In the Aftermath

The night we moved Uncle Raleigh’s cold body into the dining room, the only one in the apartment with a working air-conditioning unit, his spirit rose up again and teetered the few steps to our bedroom door, wheezing all the way. I slept right through the resurrection but woke to Isaiah, my five-year-old brother, trembling on the floor beside my bed, tangled in his sweaty pajamas.

‘He won’t leave me alone,’ he moaned, shoving his thumb into his mouth.

His bladder had released itself in fright. I could smell it on him even before I slid to the floor and touched his damp pajama pants. It was a warm, yeasty smell like freshly baked bread. In the partial light of the street lamp, Isaiah’s face glistened with snot and tears.

I picked him up and changed him into fresh pajamas, all the while cursing Uncle Raleigh’s selfishness. Isaiah had always been his favorite. But we needed to sleep, especially Mama, who was working an early-morning shift at the rehab center. I left Isaiah curled in the safety of my comforter and went to test the dining-room door. The brass ring around the knob was loose, but the lock held. I leaned my ear against its plywood surface. Nothing moved behind it. Nothing alive at least, I thought. When I returned I locked our bedroom door, and for good measure placed a chair under the knob.

Afew hours later, I found Mama in the kitchen hunched over a cup of coffee at our small breakfast table. We lived on the third floor, the top floor, and the morning sunlight poured in through the room’s only window. A thin film of dust and cobwebs covered the pane, but still the light was beautiful.

‘Isaiah can’t sleep,’ I said. ‘He thinks Uncle Raleigh is after him.’

She turned her face away from me and wiped her eyes with the corner of her scrubs. Mama always seemed better than her surroundings and nothing made that more clear than when she was dressed in her scrubs, freshly showered. The burgundy V-neck exposed a patch of well-oiled skin warm with the scent of shea butter. And around her neck hung three gold chains, one with a cross, another with a diamond chip and the last sporting two discs with our first initials in the center of them: ‘I’ and ‘R’. Isaiah and Remi. ‘I’ and ‘R’ always above her heart, on her breastbone day in and day out, against the rhythm of her heart. She straightened but, still keeping her back to me, took her coffee cup to the sink. That effort alone seemed to cow her, and she paused over the aluminum basin, both hands braced against its edge.

‘I called and the earliest they can take him is tomorrow,’ she said.

Two weeks before, the rehab center where Mama worked on Caton Avenue erected a white tent behind the hedges that lined its circular drive. Unlike the other centers, they hadn’t been hit very hard, but one day she came home exhausted from work and took to bed for a week. We tried our best to avoid her. We wore masks inside and washed our hands, rubbing the soap between our fingers, scrubbing our thumbs, encircling our wrists then the fingertips and the nails just like she’d taught us. But when she started feeling better, Uncle Raleigh started coughing. He’d washed his hands but refused to wear a mask. It didn’t seem to register with him that there was something lurking, unseen and dangerous, in the air. At seventy-five years old, he didn’t believe in anything that he hadn’t already witnessed with his own two eyes. So when he came down with chills and a cough, none of us were surprised. I could see the fear in him. For once he didn’t fight with Mama about going to see a doctor. He spent an hour in the ER and then they sent him home. Hundreds were either sick or dying. They had white trailers, Uncle Raleigh reported, set up in the hospital’s parking lot to house the dead.

Isaiah was still sleeping when Mama left. I checked the dining-room door again. I pressed my ear against the plywood. I could hear a slight hitch in the air conditioner’s grinding tone, nothing more.

I returned to the kitchen and pulled the iPad from its place on the shelf above the counter. It was sleek and smooth beneath my fingers. I moved into the narrowing patch of sunlight at the breakfast table and swiped upwards on the screen. The Department of Education had sent an iPad to every student who needed one. I was already familiar with the technology because of my Saturday enrichment course at Medgar Evers College. Ms Melendez, my art teacher, had recommended me for it after our class on Gauguin.

‘What do you see?’ she asked us. On the SMART board was an image of a young brown girl lying naked on a bed. Her ankles were crossed, and her arms were set akimbo. Her face was turned toward us, the viewers, with a few strands of dark hair covering her cheek. She looked about fourteen years old and easily could have been one of the students in our class.

‘I see her ass,’ Matthew said, and the boys sniggered.

Ms Melendez’s dusky skin flushed hot pink. She was new to PS 425, the third art teacher we’d had in three years. They didn’t last long in a room set up with communal tables and free access to scissors, paper and glue. There were thirty of us in all, and it was impossible for a teacher at the front of the room to keep an eye on each and every one of us. I could see Ms Melendez second-guessing her decision to show this slide to a bunch of eighth-graders and, for some reason, I felt a pang of sympathy for her. I raised my hand.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry. What is your name again?’

‘Remi,’ I said.

‘Remi,’ she said. ‘Yes, of course, Remi. Tell me, what do you see?’

‘Besides her ass,’ Matthew shouted again.

‘She’s too young,’ I said, ignoring him.

‘What do you mean, she’s too young?’ Ms Melendez asked.

‘I see a teenager who has been told what to do, how to lie there on the bed. She doesn’t look comfortable. She looks like she is trying to make herself comfortable. But you can tell. It’s like some weight is pressing down on her. Maybe it’s the weight of all of us looking at her.’

Ms Melendez turned to the painting and then stepped backward to squint at it. In a quiet voice she said, ‘Yes, yes, I see what you mean.’

A week later, during parent–teacher conferences, she handed Uncle Raleigh a brochure for Ifetayo. He would have forgotten about it if I hadn’t reminded him later that evening when Mama got home. He pulled it out of his pocket and handed it to her. She looked at it and said, ‘Your art teacher gave you this? Not your English teacher or your math teacher?’ I nodded. ‘That school,’ she murmured. But the next week, she signed me up for the program. There were ten of us in all.  
We met in the English Department’s computer lab. Every week there was a different guest lecturer who taught us about ‘the value, strength and creativity of the African diaspora’, and then we were allowed to use the computers to explore whatever topic or idea that appealed to us.

After an hour of virtual school, I took a break and went to the bathroom, where I found Isaiah crouched in the small space between the toilet and the bathtub.

‘I can hear him,’ he moaned. I picked him up and held him against me on the toilet seat.

‘You can’t hear him,’ I reasoned with Isaiah. ‘He’s in the dining room and he’s being really, really quiet.’

He reared back in my arms. His eyes were the size of saucers, the whites rolling in panic. He was crying so hard he was hiccuping, rocking back and forth in my lap. Mama told me once that rocking back and forth was something that her mentally disturbed patients did to soothe themselves. I picked him up and carried him down the hall to Andrea’s room.

We shared the floor with her. It was essentially a railroad apartment with the kitchen in the back. The three bedrooms, dining room and living room alternated on either side of the central hallway. Technically, it was an illegal sublet, but we needed the extra cash and Andrea was family. Mr Pinckney owned the entire building and lived on the first floor. In the three years we’d lived there, I’d never seen him in anything but a wife beater, boxer shorts and flip-flops. Nothing in his life seemed to require him to dress properly. If anything in our apartment broke, he called an old Jamaican man with salt-and-pepper locs that reached down his back. He’d trudge up the dark stairway with his aluminum box of tools and sigh at the groaning plumbing. His fixes only lasted a month or two and then Mama was back downstairs yelling at Pinckney.

I knocked on Andrea’s door.

‘What?’ she snapped. She opened it just wide enough to stick her face out. Her room in normal circumstances would have been the living room, and she’d covered its three front windows overlooking 21st Street with floral-patterned bed sheets. She couldn’t afford blinds or regular curtains because she’d blown all her money when she first arrived in the city on a fifty-five-inch flat screen. It hung over the bureau on the opposite side of the room and played music videos all day and all night.

‘I need you to watch Isaiah,’ I said, shifting him from one hip to the other.

‘I’ve got a customer,’ she said, glancing over her shoulder.

I leaned forward to catch a glimpse of a middle-aged Black woman in a chair at the end of the bed. Her head was covered in half-inch starter locs that were matted together into one tangled mess. She wore a mask, but I could tell from her eyes that she was smiling weakly behind it, as though embarrassed by her own vanity. I turned back to Andrea. She wasn’t wearing a mask. Mama didn’t want her doing hair in the apartment, but just like the rest of us, Andrea had to make rent.

‘He’s scared of Uncle Raleigh,’ I said, lowering my voice. ‘Just let him sit in the back and play on his games. He won’t bug you.’

‘For how long?’ she asked.

I glanced at Isaiah and back at her.

‘A half an hour,’ I said. ‘Tops,’ I added when she frowned at me. ‘I’ve got to get something that will make him less scared.’

‘We’re all scared,’ she said. ‘This country needs prayers.’

Amonth ago, at the start of the pandemic, someone tagged the USPS mailbox on the corner. The neon-blue bubble letters were supposed to spell out initials but in their current state looked like a single, abstract shape, outlined in fire-engine red. It glowed like something out of a museum, still communicating the energy and movement of its making. The term came to me when I turned the corner onto Flatbush: ‘abstract expressionism’. I stood under the red awning of Crisp and Crunchy Kennedy Fried Chicken waiting for the traffic light to change. On a normal day, Flatbush moved. Cars leaped forward at intersections, darting ahead to be the first to turn. Delivery trucks, ignoring oncoming traffic, parked in the middle of the road and diverted the steady stream of steel and chrome into improvised channels. Drivers climbed down from their perches, walked around back and lifted the doors with a great clattering of steel. They pulled long ramps from inside, setting off choruses of clanks and clatters, delivering cans of beer, ice cream and sodas – whatever the surrounding stores needed. But that day on the street corner at the height of the pandemic there was only one sound dominating the heavens, the long continuous wail of emergency vehicles. Just when one siren completed its circuit, another took up the call.

I crossed the street, headed toward the deli with the sun-bleached ads, featuring benefits-approved products. They were faded into pastel colors that I associated, for some reason, with California sunshine: Kool Aid, Trail Mix Crunch, Special K, Multigrain Krispies, Hunt’s Ketchup and something called Tang Orange. There was another tag by the mailbox artist, only this one with black bubble letters outlined in red. It marked the side of a shoe store. In the crevices and corners of door frames and gates were business cards for Poblanita Car Service and blue-and-white stickers for Frankie’s Locksmith and Hardware. Commerce here was reduced to its barest form, the slogan, and was only interrupted by the presence of Jesus in all his incarnations: Eglise De Dieu De Beree. Church of God Faith in Christ. Church of the Holy Innocents. Rescue the Perishing Deliverance Ministries Intl. Inc. Upon this Rock Church of God. Triumphant Church of God.

After this, the heat and slogans of Flatbush gave way to massive brick apartment buildings that spanned entire blocks. Sicko and CSR-1 had tagged the first-floor walls of each. Otherwise there was little to distinguish one complex from the next. They felt otherworldly, even a little sinister, in their total devotion to housing as many people as possible. At least here it was always quiet.

On Ditmas Avenue, trees lined the lane. Twenty in all reached sixty feet into the air and, with their sweeping branches, weaved a canopy of leaf stippled green across the heavens. The air here was moist and cool from their recycled breath. Birds nested in the soft-barked trunks and their offspring chattered and circled in the highest branches like singing garlands. Above, the sheltering emerald green was interrupted by fragments of white and the sky’s Berlin blue like shattered pieces of Chinese porcelain.

The homes here spread around corners, and the sirens, largely concerned with the other side of Ocean Avenue, faded into a manageable wail. Wide front porches invited rest. There were cupolas and rotundas, towers and verandas. The lawns out front were of equal importance. Already tulips had opened and sagged under the weight of their own meaty petals, exposing two or three thready pistils at their centers. Hedges and ferns grew in pleasing, alternating patterns of meticulous shades of greenish blue, greenish white and greenish black. Wide windows opened onto empty passageways of varnished wood that hinted at unencumbered movement, and what I imagined was unencumbered thought. Most were empty, their owners having fled at the start of the pandemic to their vacation homes outside of the city.

At the end of March, right before he got sick, turning onto 18th, Uncle Raleigh and I heard something moving at great speed, and then trying with great effort to slow itself. That sound in and of itself wasn’t unusual, but what followed stopped us dead in our tracks. It was the showering down of a thousand tiny pieces, as something that was once solid and complicated came apart, splintering into ever smaller bits of plastic and steel. By the time we arrived at the corner a young Black man was pacing back and forth in the intersection, his arms rising and falling to the rhythm of his agitation.

‘Oh my God. Oh my God,’ he said. ‘He ran the stop sign. He ran the stop sign. Why didn’t he stop at the stop sign?’ A young teenage girl dressed head to toe in black with thick braids cascading down her back stood silently amid the destruction. She held a plastic soda bottle in her hand. Her stillness suggested she had been the passenger in the young man’s car. It was a cheap Japanese model, built low to the ground for stealth and speed. The impact had spun it around so that it faced back the way it had come. The front half was ripped open. A piece of Styrofoam shaped just like the front fender lay in the street, although its black casing was nowhere to be found. The car’s intestines, wires and jagged pieces of white plastic, spilled onto the concrete below.

Uncle Raleigh whistled when he spotted the other vehicle. It was a minivan. The impact had catapulted it over the corner, so that it rested perpendicular to the sports car, wedged on top of a hedge and the adjacent apartment building’s low brick wall. We crossed the street for a better view and found the van’s entire right side caved in. The passenger-side door was open and a deployed airbag covered its side window. Leaning against the car cushion, propped half in and half outside of the van, with her feet braced against the cement, was a middle-aged white woman. She pressed a cell phone to her ear.

‘I don’t know,’ she moaned into it. ‘I don’t know what happened.’ Her right knee looked just a little bit off. ‘All I know is that I need help,’ she screamed into the phone.

The driver, an elderly man, hunched over at the waist, unable to straighten his spine, hobbled around the front of the van to her side. His short-sleeved button-down shirt swung open with his efforts, revealing a white undershirt. He wore black dress socks pulled up high over his calves and a pair of shorts that stopped at his knees. He didn’t say anything but hovered around the damaged door. The woman refused to make eye contact with him, and when I glanced down at her knee again, it was fatter and turning a deepening shade of purple.

‘He ran the stop sign,’ the young man yelled to no one in particular.

An audience had gathered on each of the intersection’s four corners. Most looked like residents from the surrounding apartment buildings, clots of older women, drawn from their early dinner cooking into the street. On this one stretch of Newkirk, there were no Victorian homes. A middle-aged woman came to stand beside us. She wore a thick nylon shower cap. Her stomach escaped the gap between a tank top and the Lycra binding of her bicycle shorts. It was loose and flabby like the spilled pancake batter that sometimes escaped the lip of our mixing bowls.

Uncle Raleigh glanced away when he saw her. His grip tightened on my hand. I looked down at his knuckles. Between those carved mahogany knobs the valleys where the lotion could not reach were light with ash. In Bahia, one of the Brazilian outposts of the African diaspora I’d learned about at Ifetayo, Uncle Raleigh would have been considered ‘root’, as grizzled and gnarled as the thick ropes growing from the base of a baobab tree. ‘Root’ meant you were closer than others to Africa in thought, language and dress. One such tree was estimated to be over two thousand years old, and even though Uncle Raleigh was a second-generation American, he possessed that same quality of endlessness. He stood up straighter in this woman’s presence, as though his spine were the mast to a ship that could rescue us all from colonialism’s indignities – like Lycra, and nylon and the processed foods that reduced this queen’s stomach to a spreading, sagging rumble.

I had also seen and felt that stinging lash of his disdain. Uncle Raleigh coddled Isaiah with a tenderness that he could never muster for my mother and me. Bouncing Isaiah on his knees, delighting in the toddler’s drooling glee, Uncle Raleigh would send me running to fetch things for him, claiming, if I hesitated for even a moment, that I ‘had young legs and should use them’. I always felt like a broom’s handle beneath his ashy grip. He had never married. A fact that my mother rarely if ever mentioned because of what it might mean. But whatever shame had shackled him radiated from his entire being, turning him into an unforgiving judge, critical of the slightest human defect.

Granted, when my father dragged me to a paternity test to establish that I was truly his, Uncle Raleigh intervened. My father had been raised better, Uncle Raleigh said, but we knew that wasn’t entirely true. As the youngest, he had been allowed to grow up wild on the streets. ‘He always did seek pleasure for pleasure’s sake,’ my mother explained to me after that tearful visit to the paternity testing center on Church Avenue. The billboard out front had a picture of a fat, white baby and the slogan, **does he really have his father’s eyes?** In the waiting room, I’d looked at my father, a vision of pecan-colored beauty but sweaty now from his effort to prove his delusions true, an excuse to leave us. Even as I gazed at him with the sympathy and pity that only a child can feel for a parent, I knew that he would never test Isaiah in this way. His disappointment in me was an extension of his disappointment in my mother. Uncle Raleigh came to our rescue, moved in with us when my father disappeared, and watched over us, always with that cutting, unrelenting eye. The same one he cast now on that poor woman who had stepped from the privacy of her home onto that most public of street corners.

The adjacent building’s super, Mr Watt, an old friend of Uncle Raleigh’s, also joined the mayhem in the intersection. He wore his blue work shirt with his name stitched onto the front and his dark blue work pants. His fat key ring slapped with authority against his thigh. He pointed to the heavens, the north, the south, now east, now west, as he reported the accident on his own cell phone, no doubt to the building’s management company.

‘Watt,’ Uncle Raleigh called out. ‘You see what happened?’

Watt crossed the street without lowering his cell phone. ‘You know these young Black men,’ he said. ‘They make me so angry. They don’t always behave the way they should. They have problems.’

‘But he says the van ran the stop sign,’ I called out.

‘No, no,’ Watt said, shaking his head. He had a thick French accent, but I never knew where he was from exactly.

‘He was going too fast. You see the marks. He tried to stop but he couldn’t.’

The young driver was on his phone too. ‘I just know these cops,’ he moaned. ‘You don’t know how they are. They’ll find a way to pin it on me. They’ll find a way to send me back.’

It occurred to me as we walked away to complete our bottle-returning errand on Newkirk that we would never really know what happened at the intersection.

Now, halfway down the block on Newkirk under the scaffolding that had been there since early February, I found a green glass bottle. It was for an expensive French brand, and I knew that I had made the right decision to cross Ocean Avenue. Green would work but blue, cobalt blue to be precise, would be better. I’d learned that in the Congo people hung shards of broken ceramic plates and cups from the trees. It was believed that the sound they made on the wind, the clinking and clanking of porcelain, drew evil spirits to them. Down South slaves had turned the ceramics into bottle trees. They hung blue- and green-colored glass bottles from the myrtle tree’s branches. The colors drew evil spirits to them. Once inside, they couldn’t escape the narrowed necks and were burned away by the morning sun. It was old magic, root magic, the only thing that could capture and contain someone like Uncle Raleigh.

I passed the ‘Murder Mart’ on the corner of 17th and Newkirk. Of course that wasn’t its official name. Officially it was the Smoke and Deli shop. Beside their dumpster and recycling, white cathedral candles encircled several blue cathedral candles on the ground. Someone had also splashed blue paint onto the cement around them. The color marked the block as Crips territory, and just as I wondered about their fallen comrade, a police cruiser pulled up alongside the makeshift shrine. I bowed my head and continued down the street past the Mexican tienda, the Haitian church, the fish store and the gyro cafe with its faded sign announcing its grand opening in January still hanging in the display window. I turned the corner at 16th Street. About a quarter of the way down the block were the bottle and can exchange machines. The grocery-store owners had marked the sidewalk at six-feet intervals with long strips of red tape. It occurred to me, as my fellow bottle scavengers avoided eye contact or stepped into the gutter to avoid me, how much the virus had exploited our weakness for connection. It made everyone suspect. I cleared my throat behind my mask.

‘Excuse me,’ I called to the man six feet in front of me at the end of the line. ‘Do you know where I can find blue bottles?’

‘No, no, no,’ he said, shaking his head for emphasis. I stepped down into the gutter and pulled out my flip phone. It had taken me fifteen minutes to walk from Flatbush to Newkirk. I still had time. A great rattling came from around the corner. A few seconds later, an older gentleman pushing a grocery-market cart appeared from behind it. Broom and mop handles were staked at each corner of its metal frame. From them he’d tied two bags packed full of aluminum cans and plastic bottles. The cart was piled high with stuffed bags and three additional ones hung from its front handle. He shimmered and rattled as he walked, the insides shining iridescent and metallic in the overcast light. He wore a fedora cocked to the side and a button-down shirt that was open at the neck. A jaunty handkerchief was tied around his throat. He looked like someone out of a Van Der Zee photo, transported through time with that same air of dignity that everyone in the sepia-toned portraits seemed to possess.

‘Excuse me,’ I said, clearing my throat again. ‘Excuse me,’ I repeated a little louder.

‘What can I do for you?’ he asked.

‘I’m looking for blue bottles, sir,’ I said. I wondered at my use of the honorific. I’d never used it on Uncle Raleigh before and he by right would have deserved it more than the scavenger before me.

‘Blue bottles?’ he asked. I nodded. ‘No money in those.’

‘I don’t need them for the money,’ I said. ‘I need them for –’ I stopped myself. ‘An art project,’ I finished lamely.

‘Your art teacher sent you out in a pandemic to collect bottles?’ he asked.

‘Well, no,’ I said.

‘What do you need them for then?’

We imagined he’d died in his sleep. His body was cold when Mama went in to wake him at 5 a.m. before she left for her morning shift. The ambulance took almost an hour to arrive and when she opened the door, there was only one EMT standing in the hallway.

‘Don’t you work in pairs?’ she asked, leading him toward Raleigh’s bedroom door.

He mumbled something.

‘What?’ she demanded. ‘Speak up.’ I knew that tone. The EMT had no choice but to answer.

‘He had an emergency at home,’ he said.

She’d spoken to him as though he were a child, and when I saw him I understood why. He looked eighteen years old, if that. His eyes were bleary and red-rimmed. His hair, perhaps hours before, had stood upright in spikes, shaped and formed by hair gel, but at the end of the shift they’d deflated. A thin gold chain hung around his neck.

‘Where . . . ?’ he asked.

‘In the bedroom,’ my mother added, leading him toward the back. At the doorway, she turned on me. ‘Remi,’ she said, ‘go make your brother breakfast.’

I lingered, trying to peer around her into the room.

‘Now,’ she said.

I poured Isaiah a bowl of cereal and settled him into his seat.

I could hear the mattress creaking rhythmically as though someone was pressing hard down on something on top of it. Was he doing chest compressions? I wondered. On a dead body?

‘Time,’ my mother said.

The door opened and the EMT walked into the hallway. He didn’t notice me there. His eyes were made of glass, wide open, the size of saucers but blind. He stumbled toward the front door.

‘You can’t leave,’ my mother called after him, ‘until you contact the morgue and they come to pick up the body. You have to wait here with us.’

‘Lady,’ he said, turning on her with the first sign of gumption he’d displayed since his arrival, ‘there’s no one to call. There’s no more room. Anywhere.’

‘I don’t understand,’ she said.

‘We’ve been on call since 7 p.m. last night. Back-to-back calls all the same. Cardiac arrest. Cardiac arrest. We tried chest compressions for forty minutes. Then they told us just do it for twenty because the calls keep coming. We were on our way home when we got this one. Twenty minutes of chest compressions but –’ He turned to her now, his face pleading with her to put an end to this. ‘I volunteered for this because I thought it would look good on my résumé. I’m a freshman at CUNY. I wanted to work for one of the big firms, but now they’re telling us to keep the bodies in air-conditioned rooms and for you to reach out to local funeral homes.’

My mother just stared at him.

What did I need the bottles for? This stranger wanted to know. I needed the bottles because there was a dead body in our dining room. Because it was still chilly out but we had to keep the air conditioner on to slow its decomposition. Because my mother had to work. Because my father had left. And even though I didn’t believe in ghosts, I could feel him in that room just behind that flimsy door, waiting for us to join him.

‘I need the bottles because my dead uncle is haunting my brother, Isaiah, and he’s too scared to sleep. And he needs to sleep because he’s little. He’s haunting Isaiah because Isaiah was his favorite, not me because I’m just a girl. There’s no room at the morgue or the funeral home, so we put his body in the dining room with the A/C –’

‘The body is in the dining room?’ The scavenger interrupted me. He no longer wore his jolly grin. It was as though he had been told something that he’d suspected all along, horror blossoming within him like nightshade.

‘We need the blue bottles to capture his spirit so that the morning sunlight can burn it up and send him to the trees on Ditmas Avenue.’

‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph,’ he said. He wiped his hand over his face.

‘Don’t touch your face,’ I wanted to yell at him.

‘Saratoga water,’ he said. ‘That used to come in blue bottles.’

He continued to shake his head, mumbling something to himself as he arranged and rearranged the bags in his cart. It was as though the story about Raleigh had knocked something loose in his mind, and the professional demeanor that had first impressed me was replaced by the image of a confused and doddering old man.

I knew of three places on Newkirk that might sell that kind of water. All three during better times had outdoor seating. We passed them on our way to the playground at PS 135 on the corner of Coney Island Avenue. The customers looked like people out of advertisements. Even on the darkest, gloomiest, most overcast days, they looked well lit. They seemed to know that they were on display but, sipping coffees or crumbling croissants through their fingertips, they didn’t seem to care what the onlooker thought of them. Some wore sunglasses. Some worked on sleek laptops, but none of them ever seemed interested in Uncle Raleigh, Isaiah and me. They appeared lost in the pleasure of consumption, the pretty food on their plates that was too beautiful to eat. They must, I thought, half running, half walking, have blue bottles.

The first one was a small French bistro on the corner, only two blocks away. Their outdoor benches were empty, but I went around the side in search of their recycling. There was only one bag, and I tried to see through it. The sidewalk was sticky with garbage and the recycling’s residue. Grime and food drippings streaked the green dumpster beside the bag. Every surface was gummy and the faint odor of sour milk wafted from the bag in my hand.

‘Can I help you?’ a voice asked from behind me. I turned from my scavenging to see a man standing in the side doorway with a white apron wrapped around his waist.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked again.

‘I’m sorry,’ I stammered. ‘I’m just looking for Saratoga water bottles . . . ?’

‘Wait here,’ he said. He disappeared inside and came back out with two full water bottles.

‘You mean something like these?’ he asked, holding them up to the light. I felt like I was looking up at the linden trees. The garbage, the tags, the spilled blue paint, the pigeon-streaked awnings, the dust and the dirt disappeared in the light of the blue. They were regal urns, vessels, owned by kings and queens who had them buried along with their bodies when they died. They reminded me of the shards of pottery and glass on display at the Met, beautiful in both their form and function. The blue was almost opaque, impenetrable, certainly strong enough to contain Raleigh’s restless spirit.

The stranger handed me the bottles, and I cradled them in my arms.

‘I don’t have any money,’ I said.

‘That’s okay,’ he said. ‘Hang on a minute.’ He disappeared back inside. Just when I thought he had forgotten about me, he reappeared with a grease-stained brown paper bag.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘put the bottles in here. I also made you a burger. I’m trying out a new recipe while we’re closed. So, you’ll have to come back sometime and let me know if it was any good.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. I couldn’t say much more. It wasn’t the food that silenced me but the fact that he hadn’t asked me to explain about Raleigh and the body or Isaiah’s fear or my own loneliness. He just anticipated what I needed and, for the first time in a long time, I felt held in generosity’s gentle embrace. I turned before the tears leaked out. I got pretty ugly when I cried. My nose turned bright red and my mother could spot it, even when I tried to hide my sorrow from her. She had a nurse’s eye for pain, a way of sensing the discomfort of others.

‘First,’ I said to Isaiah back in the apartment, ‘we eat.’ I took out the foil-wrapped burger and placed it on a plate. There were fat fries and a dill pickle too. I arranged them the way I had seen them arranged on the plates at the cafes.

I grabbed a serrated knife from the stand on the counter and cut the burger in half. The meat was thick and dense. It was held between an English muffin, and I raised my half doubtfully to my lips. Maybe it had been easy for him to part with the burger because he knew it was an unsuccessful attempt at something different or maybe he just liked poisoning little girls who were found rummaging through his garbage. I took a bite and closed my eyes against the pleasure of it. Relief radiated through every muscle and joint in my body. I hadn’t realized I was hungry. I’d skipped breakfast. Isaiah murmured his approval and wiped a rivulet of grease from the corner of his mouth.

‘Hang on,’ I said, and ripped a paper towel off the roll on the counter. I understood why the people at the cafe felt so special. I wiped Isaiah’s face with the coarse paper, and he squirmed away from me.

‘Stop,’ he howled. I dipped a fry in ketchup to placate him. We sat long after we were done in our chairs, stunned by the weight in our bellies.

‘C’mon,’ I said eventually. ‘I got the bottles.’

I arranged them in a line at the base of the dining-room door, first the green one and then the two blue ones. Isaiah squatted down beside me, both hands on his knees.

‘It’s going to be okay now,’ I said.

He reached for my hand, slipping his into mine. His thumb went into his mouth for comfort. I picked him up to draw him away from that door. It had followed me down Flatbush, across Ocean, through 18th and down along Newkirk. I had seen it looming always in the back of my mind, tall and flimsy, made from plywood with a cheap brass doorknob that swung loosely when I locked it. The sound of the laboring air conditioner behind it had haunted me, hiccuping and switching gears, trying to live up to the demands placed upon it. I couldn’t see what was on the other side of that door, but even as I played go fish with Isaiah, confident that nothing could cross that barrier of blue glass, I imagined that everything on the other side of it had gone black, the sheet-covered body on the table sucking out all of the room’s light.