form of pimples. But still, all I cared for was the kindness and softness that emanated from his smile and his velvet gaze landing on me like a caress.

Dad was responsible for controlling Hevea plants at the SAPH (African Society of Heveas Plantations), where he worked as a chemist. I believe he held a high-level position there; the company granted him a spacious house in Toupah just feet from a lagoon. The rare photos I inherited revealed a two-level white home standing on a hill. Tropical trees, unidentifiable from the washed-out photos, surrounded his home. It looked like palm trees were scattered around the house with no specific order since none of them seemed to create shade for the two-story house. Some stood skinny looking lost while others proliferated in small groups, like small human tribes.

Hevea trees are also called rubber trees. They are cultivated on plantations in the tropics and subtropics, especially in Western Africa and Southeast Asia. At the time the only available Hevea fertilizer was to place rotting fish heads around the plants. My mother, just shy of 17, enjoyed exploring her village's surroundings with her friends. An easy 4-mile walk separated the two villages—Toupah where my father worked and Vieux-Badien where she lived. How my mother was aware of those fertilizing practices, I have no idea. Perhaps one day during some girls' adventures, they discovered the existence of the plantation and decided to return with a plan of action to steal the fish. Or perhaps they stumbled upon the Hevea trees' kingdom by accident and with pounding hearts, picked the dead head fish and piled as many as possible in the layers of their African dresses. They made sure to steal those still in good shape to be cooked. The method was quick and required no energy compared to spending hours fishing. My mother and her friends needed to contribute to their respective families' needs in the fields and at home—there was no way to escape the constant chore of preparing meals.

"*Ongnan moann ign min'n es!*" (Hey there! Stop!), the security team screamed; they caught the girls during a random safety tour around the plantation. They were about to discipline my mother and her friends, but my dad, who was passing by with his chauffeur, Timothee, saved them from harsh consequences.

*"C'est dangereux de manger des tetes de poisson mortes; c'est du poison,"* he said.

(It's dangerous to eat dead head fish; it's poisonous.)

My mother looked at Timothee, intrigued by this white man who spoke a new language she had never heard. Noting Therese's confusion, Timothee translated into Adioukou, the local dialect. Embarrassed, the girls explained how they had little food at home and needed food, any food. Dad gave them some money right away and asked them not to steal again. The young girls left, overwhelmed with relief, with no punishment and money hidden in their dresses.

Therese Yei Meledje appeared in my dreams at first—she was nameless, a shadow. I created everything about my mother, the mother who gave birth to me; a creation I built from

imagination with only one reference point: me—or whoever I saw in the mirror's reflection. I forgot the negritude because I did not even know it existed; my dreams did not know either. In my recurrent reverie, my mother lost the most precious attribute she possessed: her blackness. Once I left Cote D'Ivoire, I grew up in a white world where mouths veiled the truth. I was a child, a bi-racial little girl snatched from her African roots. In some ways, the separation was a blessing—I survived—but beyond my brownish skin lived a past I muted until I no longer could bear the lie. I remained open to my African family's folklore, no matter its accuracy; my eagerness to learn about my past transcended the limits of its truthfulness.

One day, I took a photo of my mother's black and white photograph I keep on my nightstand. I zoomed in to get closer to her. I scrutinized every single detail I could find. My mother's hands in the photo held me on her lap. She sat on a stool I couldn't see. Without knowing my mother's story, anyone would notice her long fingers; they've worked hours in the field, marked by the sun and the dry sweat, encrusted on her skin. Her veins stuck out, spread on top of her hands, little rivers filled with African blood; my blood, too. Her hands seemed strong, but fragile at the same time. Her fingers could have been those of a renowned pianist; *Why not?* I bet God knows; God knows our gifts. He knows the difference between the gifts unused by choice and the gifts wasted by circumstances.

*Does God give second chances?*

There's something statuesque about my mother's face. I think it's about the shape of her mouth and her nose; they transpire a sentiment of strength and determination, but also hints of sadness and resignation. Her eyes stared at the camera with intensity, her gaze looking at me with the tenderness she kept inside, a treasure meant for me, her first child.

According to my African birth certificate and other identification documents, I was born in Dabou, *Cote D'Ivoire*. I have no reason to believe that someone falsified my birth information, although anything can be altered in Africa with the help of money.

My maternal aunt, Christine, shared her own testimony: "*Tu es nee a Vieux-Badien, Maryline*"; she insisted I was born in my mother's village. I could believe it—my mother was poor and she had no means of transportation. Sometimes the pace of the labor did not allow enough time to reach the hospital in Dabou anyway. Plus, I thought that being born in my village had something tribal about it, an immersion I could appreciate, even delayed. *Why would Aunt Christine come up with a lie?*

My mother, Christine's older sister, watched over my aunt and other siblings like a second mother. I can't fathom a reason to falsify a different scenario. I am sure Aunt Christine respected my mother and her dire were truthful. In another photo, Great-Aunt Emillienne, Aunt Christine's mother, is pictured with a candid and genuine smile. She wears a black and golden dress with triangular fine African design. She sat with pride and distinction despite the impressive heavy jewelry around her neck. Her earrings and head turban matched the necklace, which appeared to be made of gold. Her deep black hair shined the same way her skin glowed. Great-Aunt Emillienne looked as if she could have come straight from the West Indies or from the tales of an ancient Egyptian deity. I stared at both photos for a while, not to compare them, but to retrieve the distinct softness of my great-aunt's face hidden under my mother's facial features.

My mother's and Aunt Christine's respective life stories differed. My mother was the eldest of her family with constant responsibilities. She lost me—her first child—before reaching her adult age, then conceived eight more children. Aunt Christine never married and bore no children.

In one of her letters, Aunt Christine explained her version of the story. Her missive began with my African grandmother's name—I loved the sound of those long African names I read aloud on purpose, to hear the echo of my voice pronouncing what seemed to be legendary characters—" *Ta grand-mere Midi Koke Marguerite visitait le village Petit-Badien . . .*"—your grandma Midi Koke Marguerite visited the village Petit-Badien located 15 kilometers away from our village Vieux-Badien. Rumors travel fast in small villages. Marguerite heard the news about the white baby through one of her sisters. Intrigued, she rushed to the village with her nieces Jeanne and Jeanne D'Arc, Great-Aunt Emillienne's daughters. A large group of villagers clustered together in front of the house's entrance where my mother laid with me. Men and women hoped to catch a glimpse of the white baby. My grandma and her nieces forced their way through the crowd " *Egbre yess setch, egbre yess setch!*" (Let us go through, let us go through now), she said, pushing villagers with her elbows. There, they faced the truth—Therese Yei Meledje gave birth to a white baby.

My mother hid her pregnancy for many months and kept secret her liaison with my dad, but on this day, her joy was impossible to miss and the evidence shined in full light. The two younger sisters stood there, motionless. My pale complexion begot a wave of bewilderment in the village. *How could this even be possible?* Some wondered in silence while others believed in witchcraft. After a while, Jeanne and Jeanne d'Arc emerged from their astonishment and whispered a few words to each other. All of a sudden, they laid down near the crib my father bought. " *Ko Bla en koke?*" (What are you doing?), said my mother. " *Eke wel berou es Ganga liye e saw a, wel o tou eke, we kew ese Ganga yow af,*" (If we lay down near the baby, we will maybe become white), they said—her voices brimmed with innocence. Laughter burst in the room and spread outside in the villagers' crowd once Jeanne's comment travelled from one ear to the next. In the 60's, Ivorians who lived in villages in Ivory Coast knew little about white people. Most had never seen any, so an African woman who gave birth to a pale baby appeared incongruous. It says on a pseudo-official document that I was born at 10:00 at night. I was in my mid-forties the first time I heard this information. I inhaled lots of air; it might seem trivial for most but for me it was the



confirmation of my existence. But then later, I questioned it, the same way I questioned the story that stipulated that my dad called an ambulance once my mother felt her first contractions.

*Are you confused yet? — as much as I am.*

Therese Yei Meledje's first words after I came through the narrow tunnel of her sacred body, echoed her clear wonderment: "*Mew low es ufu!*" (I gave birth to a white angel!)

This is the only time I ever met my maternal grandmother, Midy Kockly Marguerite. I heard that she picked me up and held me close to her heart. She gave birth to 14 children. Her first child died, and her second child was my mother. I was her first grandchild. Did this scene happen at the Dabou Hospital or in Vieux-Badien? Perhaps we should ask the present and its stored memories.

Therese Yei Meledje was secretive and had all the right reasons to be. She was still an adolescent and she had a liaison with an older white man, my dad, 27 years old at the time. I often wondered if my mother's age was accurate. In Africa, young girls, minors, have sexual relationships with adult men, and, due to a lack of information on contraception methods, early pregnancies are not uncommon. I asked my African relatives many times, for confirmation and certainty, and each source rehashed the same answer: Therese Yei Meledje was 18 years old when she gave birth to you. But I am not convinced; my intuition tells me otherwise.

Nobody in the village nor at the SAPH imagined that Therese and Yvon were an item. For months, my mother denied she was pregnant, until the size of her belly could no longer hide under her clothes. She remained silent when bombarded with questions, resigned to keep her secret. It was only after the birth and the realization that the baby was light-skinned that everyone started to wonder about the father. Her parents and villagers questioned Timothee, the local friend she spent lots of time with. Timothee was Dad's "*homme de confiance*" (his man of trust). When people asked about their relationship, my dad never mentioned that he was his driver. Yvon wanted the Africans to feel comfortable with him as if no hierarchy existed. Perhaps Timothee knew about the relationship but kept it quiet to respect my parents' will. The rumor grew inside the village and my father came to Vieux-Badien to see me. With no hesitation, he confirmed I was his child. He recognized his paternity, and also apologized to my mother's parents.

A few days after my birth, Dad sent gifts and money through *Monsieur Gborou*, my mother's interpreter who lived in Toupah. Yvon Soulard was known for his generosity and kindness not only in France, but also in Ivory Coast; Africans loved him and called him "*Tonton*" (Unk). He listened to their problems and cared in a very unique way. Dad helped many young Ivoirians to work at the SAPH factory. He recruited the young men to fill seasonal jobs during the holidays.

The young Africans came from Toupah, Vieux-Badien, Ousrou, Pandar, Orbaf and all the neighboring villages. For this reason, my dad was loved—he wanted to make a difference, not just be another white man exploiting the Africans, which was often the case.

Money can be a problem in Africa when transferred from one person to another. My mother's parents realized Therese received little money for my care from my father, and my health began to deteriorate. Unbeknownst to us, *Monsieur Gborou had been keeping* large portions of the money Dad regularly sent for us. After questioning him, my maternal grandparents and my dad fired him. *Monsieur Gborou* entered my parent's life from the beginning of their relationship. Dad spoke French and my mother only understood the Adioukou dialect. Some kind of trust had been established between the three at first, but Therese confessed once to my aunt Christine: "*When we are sleeping together and want to make love, I can feel his physical presence, but when we need to communicate, we can't without the interpreter . . . and then, Christine, there is no more intimacy.*"

A few weeks after my birth, my health declined even more. The major issue was dehydration, caused by green diarrhea. When not treated, it could be fatal. Nobody had an explanation for the presence of the small pimples all over my body and my face. The cough also persisted with the other symptoms and nobody had a clue how to heal my small body. Traditional medicines from the village were used with no results.

My mother was upset to discover the interpreter's dishonesty after being blamed by her parents for her lack of care. Frustrated with the entire situation, young and impetuous, she decided to end her relationship with my dad. I don't believe Yvon expected my mother's abrupt reaction. He was ready to care and provide for us, but Therese had no intention of changing her decision. My grandfather, concerned for my future, advised my dad to take me away to get treatment from the whites, if he wanted me to stay alive.

Dad did not know what to do. In the meantime, frail and vulnerable I continued to fight to survive.

He told Timothee with a sigh: "*Je n'ai personne en France qui peut s'occuper de Maryline. Que vais-je faire?*" (I don't know anybody in France who can take care of Maryline. What am I going to do?)

In the next few days, he looked for help. He found Sister Colette, a white nurse from the catholic church in Toupah. Yedo Marcel, *un vieux de Toupah*, called *Papa Marcel*, who is still alive today. He was born in Toupah near the catholic church. *Papa Marcel* is recognizable from a distance. He wears a beige straw hat with a black turban that seems too small for his head. On the photograph taken in 2021, he's in his mid-70's, but the state of his hat says more about his age

than the wrinkles on his face. His charm is intact, unaffected by the passing of time. His smile is soft and emits the same gentleness I often noticed on many of my Ivorian relatives. In the '60s, he met Sister Colette and Sister Roger and often observed their work. Once the sisters arrived in Ivory Coast, they helped many villagers in Toupah. Sister Colette held the African children as if they were her own.

In another photograph taken in Toupah, Sister Colette's hair was pulled back and held by a long white veil attached to a coif to secure it. Her habit had short sleeves and I supposed covered her legs entirely despite the heat; the photograph was taken from the waist up. A cross hung around her neck, attached to a simple necklace, and modest glasses sat on her nose. She's holding a young baby on her lap naked with handmade diapers. It looks like she's talking to the baby who's staring at her. The old photo was taken from the side and it is difficult to identify if I am the baby.

The sisters set up a camp where they organized meetings to inform Africans how they could help orphans. Their mission included caring for babies and children without parents, along with the sick and hungry. They implemented an orphanage providing free food, clothes, medicines, and even toys. Villagers with sick children also turned to the nuns' gracious help to heal their sons and daughters. The sisters received all their goods from European donations and saved many children, including myself.

Sister Colette taught my dad and Timothee how to care for me at first with the feedings and the hygiene care. With my mixed skin complexion, she knew that I suffered from the heat conditions and realized that my skin was fragile. I was fed powder milk bottles that I drank on occasions, but later in France, I refused to drink cow milk. Each time they tried, I vomited right away. The milk I wanted to drink was the one from my mother's breasts—the message was clear.

Once I became a mother, the continuous bond between a child and his mother revealed itself; for the first time I was in part responsible for the little wonder growing inside of me; for the first time my blood ran into my child's veins and the perspective of some resemblance was a delight to experience. But at times, I thought of my own mother contemplating the shadow of my presence on lonely summer nights and the emptiness she must have felt.

I discovered in my forties, the book "The Primal Wound" where the author Nancy Newton explains that "the connection between a child and his biological mother appears to be primal, mystical, mysterious and everlasting." My mother will never have the opportunity to read this book, but she knew this; she lived it her entire life. What if during my long absence and her endless longing, she still felt a tiny piece of me inside of her. Because as Newton noted, "the mother/infant bond takes many forms and the communication between them is unconscious, instinctual and intuitive." *Would this explain the compelling need for orphans and adoptees to search for their mothers and for mothers to search for their lost babies?*

Akpa Ede Gervais Fulgence is the son of my mother's sister, Agnimel Meledje N'Igo Juliette. When he was 16 years old, his mother passed away and my mother, who had 13 children, adopted him. In Africa, the notion of family is primordial; nephew becomes son and niece becomes daughter with no second thought. It is impossible to miss Ede's kindness; it spreads on his face like a wave on the shore, illuminating his smile through his eyes. There are people who effuse compassion in the most natural ways. They look for the best in others in any situation and their goodness seems limitless—Ede, who I consider my brother, fits this description to perfection.

He cared for my mother as she had cared for him. Perhaps this is why they appeared fond of each other in the few photographs I keep in the only African photo album I own. My mother taught him about life and the purpose of being a good person, which Ede applied in their relationship as a gift for her unfeigned motherhood. I've known Ede for almost 20 years and, in the same way he related with my mother, he provided faithful care from afar and helped me recollect information from my first year in Ivory Coast.

I had heard that when someone receives money from another person, it was normal, even understood, that the person would keep a small amount; but I knew I could trust Ede. Unlike my brother, some family members, even sometimes random people trying to pass for family requested money for different reasons.

The quintessence of a child's behavior is based on feelings. Infants express the purest and the simplest form of love and dependence, and until they learn otherwise, nothing is altered.

Before Timothee passed away, *le Vieux* confessed in a soft voice polished by the years . . .

*"Ede, il y a longtemps de ca, j'ai voyage en France et suis reste avec le papa de Maryline"*

(A long time ago I travelled to France with Maryline's dad), he said.

*"Quelle age avait-elle?"* (How old was she?), Ede said.

*"Je ne me rappelle pas, mais assez grande pour poser des questions"*

(I cannot remember how old she was, certainly old enough to ask questions).

Timothee paused for an instant and tried to capture an image in the depths of his mind.

*"J'ai sorti de ma poche une photographie d'une femme noire et je lui ai montre"*

(I took out a photograph of a black woman from my pocket and showed it to her)

Ede nodded, and said *"Ehehehehe,"* like he often does in the middle of his sentences. Timothee smiled; even his smile seemed to happen on his face in slow-motion. He continued, *"Intriguee, Maryline pris la photo dans sa main et demanda qui etait la dame sur la photo"*

(Intrigued, Maryline held the photo and asked me who was the woman in the photo.)

"*C'est ta mere*" (This is your mother), I said.

"*Elle a regarde la photo de plus pres pendant quelques secondes et demanda avec sincerity*"

(She held the photo closer to her face for a few seconds and asked candidly),

"*Pourquoi la dame est noire?*" (Why is the woman black?)

"*Je n'avais pas anticipe cette reponse Ede, alors j'ai du reprendre mes esprits*" (I was not exactly expecting this response, Ede, so I collected my thoughts before answering)

Timothee cleared his throat a couple times, then he said "*Eh bien Maryline, dans ta famille, il y a des personnes noires comme ta Maman et moi et des personnes blanches comme ton Papa*" (Well, Maryline, in your family there are black people like your mother and me, and white people like you and your father)

Maryline looked at her dad, who read what her eyes were asking.

"*Oui, c'est la verite Maryline.*, (Yes, this is the truth,) he said.

I have no memory of this episode with Timothee and my dad, but when I read his testimony, the word "white" sounded like a sad reminiscence in my ears. If my own African family and friends' circle portrayed me as a white person, how was I supposed to understand my own blackness? Even my mother's first impression when she brought me to this world confirmed the evidence of my whiteness: "I gave birth to a white angel."

*How could I understand the African part of me?*

There was an equation I had to solve. My school years never reflected a strong talent for mathematics, although I managed to conquer algebra. If  $A+B=C$ , then C will be the result of the combination of A and B. But in my case, we needed to solve  $B+C=\text{an unknown A}$ .

A variable complicated the result: I did not grow up in Ivory Coast under the hot African sun and the climatic conditions which would have altered my feature development's traits and took me further away from my heritage. I had no reference of my life's beginnings in Africa, only blurry images I invented. In my recurrent dreams, the silhouette of my mother resembled a figure I had been intimately connected to, but simply could not fathom.

My fantasies about my mother were natural, although I did not know it at the time. It's only when I read the book "The Primal Wound" that my past started to make more sense. Newton insisted that an adoptee remembers having fantasies about her birth mother: "She also

used to cry for her, yet said that she couldn't understand why she would cry for someone she never knew."

My mother's shadow never ceased to haunt me in ways I can't always describe. Shadows always fascinated me. They move with us without ever becoming part of us; detached. At least, we can see our own shadow, but the woman who gave birth to me persisted in being invisible. Plus, nobody wanted to talk about my mother, as if she had never existed. Erased from my family tree; they cut the roots of my own tree without my permission.

## *The Cut*

Earth's trails tell tales. The trickling of lineage  
that ponders the unshed tears

— Alex Murdock

Mowgli: *"You don't scare me! I don't run from anyone!"*

Shere Khan: *"Ah you have spirit for one so small. And such spirit is deserving of a sporting chance."*

Eyes glued on the TV screen, I repeated Mowgli's words—*"Tu ne me fais pas peur! Je n'ai peur de personne"*, daring an imaginary adversary. The Jungle Book Disney movie was a favorite. When not in Bambi's skin, I pretended to be Mowgli. Dina Sanichar was Kipling's inspiration for Mowgli's story; only six years old and raised by wolves, he was discovered wandering in the wilderness. The jungle was his home and he surrounded himself with wild animals. Early on, in my childhood's prime, my instinct had been to connect with animals and nature. I believe that they were a substitution for the bond missing between my mother and me.

Isn't Mother Nature the Supreme Mother? — the mother of us all.

I was attached to my mother's womb like all babies. Once the umbilical cord is cut, babies rest in their mothers' arms, tight against their warm chests. I had none of this, or too little for me to remember. So, there's a weight dissimulated in one of the corners of my own chest, an emotion that keeps coming back in the shape of salted tears. Today, I am holding a key though; writing

my memoir helps getting closer to my mother's story, where I've been invisible for so long. I am making us—her and I—visible through my words to ease Mother Nature's load, which I don't think I'll ever let go of.

Aime Cesaire, one of the foremost French poets of the 20th century, "*helped establish the literary and ideological movement 'Negritude,' a term he defined as the simple recognition of the fact that one is black, the acceptance of this fact and of our destiny as blacks, of our history and culture.*" A half century later, during the devastating year 2020, the world had to deal with an exorbitant number of deaths caused by the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, the United States of America had to face its demons on the subject of systemic racism after the death of George Floyd, a black American man killed by police officer Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd's neck for nearly eight minutes.

His death produced a cultural eruption with protests against police violence toward black people spreading in the U.S. and worldwide. Many unjustified deaths involving African Americans resurfaced and the movement 'Black Lives Matter' intensified. This time, though, the movement reached new heights and awakened the conscious within the white community. It forced some institutions to understand and acknowledge the reality of systemic racism that has existed for four centuries. The talk on the subject came back—the spark ignited a new debate. Some mentioned the importance to rewrite history books and school books while others demanded to bring down statues for their obvious contribution to hate and crimes against humanity. Fifty-seven years ago, in his masterpiece "The Fire Next Time," James Baldwin expressed an uneasiness of his time that is still present today:

*"That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on Earth—and indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words. If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring: whatever it brings must be borne."*

In the midst of this chaos, I felt something new. What had been repressed inside of me all those years—the color black—began to emanate from my pores like never before. A sudden need to express my blackness burst inside. Mixed children, mixed men and mixed women are living something else; a foot in the door and one left out. I wanted to be a voice unlabeled.

So, I wrote.

I wish . . .

we could start—now—to feel with our hearts instead of seeing with our eyes.

I wish . . .

as a mixed woman to continue to be proud of my two heritages.

I wish . . .

we can all come together to fight for justice for all, regardless of our ethnicities.

I wish . . .

we can stop the spread of rising racism and division by doing our part—every day, everywhere.

I wish . . .

in those times of anxiety and uncertainty that we can choose kindness.

My mother was black. My father was white—I am mixed. I don't have to pick a side; I have to love people. And if my Caucasian dad was still alive today, he would be marching with me for justice for George Floyd and the other victims.

*Could we see beyond the color of our skin?*

Do a lot of us have to prove ourselves against others and often work harder to get what we want?  
— absolutely.

Should it stop us from dreaming, working hard, and achieving our dreams?

. . . no.

Is it fair? . . . no.

I hope this will change.

My mother Therese Yei Meledje was illiterate, and not by choice. I decided to write my memoir for my mother and my father because behind my story will always be my mother's story—her story is where mine begins. Mitch Alborn in his full quote noted that sometimes the stories are simple and sometimes they are hard and heartbreaking. My mother was illiterate because of poverty and I am writing in honor of her name, her intelligence, and her muted potential.

*Cote D'Ivoire* officially became a French colony in 1893. Throughout the early years of French rule, French military contingents were sent inland to establish new posts. The French penetration and settlement encountered much resistance from locals. France's imposition of a head tax in the 1900's aimed to enable the colony to undertake what they called a public works program, but in reality, it was a system of forced labor, provoking a number of revolts. The system was subject to extreme misuse and was the most hated aspect of French colonial rule. From 1904 to 1958, Ivory Coast was a constituent unit of the Federation of French West Africa; it was a colony and an overseas territory under the Third Republic. Until the period following World War I, all Africans in *Cote D'Ivoire* were officially French "subjects," without rights to representation in Africa or France.

" 'Travail force' (forced labor) existed in Vieux-Badien", said *un Vieux*, named Agnimel Memel Jean—the oldest man of the village, still alive today. He was born in 1939, and my brother Ede interviewed him in July 2020. Today, Jean's face is slimmed either from old age, lack of food, or singular life exhaustion. He is sitting, eyes semi-closed, holding his head with one hand, fatigued by the heat or by the years. He gradually lost his sight and became blind at the beginning of the year 2021. A tiny cloth, originally white, laid on his shoulder. The marks on his face—curved lines under his eyes and around his mouth—tell a story he wipes each day with his cloth to dry the sweat of his existence. His textured hands are dry and show some discolored white spots around his knuckles. They reminded me of my birthmark located inside my left inner thigh, close to my groin; four aligned white dots that refused to change color over the years, half of a



century now, even with the strongest sunshine rays hitting the spot. The mark grew as I got older—it knows something I still do not, a secret between my mother and her ancestors. I often joked I had been marked with the livestock branding technique. The hot branding iron burned my skin to tame the wild mustang inside of me. Ede listened to Jean's testimony with deep sadness, his heart aching with pity for him. *Le Vieux* talked with his head bowed intensifying the sorrow plagued under his skin. Jean needed a long silence to gather his thoughts.

"Our grandparents were coerced into hard work, often whipped by the black guards, who were recruited by French colonists, responsible for managing the good operation of the labor," he confessed, nodding his head. "Those same guards traveled from *case* to *case* (hut) and camp to camp located in the village. Villagers were forced to climb wild palm trees, nine to ten meters high, with a belt made of liana they had woven themselves."

Ede noticed how Jean had to search for memories in the depth of his mind. It required a mental effort each time and the need to pause between the sharing of his thoughts. Jean continued: "The principal activity was palm oil extraction. The first harvest, after being cooked, was being fermented. Three or four weeks later, a second harvest was mixed with the fermented one and ready for the pounding. African workers gathered together, and with *pilons* in their hands, crushed the mixture to retrieve the grains. Once the pounding was over, women sorted the mixture to separate the palm tree grains from the debris. Three or four days later, the debris was pressed into vases made of dirt and wood, heated, and then pressed in bags made of woven liana to collect the palm oil. Afterward, the oil was transferred into 200-liter casks. Meanwhile, after drying, the grains were broken by the women to extract the almonds. Male workers pushed the casks kilometers away with their bare hands for storage."

"*Ede, ko uwangne*, (You know Ede), sometimes, guards would hit men's heads with coconuts," *le Vieux* said shaking his head and placing his hands on his head for protection, living the scene himself. "Women carried heavy bags of almonds on their heads for approximately 16 kilometers, until they reached Toupah's lagoon, where the storage area was located. There, the French colonists anchored their ships, filled them with the almond bags, and never compensated the workers—they would say that the work represented the taxes their parents owed to the colonists; according to their thinking, they owned the Ivorian land."

Half smiling *le Vieux* said, anticipating the effect of what he was about to say . . . "*Ede, l'esclavage est finalement devenu illegal dans les colonies Francaises en 1848*"—*il avait commence en 1619. Et en 1905, les Francais ont officiellement aboli l'esclavage dans la plupart de la region Cote ouest Africaine.*" (Ede, slavery finally became illegal in the French colonies in 1848—it had begun in 1619. And in 1905, the French officially abolished slavery in most of French West Africa.)

Aime Cesaire was ahead of his time. He passed away 14 years ago but his words from his work "*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*" (Return to the native land) reveal similarities with the climate in which we are living today in America.

*"And we are standing now, my country and I, hair in the wind, my hand puny in its enormous fist and the strength is not in us, but above us, in a voice that drills the night*

*and the hearing like the penetrance of an apocalyptic wasp. And the voice proclaims that for centuries Europe has force-fed us with lies and bloated us with pestilence, for it is not true that the work of man is done."*

Children's beliefs don't change with ease once they reach adulthood—they sit, encased in the skin and in the soul. To dislodge the beliefs I created for myself, I had to dig a hole, not outside of me but in the center, to let what I had discarded for so long fill in like raising water. Mirrors did not lie; mirrors are the rare things that don't lie. My eyes, on the other hand, were good at seeing something false, something else, someone I thought I knew.

*What would it take for me to own my heritage?*

*My negritude is not a stone  
nor a deafness flung against the clamor of the day  
my negritude is not a white speck of dead water  
on the dead eye of the earth  
my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral  
it plunges into the red flesh of the soil  
it plunges into the blazing flesh of the sky  
my negritude riddles with holes  
the dense affliction of its worthy patience.*

When I first discovered this stanza by Aime Cesaire, I recognized my systemic avoidance—this skill I mastered to escape my own reality.

"Deafness, dead water, dead eye," a puddle I had drowned in many times. We can't take detours with our pasts; there's only one path and it's impossible to miss it unless we choose to. Freedom looks at us in the eyes and if we can't take the stare then a certainty arises: we are prefabricated.

My mother neglected me—her dad was concerned; he warned my father,  
*"Si tu veux que ta fille reste en vie, il faut que tu trouves un moyen de la faire partir d'ici."*  
(If you really want your daughter to stay alive, you must find a way to send her away)

Today, I am not upset about my mother's treatment. She loved me. She longed for me her entire life. Therese Yei Meledje was only 18 years old, maybe less. Perhaps I would have been irresponsible too if I had to care for my baby at her age. I grew up believing she abandoned me: this was the real wound. We all have a destiny, and mine was not to grow up with my biological mother; my destiny was not to give birth to a dozen children; my destiny was not to be illiterate, nor to work in the fields; my destiny was not to try to survive. I am writing this with an utmost respect for my African mother and all the African women—those lives are exemplary lives. Whoever can find the strength to hold onto a thread that is ready to snap at any time—in those precarious surroundings—holds some kind of heroism within. And what the people from the West see as primitive, I see it as an art of living. What the West takes for granted, I see it as having the highest significance.

*“The villagers are so good at keeping up appearances, at working hard all day in the fields, at pounding and stirring like the rest. Poverty no longer means rags to me. It doesn’t mean mud huts and no beds, because that’s how most here live. It doesn’t mean starving kids, because most of those round bellies are just swollen with worms; serious malnutrition seems more of an accident than an obstacle. Poverty is so well disguised in the good sense of community and the homogeneity of life. The villagers are too proud to let it show. It takes shape in the things you can’t notice just passing by. Maybe you can see it if you look closely at the dinner bowls: is the starch slowly edging out the sauce? Is there macaroni in the sauce instead of fish? The villagers seem so smiling and carefree, seem so happy, make me sure I could be glad to have nothing too. But how much do they suffer quietly? How much hunger do they swallow with a smile?”*

Those are the questions Sarah Erdman asked in her book "Nine Hills to Nambonkaha"; the heart of an African village in Ivory Coast where she spent two years working as a Peace Corps volunteer. I live the questions too.

It seems that my mother during her childhood did it all, except for having the privilege to go to school. According to Erdman,

*“Children are born into designated roles according to their place in the family. The eldest son usually helps in the fields; the eldest daughter stays home to care for grandparents and younger siblings. The second son might mind the cows (often six-year-olds spend all day en brousse, in charge of giant beasts with finely sharpened horns). Among the succeeding children, girls are conscripted into fetching water and pounding corn as soon as their arms are strong enough. Girls and boys alike are expected in the fields during the planting season. School is a distinction: a few or maybe just one in each family attends. Most kids walk several kilometers to get to school before the seven-thirty gong and get home when the sun is teetering on the horizon and are immediately enlisted into doing chores.”*

*Did my mother, the elder of her family, have a taste of childhood? Cramped under endless daily chores, was time available to dream and wonder?*

After childhood, young girls entered their next stage in life with little knowledge about sexuality. Their bodies transformed and new sensations and desires implode. They became victims of prey, more often than not, for older men. After all, age in Africa was sometimes unknown and never guaranteed; official documents are mere paperwork. Without a doubt, the African woman, from the time she is a child, is considered the weak sex, and once married her condition does not really improve.

*“Polygamy has a built-in family-planning aspect in many African cultures,” wrote Erdman. “Many ethnicities believe that after a woman gives birth, having sex or getting pregnant again will poison her milk. Therefore, she waits till the child can walk before having sex again. Meanwhile, the husband doesn’t have to go outside the courtyard to find other women. And considering the paltry state of romantic love in ‘villages’, and the incredible workload for the average wife, often polygamy is a breath of relief for a wife—*

*her chores are cut in half. Granted, women are given little voice in choosing their cowives. But it's a system that has worked for centuries. The women aren't humiliated by it; they expect it."*

A couple years after my departure, my mother married her African husband, who later took a second wife. I don't think Therese Yei Meledje expected it, and as a result she became ill.

*"Cote D'Ivoire supposedly has the third largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa. Money is here, but in fine Third World form it saturates the upper level of society and never seems to seep through to the rest. Corruption has become something of an accepted cultural norm,"* notes Erdman.

I've always wondered why Africa, the richest continent in the world in terms of its natural and mineral resources, had to deal with so much poverty. In what has become the accepted narrative, it is clear that the continent strives for change—*how can we get rid of incompetent governments and power-hungry presidents?*

Nick Dearden, the director of UK Campaigning Organization Global Justice Now, titled an article in 2017: "Africa is not poor—we are stealing its wealth."

Slavery, colonization, and exploitation have shaped Africa through centuries, moving from one curse to another. I am burning inside, asking myself, what is it going to take for the Western world to respect Africa and Africans? —all of them—from the rich businessman to the poor villager. If we are willing to change systemic racism by addressing the problem globally, we owe it to Africa to change its fate. Because if we can't change the way black people are treated unfairly around the world, how can we restore dignity to the people from Africa?

As humans, we must share the same vision: Exploitation must become a practice of the past.

Dad sent a telegram to his mother in France. He explained the situation and asked if she could take care of me. Meanwhile, he gave to my African grandfather a hunting rifle and a radio, and a sewing machine to my African grandmother. My grandfather requested this exchange to let my father take me away. This "transaction," which I heard of at some point growing up, hurt the most, and still does.

I was upset that my mother never had a say, nor was she contacted to discuss any of this. I had been exchanged for a few goods, and through my European eyes, too distant to comprehend the reality of African life, this exchange reinforced my feeling of insignificance. Of course, for my grandparents, those three items were more precious than gold.

However, Newton in her book "The Primal Wound" talks about her daughter's adoption and explained that, *"Many people believe that carefully explaining to the adoptee the reasons for his relinquishment will alleviate the pain of that experience. It is certainly understandable that a birthmother would want her child to know her reasons for surrendering. Yet I maintain that the child will feel rejected and abandoned, nevertheless."* The author's daughter used the exact same

words I would utter when someone would insist that my destiny was a blessing: “*I understand that she had to give me up, but why doesn’t that make me feel any better?*”

The day came. Dad drove to the airport with Timothee. I imagine I was grabbing Timothee with my little hands, uncertain of my fate. But I knew the separation was imminent—babies feel intuitively, like animals. Dad and Timothee were my care givers for the first year of my life. I can’t remember anything. I looked skinny and frail standing in a portable baby park on a rare old photo in my dad’s house. Timothee was known for his kindness. In one of the photographs I have, his face glows with a genuine goodness despite no apparent smile. Dark patches under and around his eyes could pass for black eye liner accentuating the darkness and the white in his eyes—a gaze impossible to forget. In the second photograph, he’s holding me with one hand all the way up to his shoulders; mountains for me. His kindness attracted women, I supposed. I learned recently that he had 37 wives and 17 children, 6 of them passed away.

I flew to France alone, not quite one year old, under the care of a flight attendant. To feel abandoned, a feeling often experienced by adoptees, is one thing; to fear to be abandoned over and over is an exhausting nightmare. I was confused; I felt utterly alone—the beast began to form inside, inducing a pain in my guts I still feel decades later any time I palp my belly. No one could stop my inconsolable cries, even less the warmth of a stranger’s arms.

My mother wandered in the dirt paths of the village, torn between holding me one last time or continuing to walk with no destination, feeling the ache of a separation she had no control of. A couple of hours before the departure, Agnes, her dear friend visited her. Agnes had a round and jovial face with a short afro and long earrings. Deep lines intensified her cheekbones. Difficult to distinguish if it was from too many smiles or too much suffering. Agnes looked like she was a good listener and perhaps she holds inside deep secrets my mother confessed a long time ago. She is still alive today and I could ask for more, but secrets are meant for those who hold them tight—I believe that breaking a secret is breaking an intimacy between two persons and I didn’t want to do that.

Agnes took my mother’s arm gently and searched for her eyes welling up with tears. “*Therese, tu dois venir. ton bebe va partir a 15h cet apres-midi*” (Therese, you must come. Your baby is leaving at 3 p.m. this afternoon). Therese’s breathing had changed. She seemed to grasp for air in a familiar heat she was used to working under. The white of her eyes had turned red. In a trembling voice, my mother replied “*Ya don O en doudou doum!*” (No, it hurts too much!). In this moment, she realized her loss and what her young age could not fathom yet. I read in one of her letters I received in my thirties that my father had promised to keep in touch and send photos but she never received anything, unsure if I was still alive or not.

I arrived in France, safe. A few weeks later, Dad shared with Timothee and his wife a few photos of me with my French aunt and paternal grandparents. I am not sure if my mother saw those ones; maybe she forgot.

Years later, my great-aunt Emillienne recalled that after my dad left *Cote D’Ivoire*, another French man who had just arrived wanted to take my mother as his wife—she refused with no

further explanation.” *Je ne parle pas et ne comprends pas le Francais—je ne veux pas etre avec cet homme!*” (I don’t speak or understand French—I don’t want to be with this man!) She yelled at her dad’s face. “*Erou rou mime!* (You don’t love me). “*Tu n’as pas voulu que j’aille a l’ecole. Tu m’as mis au monde pour que je devienne la femme des blancs. Je ne veux pas d’interprete dans ma vie intime!*” (You don’t want me to go to school. You gave birth to me to become the white men’s wife. I do not want interpreters present in my intimate life—can’t you understand?)”

Following this argument, my mother ran away and took refuge in the village Petit-Badien, situated 15 km from Vieux-Badien, where her aunt Emillienne lived. Here, later on, she met an African man and became his wife.

I grew up with my cousins, Patrick and Jean-Marc. My godmother's name was Therese as well. She is the sister of my biological father, Yvon. After I flew from *Cote D’Ivoire*, I first stayed with my paternal grandmother, named like my African grandmother, Marguerite. Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous, as Albert Einstein cleverly wrote. Not long after, I moved to stay with another aunt, Dani. I do not remember this period of my life from a memory standpoint, but for some reason, I remember the pain of not belonging.

What allowed me to affirm this, since my memory failed me?

I held on to the little I knew: I was just one year old, and after fighting to stay alive, two men raised me as well as they could. Rare strong females had been figures in my life. My dad worked during the day. So, it was just me and Timothee. He was the only African figure my adoptive mother had highly praised. And I believed it; however, no one could make me smile for months after my arrival in France. Moving from one household to the next, within such a short period, I just kept on crying; so young and without words, nobody could understand the depth of my internal suffering.

My paternal grandmother, *mamie Margot* gave birth to 10 children and lived at that time in the Southwest of France, in the Vendee region. Things were not exactly going as smoothly as expected in this small village—it was the ‘60s and nobody had seen a black baby except on TV. Rumors grew in the little countryside French village, and after being moved from one family member to the next—which also caused family disagreements—I finally settled at my godmother’s home, in a suburb of Paris, situated approximately 30 kilometers from Paris.

Dressed fully in white, my baptism took place in a little church called the *Sacre Coeur*, located two blocks away from my godmother’s home. My dad was still in *Cote D’Ivoire*, and with no familiar arms to turn to, I cried through the entire ceremony, already in clear disagreement with religion.

In my early years, I did not realize the differences between myself and my godmother’s family until the exterior world made it very clear. They made fun of my skin and my hair. I turned into a tomboy; as a matter of fact, very often I would be mistaken for a boy, with my skinny silhouette and afro hair that my Caucasian godmother had no idea how to comb. Once a week, maybe less

often when I managed to escape, she used a regular brush, pulling on my sensitive scalp—I cried every time, praying to wake up one morning with long fine hair.

My godmother never researched how to care for my hair type, still thinking my body would adapt to the white world. What if I had the scalp of my Caucasian dad and the hair of my African mother? I am laughing now, remembering how often I used to place a scarf on my head with a headband to hold it, pretending I had long hair. I would go outside into the wind to feel what it meant to have long hair.

Around the age of 10, I ended up with lice. *Do you know what this means?* Hair brushed every day, a stinky cream applied all over my hair to kill the enemy, and then a green scarf to wrap my afro—yes, a green scarf, as if lice were not enough. To top it all off, I had to go to school like that. *Why couldn't I just miss school?* To this day I still don't understand. Writing about lice automatically makes me scratch my head—some things never change.

With my double identity, I would play games. Every week, I walked the street of our neighborhood to buy bread at the bakery for dinner. When my turn came to order, the lady would ask:

*“Qu'est-ce que tu veux, jeune homme?”* (What would you like, young man?)

I looked at her straight in the eyes, smiled, and said, *“Une baguette s'il- vous- plait, Monsieur!”* (A baguette sir, please!) She looked at me, stupefied. I stared at her, and finally she gave me my bread. I paid, smiled again with defiance, and left triumphant. The same scenario would happen with men, to whom I would reply, *“Une baguette, s'il- vous -plait, Madame.”* I'm not sure which one amused me the most.

It's interesting that I spent most of my childhood playing with boys. Dolls never really came close to me, except for brushing their long hair that I did not have. No black dolls existed in those times, much less mixed ones. I had to compete, I had to beat the boys, and I could. In doing so, I gained respect and was accepted.

Ta-Nehisi, in his book, “Between the World and Me,” wrote, *“All my life I'd heard people tell their black boys and black girls to 'be twice as good,' which is to say 'accept half as much.’”*

It's funny, because nobody told me this, but I acted as though someone had. I remember that in elementary school we had to go through a physical education test that included many different stations requiring athletic dexterity, which was right up my alley. Boys had to score 60 points, girls 30. I scored 60 points that day, shutting all the boys' mouths.

Near my adoptive mother's house, we played manhunt until dark, hiding in cellars of the nearby apartment complex. I was always picked first for teams because I could run fast and climb trees. Nobody could catch me and I loved to trick my opponents, laughing in silence up in my tree. I watched them looking everywhere, not understanding where I'd escaped.

We organized contests to jump from swing sets to see who would jump the farthest. I had no fear and loved to win, always swinging higher and higher. There was no end to our play until nighttime. Skateboarding on my street, *Rue Pierre Brossolette*, was a favorite. It was fast and

dangerous. Cars surged from the top of the street at an impressive speed, and in the middle of the road another street merged from the right, where other cars appeared at any time, adding adrenaline when going down full speed. Of course, our parents had no idea, and it was better that way. It's a miracle that nobody ever got hurt.

Curious, while writing my memoir, I researched Pierre Brossolette. He was an accomplished scholar, and "throughout his education held the title of 'cacique,' which was attributed to the most brilliant student attending the prestigious 'Ecole Normale Superieur' in Paris, ahead of intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre. Pierre De Brossolette became a journalist and a leading left-wing politician and a major hero of the French Resistance." Perhaps the street name held the spirit of his heroic journey and saved us from a fatal crash. I do believe that life is full of symbols around us, shaping our destinies one way or another.

I grew up practicing different sports, lots of them. The two I remember the most are judo and gymnastics. Judo because I have this photo of me that is stuck in my head. I kneeled in a white kimono with a yellow belt around my waist and a big afro standing out, bigger than my head. Everything in this photo smiles, my eyes, my cheekbones, my lips, even my body language. It was of extreme importance that I could defend myself in any circumstance and eventually get into fights, even though the martial arts philosophy emphasizes the essence of self-control and respect for others.

With gymnastics, I believe I was trying to find this thing called 'femininity,' but instead, I enjoyed the parts that required my speed, explosiveness, and velocity. The balance beam was my worst event, but I loved conquering balance and exiting that darn narrow thing with a back salto move, flying in the air. The floor event's thrill was the dancing part and the long diagonals of flips and saltos; as far as grace, I had some work to do.

The uneven bars were another dimension where momentum was crucial, and the sensation of flying between bars was always present. I believe the vault was my favorite. I could use my running speed and explode on the "*cheval*" (vault is called horse in French), flying in the air, hoping for the best for landing. The downfall of my gymnastics career was my lack of flexibility, but still, as often practiced by young gymnasts, my little body reached a degree of flexibility inflicted by force. As a result, justified or not, I grew up with interminable legs, a short torso, and a pronounced lower back arch like most gymnasts.

A sad memory that has never left me occurred at the end of a competition taking place in my hometown. This was the first and only time my godmother and her husband came to watch me. At the end of my last event, I ran to them, giddy, knowing they were present. I did not say a word, just had a huge smile on my face that asked, "*Alors qu'est-ce que vous en pensez?*" (So, what do you think?) My godmother's husband replied, "*C'est bientôt fini?*" (It's almost done?)

I fixed his eyes in silence, turned around and ran away. The pain grew bigger. My godmother's family and I had nothing in common. I loved sports while my two half-brothers were studious. Nobody cared about my skills and accomplishments.

I was growing fast, too fast in my opinion.



My body was changing but my innocence had not budged. I wore super tight t-shirts, hoping it would slow down the growth of those two bumps on my chest. Most girls loved their new appearance, rushing to the store to buy their first bra—I did not. I hated it. It was in the way when I ran, and I complained that it slowed me down. On the morning of an important gymnastic competition, I ran down the stairs in my house, alarmed, looking for my godmother.

“*Maman ... pourquoi je saigne?*” (Maman ... why am I bleeding?)

She took my arm to sit down, but I stopped her, and said,

“*Je sais ce qui se passe ... les filles a l’école parlent de ces choses la et je l’ai appris en cours de science naturelles ... mais pourquoi maintenant? ... J’ai une compétition dans 4 heures ... c’est impossible ... pas maintenant!*” (I know what’s going on, girls at school talk about those things and I learned it in health class, but why now? I have to compete in 4 hours! This is not possible. This is not happening!”)

I ran back upstairs, angry at whoever came up with this idea of bleeding each month. In this moment I wanted my African mother, the person who gave birth to me, the woman I could identify with. I wanted it now. I cried and broke whatever my hands could find in my bedroom; the animal locked inside of me for years just expelled the rage my body contained. I wanted to talk about my real mother. I didn’t want it to be a secret or a taboo anymore. I wanted to ask questions and get answers. I didn’t belong here, I thought—nobody looks like me, nobody understands me.

I said this silently: “*Trying to find my mother is linked with trying to find my sense of self.*” For the longest time I thought she abandoned me, and because of this belief, some days I hated her. Then other days I blamed someone else, and then sometimes later, I felt an admiration for her courage to give me up for a better life—she became my heroine.

The truth is, I was fucking confused, most of the time.

Later in life, in my 40’s, I fell in love with Rainer Maria Rilke, one of the twentieth century’s greatest poets in my eyes. A poem from his remarkable book “Books of Hours” struck me. In his stanzas, the image of my mother resurfaced many times, as if he’d written the poem for her...

*I’m too alone in the world, yet not alone enough  
to make each hour holy.*

*I’m too small in the world, yet not small enough  
to be simply in your presence, like a thing –  
just as it is.*

*I want to know my own will  
and to move with it.  
And I want, in the hushed moments  
when the nameless draws near,  
to be among the wise ones –  
or alone.*

*I want to mirror your immensity  
I want never to be too weak or too old  
To bear the heavy, lurching image of you.*

*I want to unfold.  
Let no place in me hold itself closed,  
For where I am closed, I am false.  
I want to stay clear in your sight.*

*I would describe myself  
Like a landscape I've studied  
at length, in detail;  
like a word I'm coming to understand;  
like a pitcher I pour from a mealtime;  
like my mother's face;  
like a ship that carried me  
when the water raged.*

Wherever I went, I was the rare child of color, the rare black student in the classroom, if not the only one; and God knows why, He let me sit in the tiny church of our neighborhood, witnessing the loss of my ethnicity. It became the norm, and I wouldn't notice anymore. I had forgotten the color of my skin anyway. But at times, I was reminded in the most vulgar ways that I was living in the wrong neighborhood, and that I should return from where I'd come: this distant country called Africa I read about in books, instead of learning about it at home.

I grew up with so many memories of my paternal grandmother's house. By contrast, I knew nothing about my African grandparents. Later, in my forties, I discovered treasures like photos of my ancestors, which speak to me a thousand ways, allowing me to perceive a distant heritage by just staring at their celestial faces. After they all passed away, my brother Ede sent me a video of their empty home. Old photos still hung on faded walls. I imagined their lives and all the memories I did not make there because of the mixed color of my skin and the unimportant meaning of my heritage—I felt robbed.

To this day, I wonder why a black man or woman deserves respect solely based on his or her level of education or profession.

*What is it? Why is the poor black man invisible?*

The poor, in general, regardless of color, appear to not exist or have no value. But to be poor is not a condition—nor is it to be rich. It is just a perception. Because in reality, the hearts of the poor hold a supreme love unattainable by the richest man on Earth.

Vieux-Badien, Dabou, Toupah, midwives, old hospital, birth, dead fish, celebration, admiration, dancing, hevea, friendship—words swirled inside my head while precious images resurfaced

from a distant past. Assembling interviews and letters allowed me to write and feel closer to the memories buried in *Cote D'Ivoire* and freed me from invisible chains.

In the end, how and where I was born will remain a mystery or the story I want to believe. My whiteness shaped my destiny toward other horizons where certainty never reveals itself.

## BREATHLESS

*Ever poised on that cusp between past and future,  
we tie memories to souvenirs like string to trees  
along life's path, marking the trail in case we lose  
ourselves around a bend of tomorrow's road.*

*- Susan Lendroth*

Ourika was “a black child brought back from Senegal shortly before the Revolution.” Her aunt (princess of Beauvau) raised the child, along with the princess’s two grandsons. “*Claire de Dura’s first novel is the story of a black child rescued from slavery and brought to France who believes herself to be like aristocrats who raise her until she discovers racial difference and prejudice.*” The story took place in the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A century and a half later, bigotry and prejudice continue to exist. “*Ourika comes into her knowledge of herself through a powerful confrontation with her negritude. While she went through an ‘awakening to her racial difference, she obsessively veils and covers any exposed skin, driven by the constant awareness*

*that the simple fact of her color irrevocably separates her from the French society to which she had originally felt she belonged.*” Unless I was reminded of my skin complexion—light brown in winter and darker in summer—I felt like a white person with an island tan most of the time.

African roots were a distant concept, read in books, talked about with friends, but never or in rare occasions mentioned by my adoptive family. And if I dared to ask, this is the answer I would get:

*“Si tu cherches a retrouver ta famille Africaine, ils vont te demander de l’argent.”*

“If you try to find your African family, they will ask you for money.”

Which was not far from the truth, but it should not stop me from trying to understand my heritage. I refused to be intimidated by it.

Ourika went through an identity crisis I found familiar. Severely depressed, she is also insomniac, and excessively thin. *“It’s the past we must cure,”* the doctor decides. *“But to do that, I must know it first.”* In a conversation with her doctor, however, Ourika declares that she cannot remember her African past and that France, *“this land of exile,”* is the only home she has known. No doctors had such conversation with me. I could either speak to the mirror or engage in a conversation with my own self—a futile attempt that got me nowhere.

Today I know more than yesterday. I’ve understood that my birthplace is part of me. The fact it is located thousand of miles away in another continent makes no difference; it’s in my DNA—my ancestors, my African history, my village, they live inside of me, little aliens invisible to me.

Ourika was brought from Senegal to France at age two. *“Chevalier de B. was then a governor there and one day he saw Ourika being taken aboard a slaver that was soon to leave port. Her*

*mother had died and in spite of her cries she was carried to the ship. He took pity and bought her and then, when he returned to France, gave her to his aunt, Mme la Marechale de B.”*

My adoptive father, Jacques, never mentioned my birthdays. I don't remember my birthdays anyway, except when I turned 21 years old, just before I left to work for Disney World in Florida, I organized a party in Paris at an Ivorian restaurant.

*“Why would one want to celebrate the day they were separated from their mothers?”*

*“There seems to be a memory built into the psyche and cells, an anniversary reaction (also often felt by the birthmother),”* which leaves many adoptees in profound sadness around their birthdays.

*“Once she is old enough, Ourika discovers in one searing moment that her blissful integration is an illusion.”* My French integration into the white world I lived in was in part the result of a false identity I created for myself. Often, I was told that I sounded and acted like “white people” —whatever that means. And more often than not, I've been reminded that I was not “black” enough. And today I finally think this is correct . . .

*I am no colors . . . or am I ALL colors?*

The truth is that African blood runs in my vein, and it is pure red—a dazzling red. *Have you ever noticed the transparency of the dew on a rose?* My skin is the dew, translucent, undefined and full of nuances.

If anything, I fathomed this other truth . . . I am not a distinct color unless it's the color of humanity.

It had been an insane year working at Disney World in Florida. In a new country, speaking English learned at school, I shared a condominium with four roommates from different countries.

Early mornings were an interesting ritual due to the strong smell of Chinese food cooking on the stove. At night it was impossible to fall asleep until our roommate from Norway was done partying and drinking with her friends. Not so much a fan of vodka, I enjoyed tea times with my British roommate, Sarah. Our Mexican roommate was low key. On occasions, I drank Rum and coke when partying at other friends' condominiums, being a pain as well. This neighbor from a country I don't remember never missed a morning to come out, hair undone, yawning, to congratulate me:

*"I don't know how you do it. Most of us wake up still drunk from last night and here you are, running light as a feather!"* he would say.

I laughed in between two breaths *"I don't drink much!"* I said — *"That might help!"*

We worked at Epcot Center, dressed in folkloric costumes from our respective countries in hot Floridian temperatures. I worked in all the French stores in the French pavilion. My favorites were the Artbook, with its art and books, and the Signature, where I was selling perfumes and other products and doing make-up sessions with the guests. During the day we were sometimes bombarded with the most insane questions. In the background of the French pavilion stood a fake Eiffel Tower, and occasionally we were asked if it was the real Eiffel Tower, and if we were flying back home every night.

At some point I did some modeling and was supposed to be in a French movie that got cancelled in the end.

Before I left for Florida, I lived in Paris with my boyfriend, Sebastien, for about three years. Cut from my high school friends and the few I made in Paris, once I returned, I moved back to my

adoptive parents' home. The pain in my belly came back. It felt like moving back in the middle of nowhere. Old friends had their own lives, friends from Disney World were scattered all over the world, and I drifted from my boyfriend. I realized I was still longing inside, and it was a different longing than the one I felt for my biological dad. *“Both mother and child live their lives with a longing that cannot be fulfilled unless they are reunited. There is a grief inside that lingers and never ends because the mother and the child are still alive and the soul is aware of it.”* At 18, I wrote a letter to the Embassy of Ivory Coast in Paris. Nobody knew that I did, except my boyfriend. I explained my story and expressed my determination to reunite with my biological mother. I waited years, until one day I received a letter from Ivory Coast. I could not believe it at first. I knew from the start that I had a slim chance of finding her. All I had learned over the years was scarce: I was born in Dabou and my biological mother was from the village Vieux-Badien in Cote D'Ivoire. I jumped and danced at first, and threw the letter in the air. But then I stopped and faced the reality of it all, hands shaking. I stared at the brown envelope to make sure the sender address I read in haste was really my mother's name, *‘Therese Yei Meledje’*—no doubts, it was her. It was new, some kind of sensation only a mother and her child could share, I thought—half guts, half heart. One part of me wanted to tear open the brown envelope, and the other part was freaking out. I waited—I just could not open it. I called my boyfriend and explained my fears in tears. He came to pick me up and we drove to ease my nerves.

*“Et si ce n'était pas ma Mere? Et si il y avait une erreur?”*

(What if it is not my mother? What if there was a mistake?)

*“Maryline, si tu n'ouvres pas la lettre, tu ne sauras jamais.”*

(If you don't open the letter, you will never know.)

I remained silent for an instant to calm my breathing. I looked at Sebastien asking for approval. I felt the envelope's texture with my eyes closed and tried to guess its content. Something felt rigid. I took a long breath that stopped half way into my lungs. I tore open the envelope, taking my time—why hurry after decades of longing? I looked inside without touching anything and saw something that looked like a black and white photograph. I pulled it out. I could hear my pulse beating. I discovered an African woman holding a baby on her lap. I stared at it for a while. I could not pronounce a word.

*“Maryline, pourquoi tu ne dis rien?”*

(Why are you quiet?)

*“Regarde la photo. C'est impossible que ce soit ma vraie mere. Je ne lui ressemble absolument pas!”*

(Look at the photo. It's impossible that it could be my real mother. I look absolutely nothing like her!)

My boyfriend parked the car and looked at the photo. He looked at the photo again, then at me a couple of times . . .

*“Si, tu lui ressemble un peu.”*

(I can see you in her, I do.)

I took the photo back.

*“Pas moi . . . pas du tout.”*

(Not me . . . not at all.)



*“Maryline, ecoutes. Tu as grandi en t’imaginant une maman qui te ressemble mais rappelle toi que ton pere etait blanc et que tu es le mélange des deux.”*

(Listen, Maryline. You grew up with the vision of a mother who looks like you, but remember that your dad was white and that you are a mix of both.)

I could not let any logic persuade me. I was disappointed and in denial. Crushed and delusional, I bowed my head and wept. Sebastien held me close, as always. He had this power to be a boyfriend, a father and a friend.

Someone wrote the letter, since my biological mother was illiterate.

To read. . . *“Ma Chere fille”* (My dear daughter) at the top of the letter had the effect of an electroshock—I had never read those three simple words before. She mentioned the immense surprise the reception of my letter caused, and their anticipation to respond to show their joy, their love and the pleasure they felt. They wondered for the longest time if I was still alive or not.

I could not fathom my boyfriend’s conclusions. Later that day, I put the photo and the letter away in a box like a discarded treasure, resolved to forget it. In retrospect, today, I understand the power one’s education has on a growing child. How could have I connected with this woman, different from anything I was familiar with? She looked like a stranger to me. I grew up around idyllic dreams—they could not be otherwise. I could only dream of the world I knew: their white world. The real me was made of two. Ignoring the first one was like discarding one half, and hoping that I would manage to stand hobbling on one leg—what a lie.

In my adoptive parents' house, grey days passed, one by one, with no purpose. It was my bed, me and solitude. All I could do was move backward in search of a past I had loved. I logged into my mind and waited for the memories to resurface. I was grateful for the sports in my life growing up—a place where I could express myself, but also where I could vent my aggressivity that most people around me could not understand, much less tolerate. A team player, I enjoyed playing handball with my best childhood friend Lydia Persod Caillaba and our twin friends Anne and Veronique. I also loved to run, and on occasions helped Lydia's track team, especially the relays. At 14 years old, I hung out with a group of friends, mainly boys. In those times of no electronics, our group enjoyed talking about different subjects (something we did not do at home) and listened to music. We played soul and funk vinyls on a gramophone (phonograph) most of the time. After a while, I became closed to one of the boys— Sebastien. We both loved R&B and jazz—a love he inherited from his dad. Attracted by similar things, we danced together at parties on Saturdays; something I always looked forward to. Sebastien's mother was German. He was blond and had clear green eyes. Despite a small frame, he was quite athletic and played handball as well. He loved to say: "*I'm black,*" and he could dance like one, with good rhythm and agility. During most parties, he would end his choreography with a split and a smile, covered in sweat. His parents were divorced, and he had a young half-brother he was crazy about. We were a great group and shared fantastic moments. After a year or so our friendship turned into love, but we both agreed to keep it secret to not disturb the group chemistry; or was it because we both, in different ways, experienced the concept of love as something to be guarded against?

It worked for a while. It was even quite exciting to be the only two to know until I moved to high school. We both went to different schools but kept seeing each other and meet with our group.

On the first day of school after parking my yellow moped, on my way to class I saw this boy walking, chatting with friends. Maybe I stopped, I don't exactly remember, but I know I was in awe. I asked some friends if they knew who he was.

*“Oui! C’est un etalon! Toutes les filles sont folles de lui.”*

(Yes! he’s a stud! All the girls are crazy about him.)

Ignoring the fact that I was not the most attractive girl at our school, I dug for more information and learned that he was a soccer player and his brother a senior in our high school, *Le Lycee De Montmorency*. One day at recess, I approached the stud’s brother, Jacob, and started a conversation—we talked about soccer. I figured out his name and found out that Pierre played in a soccer club in the region. He was a good player and was on a team with lots of African players. Pierre was Jewish and loved “Blacks.” It took a little while, but at some point, Pierre and I started to talk.

*“Putain Maryline, comment t’as fait pour le brancher?”*

(Fuck, Maryline, how did you get his attention?), a friend of mine said.

*“I met his gaze couple times during recess. I thought it was a good indication that it was time.”*

My friends could not believe my nerve to approach him. It did not take too long to meet often at the cafés, *“Le Disque Bleu”* or *“Chez Mira,”* where we ate lunch most days and played Flipper or Pac-Man arcade games. One day, Pierre confessed that he had dropped his girlfriend. The way he talked about her was demeaning—he was mocking her. On our way to the café, I stopped.

*“Pourquoi tu parles d’elle de cette facon? T’aimerais qu’elle parle de toi ainsi?”*

(Why are you talking about her that way? Would you like her to talk about you like that?)

*“C’est comme ça que tu parles de toutes les filles que tu largues?”*

(Is that the way you talk about all the girls you drop?)

He looked at me, puzzled. I shook my head and raised my eyes and said *“T’es pathetic,”* and left.

I thought Pierre was not such a stud after all. We continued to talk when we crossed paths but it was different. The attraction diminished but meanwhile, he fell in love with me. He invited me to one of his soccer games.

I realized his feelings toward me had changed; I felt triumphant, but also hesitant. After the game he apologized and shared he had thought about what I said and agreed with my statements, except for the “pathetic” part.

Pierre and I had something in common. We both lost our dads. I was only a child; he was a teenager when it happened. It was a similar wound, a pain we knew that we could understand and share. I think we are drawn by people who can reflect our own pain. Pain is an energy, it cannot hide, it’s all over and within us—there’s no escape. Pierre lived with his brother, his sister and his mother, all of whom he was very close to. I continued to see Sebastien but could not share with him what happened to me at my high school. On the other hand, I don’t know why I told Pierre about Sebastien. He never pressured me about it, and almost a year of extreme insouciance and free will passed by. I was 16 years old and no sexual contact with either one had happened yet, which took away some guilt. I was a romantic, remember. Sex had a bad rep. I was afraid of it, disgusted by my adoptive father’s pornographic obsession and his constant

loathsome lust. I hated his lingering repressed dirty ugly want. I can't write the word *desire*. Desire is for love and passion. The way he portrayed me and fantasized about me gave me all the justified reasons, every minute of my life, to stop calling him dad. One cannot adopt a child and turn that child into a prey.

A day came when I knew Pierre and Sebastien would be both present at a party, and Pierre had no intention to not go. I panicked. I went in with no plan, just the intention to act with spontaneity, as I always did. I am not sure why, but I pretty much danced the entire night with Pierre. Sebastien's mutual friends were there, and we were supposed to be friends anyway. But he knew something was going on and that Pierre and I were an item.

That night Pierre said "*si on est ensemble, je veux que tu sois ma femme*" (if we're going to be together, I want you to be my wife). He never said anything like that before. I thought it was beautiful even though it freaked me out. It was summer, or about to be, and we danced outside under the moon, a slow dance with no music. Adolescence is magical. The sensorial world is so primitive. Feelings "*a fleur de peau*" (skin deep) are what innocence is to childhood. The discovery of the body reveals itself in such an intense explosion, impossible to duplicate later in life. There are those thrills, like any others, those felt for the first time. They should remain encased in our skin like old photographs in broken frames.

I knew that the next day, when I would see Sebastien at the stadium, he would ask for an explanation. I parked my moped and inhaled as much air as possible before entering the place. He was sitting on a chair in the middle of the handball court dribbling a ball. He did not hear me

come in. I looked at his back for a little while, hesitant to confront him. He noticed me and continued to dribble as if I was not there. After an awkward silence, I said . . .

*“Je suis desolee.”*

(I’m sorry.)

He looked at me and said nothing. I waited a couple of minutes, then said,

*“Je croyais que tu voulais me parler”*

(I thought you wanted to talk to me.)

“I do. But who has to give an explanation, you or me?”

I bowed my head. “I should have told you before but I could not.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You love him?”

I remained silent.

“You need to reply, Maryline.” He stopped dribbling.

“I do, but I love you too.”

He kicked the ball with his foot and walked away, angry. I caught up with him and held his arm.

*“Sebastien, s’il-te-plait attends, s’il -te plait ecoute.”*

(Sebastien, please wait, please listen.)

*“Tu sais tres bien le manque d’amour dont j’ai souffert depuis que je suis nee. On en a tellement parle ensemble. Peux-tu essayer de comprendre? Cette soudaine abondance c’est un cadeau en or, que ce soit legitime ou pas.”*

(You know very well the lack of love I suffered since I was born. We talked about it so much.

Can you try to understand? This sudden abundance has been a golden gift, whether it is legitimate or not.)

“Sebastien, my past life is a secret. My love life is a secret. Do I need more?”

He looked at me without saying a word, and then said, “You have to choose. Don’t hesitate too long,” and he left.

That year, 1983, had been one of the happiest years of my life, and I had to end it. I was torn.

Causing suffering was inevitable, and it was the last thing I wanted to do. My best friend Lydia came over that night while my adoptive parents were playing bridge. She found me in tears. I had just ended my phone call with Pierre. When he heard that I had to choose between him and Sebastien we cried on the phone together.

*“Lyd . . . C’est impossible . . . Je ne peux pas choisir . . . Je ne peux pas . . .”*

(It’s impossible . . . I can’t choose . . . I can’t . . .)

She hugged me.

*“Mon coeur, j’ai mal. Ca brule a l’interieur.”*

(My heart, it hurts. I’m burning inside.)

We talked for three hours or more that night, until there was nothing to talk about anymore, just a choice to make. I grabbed the old-fashioned phone, trembling, and placed it near my ear. I took my time to dial the number I knew by heart, while tears landed on my bare feet. It rang only once . . .

. . . a long silence . . .

I cleared my throat . . .

*“C’est fini, je suis vraiment desolee.”*

(It’s over, I am so sorry.)

I did not sleep that night.

In the days, weeks, and months following that night, I felt guilty, not for what I had done for almost a year but for ingraining this feeling of abandonment in someone else’s skin—a feeling I



knew too well. I hated to hurt someone I loved. I understood Sebastien's jealousy, but our love was secret, and I was tired of it being that way.

My second year of high school came to an end, and my senior year major was not available there, so I had to move to a different school. I moved to Sebastien's school and our relationship no longer remained a secret.

The day passed, I still was laying in my bed living my past, this old movie that was mine. The gray clouds had not moved either; they stared at me, waiting for more souvenirs. I no longer bothered to close my shutters at night. The month of November never seemed to end and the luminosity was rare, making day and night interchangeable. It was a little bit after lunch time, and I had not eaten. The old scenes brought intermittent smiles and tears and long sighs. During my downfall, I realized one thing. No matter what happened in my life, what stuck with me were the intentions, the efforts, the commitments, and the moments. This is exactly what I wanted: to remember the moments and sculpt them one by one in my mind like the sculptor shaping his stone. Nobody could control my memories or judge my actions. I was free to pile up images and make my own movie.

After high school, Sebastien and I moved into a tiny apartment in Paris not far from Montmartre. We fooled ourselves into thinking that this would work. The shadow of Pierre was so often there, in between, laughing at us. The choice was just a choice to end a situation with no future.

Whoever I would have picked, the result would have been the same: the perspective of a doomed

relationship. Despite rare moments of serenity, Sebastien kept asking about Pierre, comparing, wanting answers. I suffocated.

I found out that Pierre was in a commercial school as well, not too far from the Chamber of Commerce of Paris I attended. Through a common friend, I heard that he went through a rough time after I left him. He began to smoke cigarettes and other substances. The guilt resurfaced and I recognized the pain in my heart. I wrote letters he never replied to. He called me once and later on we saw each other at a party.

My school (The Chamber of Commerce of Paris) advertised and recruited students to work at Disney World in Florida, at Epcot Center, and I made the cut. I needed to leave, I needed change, and this was my opportunity. Sebastien was sad, of course, but also happy for me for this new experience and the perspective to become bilingual. My departure approached and two weeks or so before the date, Sebastien and I were coming back from a dinner with friends when the phone rang as we were about to go to bed. Sebastien answered, and the person hung up. I was in our bathroom where only one person at a time could occupy the miniscule space. A few minutes later, the phone rang again, and the same scenario happened. The third time, I said . . .

*“Laisse-moi repondre.”*

(Let me answer.)

*“Allô.”* . . . (silence)

*“C’est Pierre” . . . (It’s Pierre.)*

*“Tu sais quelle heure il est! C’est minuit passe.”*

(You know what time it is! It’s past midnight.)

*“Je sais, je suis desole. Il fallait que je te parle avant que tu partes pour les States.”*

(I know, I am sorry. I had to talk to you before you leave for the States.)

*“Je pars dans 15 jours. On peut peut-etre se voir a une heure plus approprie.”*

(I am leaving in 15 days. Maybe we can see each other at a more appropriate time.)

*“C’est maintenant ou jamais.”*

(It’s now or never.)

*“Pierre, arrete avec tes ultimatum, s’il-te-plait.”*

(Pierre, com’ on, stop with your ultimatums, please.)

*“C’est maintenant ou jamais, Maryline.”*

(This is now or never, Maryline.)

I sighed, then let the silence linger. I knew he was not kidding. What happened in the past at a ski camp came back like a rush. I had a crush on one of the ski instructors. I was not 18 years

old yet and he was 25 years old. The attraction was brutal, but I was a minor. We promised each other to meet in Paris when I turned 18, but I did not go.

I hate regrets.

*“Ok, je serais devant le cinema de l’autre cote de ma rue dans 30 minutes.”*

(Ok, I will be in front of the movie theater on the other side of my street in 30 minutes.)

We hung up. A wall separated me from Sebastien. I knew he heard the conversation, and I was not trying to hide anything. I walked into the bedroom. Sebastien was half-seated on the bed, his back against the wall. I approached and sat next to him.

*“Si c’était toi a l’autre bout de la ligne, j’y serais alle aussi.”*

(If it was you on the other line, I would have gone too.)

He looked at me, sad. I don’t think he said anything.

I went back to the bathroom, dressed in the most unsexy clothes I could find—baggy jeans, a too-big jacket, a loose sweater—and left.

We lived near Montmartre but also near Barbes-Rochechouart, a hot arrondissement in Paris, especially at night. I walked fast to our meeting point. I recognized his Volkswagen. I jumped in.

We looked at each other without a word. After a while, I said “Really, after midnight you call. Really?”

*“Tu es belle.”*

(You look beautiful), he said.

*“Quoi!”*

(What!)

*“Non, non, je ne suis pas belle. Je me suis juste habillé rapidement. J’étais prêt à aller me coucher.”*

“No, no I’m not. I just put some clothes on. I was ready to go to bed.”

*“Ca change rien. Tu es belle c’est tout.”*

(It makes no difference, you’re beautiful, that’s it.)

*“Ok, c’est gentil. Merci. Honnetement, j’ai tout fait pour ne pas l’être.”*

(Ok, that’s nice. Thank you. To be honest, I’ve done everything to not attract your attention.)

We laughed.

*“C’est impossible que tu sois autrement.”*

(It’s impossible that you could be other than beautiful.)

I blushed and changed the subject.

*“Comment as-tu appris que je partais aux States?”*

(How did you find out I was about to leave for the States?)

*“Mon frere m’a dit.” . . .*

(My brother told me.)

*“Comment le savait-il?”*

(How did he know?)

*“Je sais pas.”*

(I don’t know.)

*“Pourquoi appeler ce soir?”*

(Why call tonight?)

*“J’etais a une soiree et je pensais a toi.”*

(I was at a party and I was thinking of you.)

We drove to his mother’s apartment, where he still lived with his brother and sister. Keeping it as quiet as possible, we entered the apartment and went into the living room.

*“Si ta mere me trouve ici elle va me tuer.”*

(If your mother finds me here, I’m dead.)

*“Non, elle ne te dira rien.”*

(No, she won't say anything.)

On many occasions in the past, I was invited for dinners and soccer games, and his family and I were fond of each other. It was so different than the ambiance at my house. In the same way, Sebastien's parents liked me and were very present in my life. Sebastien's dad, who worked with adolescents with problems always said,

*“Tu t'es entouré de gens bien qui t'ont aidé à ne pas succomber à la délinquance.”*

(You surrounded yourself with good people who helped you to not succumb into delinquency.)

I agree with this; in a sense I raised myself.

We talked about a lot of different things for a while, of his life, of mine. We were sitting next to each other, contemplating our futures from a distance. At some point he said . . .

*“Ce qui serait le mieux pour toi serait de te marier avec un Américain.”*

(The best for you would be to marry an American.)

*“T'es fou. Je ne crois pas non, pourquoi tu dis ça?”*

(You're crazy. I don't think so. Why are you saying that?)

*“Je crois ce serait la meilleure solution.”*

(I think it would be the best solution.)

*“Pour qui?”*

(For who?)

*“Tout le monde.”*

(Everyone.)

We remained silent for a while. I came closer to kiss him. He gently stopped me . . .

*“Non, je suis pas venu te chercher pour cette raison, je voulais qu’on parle.”*

(No, I did not come to pick you up for that. I wanted us to talk.)

*“Je comprends. C’est pas grave, Pierre.”*

(I understand. It’s ok, Pierre.)

Then, we ate in the middle of the night. Time had stopped, at least for us, and love hid in the dark. We were two shadows in the night, wanting each other desperately.

He kissed me . . .

I stared into his eyes and melted in his gaze because his eyes were a deep blue, an ocean I had been drawn into before. I wanted to start over. I closed my eyes, letting the wave of sensations transport me where the kingdom of love closed his doors behind us. There, we walked backward on the path we’d once strolled in search of peaks our bodies craved. His furtive looks used to search for me in every corner of our high school recess court. He cared, he made sure I had all I needed. I used to sit on his strong lap to eat the lunch he just bought me. High school had been



about the time spent together. One day, he walked kilometers just to meet me at the park.

Impatient, he kissed me through my moped's helmet, as awkward as this may sound. Always in the moment, there were no half-measures. We shared a romanticism that we created for ourselves free from clichés. His slow approach respected the young woman I was, despite the early wounds afflicted growing up by the distorted father figure I lived with. Another time, laying down in the grass, after a soccer game, we stared at the same sky, feeling each other's desires, searching for a meeting. But even then, he would search first inside of my eyes with his deep blue eyes the sign of a consent to mold his hands on the contours of my skin. I found it touching.

To give my body for the first time to a man who loved me had always been one of the most important things in my life. I was 18 years old when Sebastien made love to me for the first time. And similar to the first kiss I shared when I was 10 or so, I thought it resembled nothing like what I had imagined. Love had always been about soul in my world. If the flesh would annihilate the beauty of romantic love, I was determined that the sexual act would never happen again. But it did. If there was something I was not going to give up on—without a doubt—it was love.

At times, love stories are meant to be lived; They are written somewhere and carried by the winds. They can unfold if we don't resist or they may never leave us, sharp needles inside called regrets. I visited Pierre at his place after he broke his leg during a soccer game. He was lying in bed in his mother's bedroom. I knocked lightly. He smiled as soon as he saw me. I sat on the bed next to his leg enveloped in a white cast. We remained quiet at first, then exchanged futilities. Of course, it saddened me that his soccer season was over, but in that moment, I loved his vulnerability. I felt his pain and dismay. We were observing each other, knowing exactly what

the other wanted, without having to say a word. I was shy; but not that day. I wanted his flesh to melt with mine and my soul to contemplate his—I made love to him just because.

I think my departure for Florida was just after my birthday. It was my first time flying to America. Most Europeans dream to go there. I was excited and nervous and sad. One Saturday, a week prior to my departure, I celebrated my birthday in Paris and gave a party in an Ivorian restaurant. Pierre's brother came, but no Pierre—Jacob shared that he was too emotional to make it.

On my birthday, the day before my departure to the States, Jacob invited me to come over to say goodbye. Pierre was there with some family friends, and a warm atmosphere reigned, as usual. We cheered around some drinks. But sadness floated around. When it was time to go, Pierre drove me to the train station, but he brought one of his friends, I thought on purpose. The goodbye was awful, empty of intimacy, as if we were good old buddies. He was afraid. The last thing he wanted was to show what he really felt.

I wept in the train. There would not be another day or another chance. In this moment, I realized what a lost love was and what it tasted like. Pierre had lost me already.

I'm back in the same bed, same house, same adoptive parents. I need something new but instead everything stayed the same, unbreakable statues I can't look at anymore. I came back from the time machine where I contemplated what I could no longer change. This chapter of my life was closed—air-tight—I loved it and I hated it; a paradox with no manual. What to do now with this

emotional tumult? I was crying about my past, I was crying about the present, I was crying about the future. Everything, my soul, the pores of my skin, my belly button cut from my mother, everything was crying for help.

I began an internal dialogue:

*Nothing's right. When I close my eyes I feel less, the pain is more at the surface, it is more subtle. I need to write but I don't have the words. No one can reach me right now. I am invisible. God is testing me—I am tired of being tested.*

*What's missing . . . I don't get it . . . I don't understand. Is there something to understand?*

*Who's listening?*

*Le Neant . . . nothingness . . . I'm here.*

*Don't feel, don't want, don't care, don't see, . . . don't anything.*

*I'm alone . . . leave me alone . . . breakdown . . . silence—I'm scared.*

*God, I said. I keep on knocking. I know that you have so much to do, so many to help, so many to love, so many to save. The wrong words are in my mouth, the wrong thoughts are in my head.*

*My body is heavy but it is also light and weak because I feel needles everywhere . . . sometimes that is all there is . . . I can't talk . . . I can't explain . . . I'm just crying, crying, crying . . . until it dries inside, in the end.*

*Alone around others . . . alone in the center.*

*You picked me God—why—? Adopted children are good at questioning the purpose of their existence over and over and over. Relinquishment is in our DNA and it's not giving us a break.*

*My emotions are killing me, another wrong word out of my mouth, I keep saying them non-stop, like they are part of me. Go away words, stay away from me, I don't like you. I want to talk the language of love.*

*Tomorrow . . . when is tomorrow? . . . and the next day . . .*

*I need to scream . . . I just did . . . it felt good . . . let's do it again . . .*

*I am so far away, welcome solitude . . . you are my friend. We dance well together.*

*Where do I belong? . . . who knows? . . . who can help? . . . HELP!*

*God, I'm searching for you but I can't see you, please come back and let me grab your hand, you're my Eternal Friend, the only One, the One who never leaves, the One who never quits.*

*Maybe I don't understand . . . I just don't understand . . . maybe there is nothing to understand . . . just letting go . . .*

*. . . and not feel the pain anymore.*

I knew my adoptive parents were going to play bridge later that night. I could not hear noise, so I sat on my bed first; a real task. I felt dizzy from lack of food in my system. My legs looked thin and weak. In the mirror, standing on the wall near the door, I noticed my reflection. I lowered my eyes to avoid this new reality. I took small steps to reach my bedroom door. I had stopped

thinking. I had stop feeling. I was standing in the dark, alone. I took my time to go down the stairs, perhaps I hoped that my being, my body, my soul will wake up from this numbing—but nothing happened.

In the kitchen, I looked for alcohol. I found whiskey. In the medicine cabinets, a variety of strong medicines looked at me for me to choose. I grabbed a couple and walked back up the stairs, faster this time, determined to not change my mind. I made sure to close my door. I can't remember if I locked it or not. My heart was pounding. I sat on my bed, looked at the medicines and picked one bottle. I opened the whiskey bottle and started to drink. I stopped. It burned. I waited . . .

I drank more. I relaxed . . .

I waited . . .

I swallowed one tablet, then two, three . . . I could no longer feel the burn . . .

I was at peace somewhere between my soul and my skin . . .

I opened another bottle, and repeat . . . one, two, three, lots of them. . . until . . . I lost consciousness . . .

*“I was to pass through this world like a shadow; but in the grave I would find peace.”*

My adoptive parents came home and ate some dinner in haste, before getting ready to leave to play bridge. My adoptive mother came upstairs to change clothes and freshen up. On her way down, she placed her ear on my bedroom door. She heard nothing so she thought I was sleeping. She went down, put on her coat and shoes and heard the car outside waiting for her. She locked the house door, stepped down two stairs, then turned around and went back up, opening the door she'd just locked. My adoptive father, impatient, honked. She ignored him and went up the stairs. She knocked on my door once, and then a couple more times with more force. She went in; I am not sure if she had to force the door. She found me in the dark, unconscious.

“Maryline! Maryline!” She saw the alcohol and the medicine. She ran downstairs, screaming  
*“Jacques, Jacques! Appelle une ambulance!”*

(Call an ambulance!)

*“Quoi? Qu'est-ce-que tu racontes?”*

(What? What are you talking about?)

*“Maryline a tente de se suicide! Appelle une ambulance tout de suite!”*

(Maryline attempted to commit suicide! Call an ambulance right now!) she screamed.

Verrier, in her book “The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child,” talks about the death of the psyche. “Sometimes the sense of loss experienced by adoptees becomes so overwhelming that it leads to thoughts of suicide. Donald Winnicott calls this ‘phenomenal death’ and states, ‘What happened in the past was death as a phenomenon, but not as the sort of

fact that we observe.’ ‘Suicide is not the answer, however, but is a despair gesture.’ ‘Many suicidal people are sure that suicide is the only answer to their feelings of despair.’ But Winnicott feels that a simple acknowledgement that the person ‘died’ in infancy (which for the infant has the meaning of annihilation) can prevent the actual suicide attempt.”

I heard water dropping at slow intervals. I felt some parts of my body. I was not sure if I was dreaming or where I was exactly. I just knew I was laying down. My eyes were closed, and I was afraid to open them—I was not sure that I could. I heard someone moaning near me. I was pretty certain this was not Heaven. But I felt calm, with no sensations. After some time in this bizarre zone, I opened my eyes to find a white ceiling. I turned my head to find an elderly person in an adjacent bed in what seemed his final days. Now I realized where I was. I was still alive. Someone had saved me. I sighed, trying to fathom why after attempting suicide I was placed in a room with someone dying. It was early in the morning, and meanwhile my adoptive parents had arrived at the emergency room and talked to the doctor who saved me.

*“Elle a eu beaucoup de chance. Les médicaments qu’elle a ingère sont très fort et ont submergé son corps avec un effet toxique. Si vous l’aviez découverte plusieurs heures après, il aurait été trop tard. Nous lui avons fait un lavage de l’estomac.”*

(She’s been really lucky. The medicines she ingested were very strong and submerged her body, resulting in a toxic effect. If you had discovered her few hours later, it would have been too late. We cleaned her stomach.)

*“Merci beaucoup docteur,” ma mere adoptive ajouta. “Nous allons partir jouer au bridge et nous serions revenue seulement quatre heures plus tard si une intuition ne m’etait pas venue.”*

(Thank you very much doctor) said my adoptive mother. We were about to leave to play bridge and would have not be back until four hours later if I did not have this intuition to go back in to check on Maryline.

My adoptive father entered the room. His face showed pain and lack of sleep. The first thing he said was: *“Pourquoi faire une telle chose?”*

(Why would you do this?)

I turned my head, avoiding his eyes, and looked at my adoptive mother walking toward me. She took me in her arms, crying. This intimacy felt warm and new for a few seconds. I had no more tears in me, but I was crying somewhere inside.

*“Je ne veux pas rester ici . . . est-ce que je peux sortir aujourdh’ui?”*

(I don’t want to stay here. Can I come out today?) I said with a weak voice.

The nurse checked my vitals and said I was clear to go by the end of the day if all was fine. She advised us to look for help and meet with a psychologist. I replied that I did not want to and that I would be okay.

I was certain of one thing: Sometimes, you don’t know the why or the how, you just need to appreciate the warmth of a night and an angel flying by.



In Toni Morrison's words I found a key. "So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die." Through the storm, God's hand was impossible to find and unfeasible to feel. But in the descent, drowning in unknown depths, He clenched my flesh and my soul that I can live.

The simple act of breathing had a new meaning.

After a couple of days back at my adoptive parents' home, I decided to think of a new goal and try to find a job, determined to live. I thought for a while until I told myself that I wanted something that would allow me to travel and get away—I wanted to become a flight attendant. That was it! Never being in the same place. There was one problem: I was afraid to fly. Maybe flying alone when I was not quite one year old, from Africa to France by myself predisposed me to such fear, who knows. Well, I was determined to beat my fear one way or another. I began to send resumes and cover letters to Air France, Air Inter and other airlines. Motivated with a new goal, I started to regain some strength physically—although, I was still very thin. One day I was working on my resume on the living room table and my adoptive father came in and made a nasty remark I can't remember. What I recalled though is that we had a fight and how I burst with such anger, like never before . . .

*"J'en ai tellement marre de ta putain de tronche! Tu comprends rien a rien. Tu prends plaisir a faire du mal aux autres, sauf a ton putain de chien qui bave partout. Tu n'aimes personne, meme pas toi-meme. Tu me degoutes. Je me case. Je ne peux plus supporter ta putain de gueule!"*

“I am so sick of your fucking face! You understand nothing. You take pleasure in hurting others, except your fucking dog, who drools everywhere. You don’t love anyone, not even yourself. You disgust me. I’m out of here. I can’t stand your fucking face!”

I heard my adoptive mother coming down the stairs in hurry, screaming,

*“Qu’est ce qui se passe?”*

(What’s going on?)

*“Demande-lui, il t’expliquera. Je ne peux plus le supporter. Je me case. J’en peux plu d’etre ici. J’etouffe. J’essaye de m’en sortir et il fait tout pour que je replonge dans ma depression.”*

(Ask him, he’ll explain. I can’t stand him anymore. I’m out of here. I can’t take it anymore. I’m suffocating. I’m trying to get by and he does everything to bring me back down.)

My adoptive father grabbed my arm firmly, but my adoptive mother came in between us.

*“N’essaye pas de me toucher avec tes sale pattes. Lache-moi! Va te faire foutre!”*

(Don’t you dare touch me with your dirty paws. Let go of me! Fuck you!)

I took my coat and went outside. My adoptive mother followed behind with the keys for the outdoor fence.

*“Maryline . . . ou vas-tu allez vivre?”*

(Where are you going to live?)

*“Je vais chez les parents de Lydia. Je reviendrais faire ma valise quand il sera pas la.”*

(I’m going to Lydia’s parents. I’ll come back to pack my suitcase when he will be gone.)

*“Tiens, prends une paire de clefs.”*

“Here, take a set of keys.”