

This memoir glows with fiery passion as a Jamaican man, striving to lift his sons out of poverty, instantly bonds with a tourist, an older American businesswoman. They face alarming impediments, cross-cultural prejudices, and politics. With unshakable tenacity to their inner truth, they strive to flow with the uplifting island “One Love” vibration.

Loving To Be WE:
Receiving Mountains as Stepping Stones
to Cross the Cultural Divide Between
Jamaica and the USA/Babylon
by Cheri Avery Black

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LOVING TO BE **WWE**

Receiving Mountains as Stepping Stones
To Cross the Cultural Divide Between
Jamaica and the USA/*Babylon*

Cheri Avery Black
With Jah B

Editors: Kriss Avery and Jonne Avery Long
Forward by Wendy Crawford-Daniel, PhD



Loving To Be WE

Receiving Mountains as Stepping Stones to Cross the Cultural Divide
Between Jamaica and the USA/*Babylon*

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We are truly interested in hearing your comments,
especially about your favorite parts of our journey.

Contact us at Cheri@CheriAveryBlack.com

Visit us at our Jamaican guest home: <https://TopazDreamPalace.com>

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Chapter 1: Alex's Anguish

Alex sits on the worn cement steps of the faded yellow board house where he rents two small rooms. His strong left hand props up his chin as he meditates. After a time, he straightens up as he twirls a twig of pink hibiscus. Holding it close, he inhales a deep breath of its tangy-sweet scent. Then he takes a long drink of hot cerasee from a cracked cup. To release its strong bitter essence, he has brewed the herbal leaves for at least 10 minutes in an aluminum pan over a small cast iron *coal pot*. He really needs this blood-cleansing tea, especially today.

—*Hell a' top, hell a' bottom, and hallelujah in the middle. Guess mi dis riggle, or perhaps nuh.*— Alex mumbles the riddle and allows a grim smile. He *reasons* how it describes the tightness he's starting to feel throughout his body. He strives to relax and be *At One* with the spiritual flow of the redeeming hallelujah life force in the middle of his heart.

He lets his senses savor the taste of the riddle's answer: sweet potato pudding! His sister sometimes bakes this dessert in a *dutchie* by adding coals on a metal sheet over the top of the pan to those in the *coal pot* below.

Momentarily praying for the well-being of his two sons, Joseph and Moses, ages four and six, he bows his head. He confirms that he was right in choosing their names, as he envisioned them following in the footsteps of two honorable men in the Bible with these names. Sometimes he calls his boys Moon and Sun, as they are his night and day...his whole world.

Alex thinks about them lovingly...picturing in his mind's eye how he crosses the river each morning from their yard in Median, an area of their village of Lottery. He carries the bigger son on his back and the younger one under his right arm, jumping carefully from rock to rock over the water as he takes them to Miss Sis's preschool.

Along the way, he greets neighbors with friendly, respectful nods as he says, —Keep yuh strength, Father...Mornin', Mother...Blessings, Family.—

Alex is a descendent of two groups. First, the Arawakan Taino (translates to peace-loving, noble people) who were an indigenous civilization of over one million that had settled on the island of Jamaica by

600 A.D. And second, the Maroons (from the Spanish words *cimarron* or *cimarin* meaning runaway or wild), resourceful, fearless Africans who, beginning in the 16th century in Jamaica, had escaped over time from slavery into mountainous enclaves that colonizers couldn't penetrate.

Alex knows something about his ancestors' resilience, resistance, and strength. Even so, today he feels bleaker than ever about his family's prospects. He has no meat to prepare a meal for his sons to eat when they return from school. He wonders how well they will be able to retain the grammar and numbers they are learning if they don't eat better food. Lately, all they've had was arrowroot porridge.

He looks at the pile of vegetables...callaloo (like spinach), pumpkin, and gunga peas...he just brought down from his little patch of farm, a 20-minute climb up in the mountain. They will make a better meal, along with rice; still the boys need some fish at least.

Alex ponders his next step as he shakes his head and sucks his teeth. Strange that this sound is called *kissing teeth*. He's feeling the heat and thinks about taking his machete and climbing higher into the cool mountains where the wild yams grow.

Alex hears his name being called from the river's edge. It's Jimar, a spry 18-year-old daredevil known for taking a lot of risks with little success, but fortunately with little harm either. People talk about him, saying, —Him salt nuff bad. (He has a lot of bad luck.)—

Jimar quickly climbs the hill while shouting up to Alex that he's heading into Montego Bay to join some fishermen friends for a night out on the sea with their nets. He likes the dangerous challenge of going far away from the land, without any lights or life jackets. Jimar knows Alex won't go with him because of his boys, but Jimar has a deal in mind.

He has been craving red claw crayfish, large freshwater shrimp called *mountain* by the locals (or *janga* on Jamaica's east end). Jimar offers to bring him kingfish in the morning if Alex will spear shrimp for him from the river tonight. Alex first counsels him to be careful, —Yuh know, when di bucket keep goin' to di well, one day di bottom gonna drop out.—

Still, Alex agrees to Jimar's proposal. Kingfish are cleaner to eat than shrimp that are "bottom feeders" or scavengers. Things are looking up. After Jimar leaves, Alex happily turns back to preparing some sip (*ital* soup) with his vegetables and hot scotch bonnet pepper seasoning.

Alex leaves the sip in a pan on the coals to keep warm and crosses the river to bring his boys back from school. Once home, he tells them that instead of playtime today, he wants them to change their clothes, eat some sip, and then go with him up the river to spear *mountain*. They are excited as they have never done this before.

Trek Up the River and Through Alex's Mind

With great curiosity, the boys watch their father make a spear. He finds a straight five-foot long stick and fastens four sharpened pieces of wire around it, using a strip of an old bicycle tire tubing to hold them on.

To make torches for lighting their way, Alex takes two pieces of bamboo, each about two feet long, and jams a stick down the centers of both, knocking holes through their middle joints. The boys had wondered why their father stopped at Lennie's shop on the way home to get a cup of kerosene on credit. But next they see him pour the kerosene into the center of each bamboo stick. Then he pushes a bunch of old torn pieces of a crocus (burlap) bag down into the bamboo as wicks. He tells the boys that these torches can last long enough to burn for a week of nights.

Alex hands each one an unlit torch to carry as he picks up the spear. They start their hour-long trek up the river to a prime spot for finding *mountain*. The boys have fun watching the butterflies hovering around the bushes, as well as the lizards and an occasional mongoose which scurry across the rough path.

Using the time to think about the ups and downs of his life, Alex first gives thanks for the unexpected offer of kingfish.

Fullastyle

Alex's mind goes to his closest friend called Fullastyle or just Style. He muses about how they met. Alex had seen "Fullastyle" painted on the side of a minibus taxi and liked the name, so he had jumped in to catch a ride from Montego Bay to the country. He squeezed into a back seat, saying to the others inside, –Hey, small up yuh self. –

As the speeding minibus bumped over potholes and squealed around corners; Alex held on for dear life as he yelled at the driver, –Bumbaclaata, man, yuh try kill mi today! –

The driver snapped back, laughing, —Get out if yuh don' like di ride.— The other passengers reassured Alex that Style was King of di Road...di best driver ever was in Jamaica.

At the end of the drive, Alex again challenged Style about the rough ride. Style sparred right back, saying, —Yuh ride prob'ly rough 'cause mi see dat yuh double jointed.—

—Wuh dat yuh a'say, man?— Alex reflected Style's positive tone.

With a sly smile, Style quipped, —Mi sure mi see yuh last week in country with two joints of ganja...one in each hand. Dat wuh mi a'say!—

Alex put a gentle hand on Style's shoulder and gave him a friendly nod.

—Cha, yuh try act a bad *bwoy* but mi feel yuh kind heart. Mi like yuh light vibe. So, tell mi, since yuh t'ink yuh so smart, why a Jamaica river so rich?— Alex waited a moment, then grinned. —So yuh nah know?...Mi still need to teach yuh a t'ing or two...it 'cause di river have two bank.—

With Style's laughter, the friendship began. He later gladly accepted Alex's request that he be a godfather for Moses and Joseph.

Style started working part-time at the Grand Beach Hotel as a chef's helper. Every so often, he sneaked out a small bucket of leftover meat for Alex to retrieve. His boys said the meat looked and tasted great. It seemed untouched by the hotel guests. Alex did his best not to smell it since meat bothered his sensitive stomach. He only ate from the plant bounty of the Earth. When possible, Style packaged up macaroni and cheese, pies, and pastries as special treats for his godsons.

A pig farmer or a garbage truck usually collected the leftovers. Style couldn't believe all the food being thrown away, while so many people didn't get much variety to eat. He was glad to slip some to Alex.

Today, it has been a month since Style lost his job after a hotel guard caught him hiding food scraps. Alex still feels guilty and responsible for his friend getting fired and vows one day he will repay him for his generosity.

Charmaine

Alex's mind turns to the mother of his boys. Her birth name was June, but everyone called her what she chose to go by, Charmaine or just Char. She grew up in the same community as Alex, and right after she finished high school, she was happy to move in with him. He was strong, handsome, and

hardworking...and 10 years older than she. They made a good-looking couple, and friends often saw them enjoying each other at the local dances.

Even at her young age, Char had an impressive presence with an air of confidence. She loved her independence from her parents and traveled each week to the next parish of St. Elizabeth to buy produce to resell in the Montego Bay Farmers' Market on the weekends. Her friends were envious of her success and became determined to bring her down to their level.

After about four good years, Alex lost his job at the Hometown Grocery through no fault of his own. Then, Char's friends convinced her not to trust him. She became angry and lost her desire to make love with Alex, only allowing passionless sex. Their relationship became increasingly strained.

She started leaving Alex at home with their boys and going out most nights to the local dance hall hoping to fill the emptiness she felt. She was bored. She needed more in life and decided to do something about it. As soon as she weaned their second son, she announced she was leaving and stormed out of the house, moving back to her parents' yard nearby.

One of Char's cousins told her about a school for women interested in cutting fabric from patterns and sewing clothing. She discovered that she had a talent for creating styles people liked. The head of the school, who also owned a clothing factory, noticed Char's talents and offered her a job to follow the completion of her training. The owner worked out a payment plan for the classes, which she rarely did for others. Char liked the work. She had found the path to her calling...having a clothing business.

She planned to stay with her employer until she could save enough money to go out on her own. She knew this was still a good way off. Her job had one advantage for her family...she sewed the boys' school uniforms and a few other clothes. Once in a great while, she made a shirt for Alex and a dress for his Mom.

Many neighbors gossiped about Char. What kind of woman left her young ones for as selfish a reason as wanting more for herself? Some encouraged Alex to report her to the police or child welfare or to take her to court for child support. Alex resolved not to listen to them. He knew, as a man, it was his duty to provide for his family.

Even though Alex was heartbroken by Char's decision to leave them, he didn't try to get her to come back. He was a spiritual man with a sense of peace and acceptance that comes naturally to true followers of the Rastafari

way of life. Contrary to what her friends claimed, he had been loyal to Char. He was grateful that she left the boys with him. Anything else would have been too hard for him to accept. Alex's father had instilled in him that being a responsible father was the most important role for a man. His father never wavered from that assertion and modeled it in his own life.

Just di T'ree of We

Alex watches his boys skipping beside him, still buoyant with lots of energy. They both have big smiles and contagious laughs. They like school and are already showing different personality traits. Joseph looks more like his mother and is a curious and charming extrovert, but not always concerned about consequences. Moses looks like his father and is neat, serious, quiet, and observant, also like Alex.

During playtimes, they fly kites made from coconut leaves, swim in the river, shoot marbles, practice aiming their slingshots, skip ropes made of vines, and race trucks they make out of discarded juice boxes, using twigs for axles and bottle caps for wheels.

They naturally feel closer to Alex than to their "Mummy," since he is the one who takes them to the river to bathe, washes and irons their clothes, cooks for them, and takes them to school, the health clinic, and the church fairs. He sits up with them when they are ill, scared, or just unable to sleep.

He tucks them in on the one bed in their small bedroom, then he lies down on a single mattress (that he has moved from the top of the boys' mattress on to the floor) like a watchdog protecting them with his life. During the night, he occasionally gets up to cover them with another sheet when there's a cool rain, or just to look at them with love.

Alex's mind goes back to when Moses was born a few months after the terrible Hurricane Gilbert landed in September 1988. It was a frightening time, the worst he remembers, with debris flying everywhere. He prayed so hard to Jah, hoping they would live to see their baby born.

He burst with pride and joy when Char gave birth to their first son in the Cornwall Regional Hospital during the first week of December. Alex visited some neighbors to share the good news. They welcomed the precious gift of life, offering him food and second-hand baby clothes.

It's been two years now, and Alex has come to terms with Char's leaving. He feels blessed to have his sons close with him. His days now

include waking early and meditating, then sweeping his two rooms, and shining the floors by getting on his knees with a coconut brush and dark red floor polish. He fixes breakfast and a light snack for his sons' lunch, helps them get dressed, takes them to school, and returns to do the wash, using his bar of blue soap in the river.

As soon as he can, he goes up to his patch of land, spending an average of four hours there in the mornings, until the sun gets too hot, working the small steep plot he has painstakingly hacked out of the mountainside. He prizes his old taped-together cassette player, which he uses to play reggae, soul, R&B, and even country-western music as he farms. Often, he hums the Bill Withers tune *Just the Two of Us*, changing the words to "just di t'ree of we," giving him more energy to do the hard work for his sons.

Later, he comes back down the mountain, does odd jobs when he can get them in the neighborhood, and gets his boys from school. He gives them a wash-off with the water he brings to the house in buckets from the river, makes sure his boys put on clean, everyday *judgin'* clothes, then watches as they run out to have fun with the other kids.

During their playtime, Alex focuses on preparing what he can scrape together to eat. Whenever he has enough vegetables to sell to the village shop, he has no problem trading for what he needs. Sometimes Lennie, the shop owner, sends one of the local youth to ask Alex to come and unload supplies, clean the yard, shelve groceries, or divide out frozen chicken parts into small portions. Lennie admires Alex's tireless efforts to provide for his boys and employs him as often as he can.

Having given up on getting and keeping a job in town, which requires a trimmed haircut, he has started to let his hair lock into *nats* (beginning *locs*). He keeps his hair clean with *tuna*, which some might mistake for aloe, but doesn't comb or cut it. He considers his *natty dreads* to be an outward symbol of his inner *livication* (re-worded from the negative sounding dedication) to his Rasta principles.

Alex is not a member of any of the Rastafari orders called mansions. The largest ones are Bobo Shanti, Twelve Tribes of Israel, and Nyabinghi. He has established his own rituals, as do many Rastafari. They value living off the bounty of the land, independence, self-determination, and responsibility. People often call him Bongo, a name for Rastafari men reflected in the Bob Marley song *Rastaman Live Up*.

Alex thinks about the two plants of ganja he is growing in the far corner of his yard. The notion flits across his mind that he could sell ganja, like many guys he knows. He could grow it on a larger scale, hidden up in the cool mountains. But he quickly dismisses that option as it's still illegal, and he's not willing to do anything to risk his sons' safety.

He has often smoked ganja as part of his spiritual livity, first isolating himself in a secluded area near the river...and sitting on a large rock. His ritual is now usually comprised of prayers, Bible reading, and meditation. It used to include smoking even larger *spliffs* (joints) of ganja, which he experiences as cleansing, stimulating, and uplifting—helping him to focus on righteous living. He feels that ganja is truly a precious gift from Jah. He prefers using a steamer (also called a *wisdom* or a chalice) when he can borrow one, enjoying the coolness of the smoke as it bubbles through the bowl's water. He made one from a calabash once, but it got mashed up.

Since the birth of his sons, Alex has had less time to spend in meditation heightened with ganja. But he keeps his plants for medicinal purposes and for an occasional private spiritual sacrament. He follows the *ital* (vital) way of eating only natural plant foods, without additives or preservatives, even salt. Sometimes he eats fish, his favorite is red snapper, but never shellfish.

He honors his body as a temple where Jah (his Mother calls God) lives in the form of the Holy Spirit. As with nearly every home in the community, Alex keeps a bottle of a concoction made up of herbs and ganja leaves that he uses to treat ailments. He drinks it as tea for fevers, stomachaches, and headaches. He rubs the boys' bodies with it when they are not feeling well.

Mountain Shrimp

Alex refocuses his attention on spearing shrimp, since he and the boys have reached the prime fishing hole. The boys are finally tired out from the long trek and are glad to find a tree to sit under and lean against. As the sun goes down, Alex lights a torch and stakes it in the ground beside them. He lights the second one and holds it high above his head as he positions himself close to the water's edge. Before long, he sees several crayfish. He aims his spear and jabs, then reaches down and grabs *mountain* number one. He stuffs it in a crocus bag, ties the top shut, and sinks the bag under the water, making sure it's fastened securely to a branch.

Then he jabs, again and again, soon filling his bag with eight shrimp. Alex decides that should be enough to make Jimar happy, and more importantly, to trade for that many kingfish.

Fortunately, Moses and Joseph fell asleep quickly while Alex is spearing the shrimp. When he finishes, he wakes them, and they head home. On the way back, they're serenaded by loud chirping sounds that surround them. Alex takes the opportunity to teach his sons how to distinguish the patterns of crickets from those of tree frogs, which are also a part of the symphony. Then, it is home sweet home. Their beds feel really good, and soon all three are in dreamland.

In the morning, loud knocks on their kitchen door wake them. It's Jimar with a bucket of kingfish, who quickly trades it for Alex's crocus bag of crayfish. Both men nod with the satisfaction of their fair exchange.

Once Alex gets his boys off to school, he picks up his big washbasin and a sharp knife, then heads to the river to gut and clean the fish. That evening, his sons enjoy a well-seasoned fish tea with vegetables and small flat boiled dumplings made from flour, salt, and water. As his mom taught him, he fries the remaining fish, then covers them Jamaican *escovitch* style with a spicy-vinegar dressing, peppery with scotch bonnet, and topped with thinly sliced onions and carrots from his sister. He wraps the fish in newspaper. They'll taste even better tomorrow, once the seasoning has soaked in.

Mother Ida and Family

The next day, Alex takes some fish to his Mom, who lives in a two-room house, a steep climb up thirty steps cut from the side of the mountain. He calls her Mima; the neighbors call her Mother Ida. She inherited her patch of land from her father and uncle, passed down through generations of family members. There is no title on record, as is typical in rural areas.

Her body is paralyzed on the left side from a stroke which seized her five years ago. She had been pregnant 16 times in her life. Just about every other one of her babies died—six of them either before they were born or mostly no older than a few months. She doesn't talk about them.

Her oldest daughter, Delores, whose mind never seemed right, died of epileptic seizures when she was about 30.

Alex is her second son. It saddens him, knowing how his Mom's heart was nearly broken when her youngest child, Nathan called Omar, died earlier this year, just after he turned 16 years old. Omar had saved some money and bought a bicycle that turned out to be stolen. Alex's father was known for his ability to "see evil" (almost as skilled as his wife), and he saw it all over the bicycle. He told Omar to toss the bike in the river, but Omar had a "hard hear" and wouldn't listen. Most people speculated that the original owner had arranged for an *Obeah man* to use his knowledge of the West African spiritual *science* to *blow* a spell on the bicycle before it was stolen. Omar suffered from a mysterious illness, which none of the doctors could diagnose or treat for two years before he died. The family couldn't find a *Mother* or a *Physician* strong enough to take off the powerful spell.

About 10 years before Omar died, Mother Ida welcomed one of her boys' good friends, Belan called Delroy, to live with them. His mother had gone to the States and left six kids with the father. Delroy was one of many community children (including the rest of his siblings) that Mother Ida helped raise, besides her own 10. He felt like family, and they called him *breda* (brother).

As a boy, Alex had taken care of his younger brothers and sisters in the same way he now watches over his sons. They well-admired Alex for the attention and advice he gave them. Though not much bigger, he took them daily, one by one, on his back across the river so they could run on to school. He did that even when he could not go to school himself.

Now, Mother Ida's second-oldest living daughter, Melinda called Tara, lives with her Mom along with her seven young kids and two brothers Delroy and Adam they call Boysie. Tara is small-boned and slight in stature, but everyone knows not to mess with her. Once, on a dare, she managed to carry a full-grown and kicking goat (not happy about the ride) while she jumped the rocks across the river. She works as a motel maid on Gloucester Avenue (called the *Hip Strip* for tourists), where many of the souvenir shops, hotels, and beaches are located in Montego Bay. When Tara is out, Mother Ida watches the grandkids. Despite her stroke, she disciplines them with no problem. She enjoys having them around.

Alex visits Mima as often as he can to assist with her care, taking a portion of the food he prepares for himself and his sons. He appreciates the attention his mother receives from Tara; she gets little help from others.

Boysie has no work as far as anyone can tell. He served a short jail sentence for petty theft of things that he gave to others who desperately needed them. Tara is bothered by his behavior and arrest record, and she often tells him so. She doesn't want him around her kids. He disappears from the house, sometimes for days, with no explanation.

The family had been sure that Boysie would take them out of poverty. He did well with the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT) required to get into secondary school. Delroy didn't do as well as Boysie, but what he lacked there he made up for in good looks, like Alex. Alex quit school after the seventh grade to work and help pay the cost of his brothers' education.

From a young age, Delroy was interested in mechanics and spent most of his spare time tinkering with abandoned cars. After high school, he began working full-time in an auto repair shop. He knew everyone there; he had worked with them during holidays and Saturdays while in high school. He made a little money as an apprentice, but learned quickly and later became a leading mechanic. Still, his pay was barely a living wage.

Delroy had an insatiable appetite for girlfriends. He charmed them, then changed them about as often as he changed his pants. What bothered Tara most was his habit of taking his latest conquest into the room he shared with her two sons. When she was at work and the boys at school, he often brought his latest girl through a back entrance, away from his mother's vision. She heard them but said nothing.

Sometimes though, Mother Ida just couldn't take it anymore and quietly confided in her daughter. Tara then confronted her brothers. They usually came back at her with charges she didn't even know who all her kids' fathers were. They said her actions were worse than theirs because hers had resulted in kids she could barely care for. Tara often threatened to report Delroy to the police, but she knew nothing would come of it.

Going over all of this in his mind, Alex walks hurriedly up the steep stony entrance to his mother's house, holding the wrapped kingfish in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other.

Sharing Fish and Frustration

Mother Ida's face lights up when she sees Alex approaching. He is always lovingly respectful and gentle with her. He comes into the house and puts his arm around her shoulders.

– Mima, how yuh today? – Alex doesn't know where that name came from. All of her kids have always called her that.

– So-so, nah pain to talk 'bout, t'ank God for dat, – Mother Ida reports.

– Jah, our God, is good. Wuh 'bout lunch...yuh want some fish, Mima? Miss Sarah send yuh di bread. –

– Dat sound good. T'ank Miss Sarah for mi. Dat very nice of she. –

Alex clears his throat and asks her quietly, – Mima, early on, how yuh find nuff t'ing to take care all yuh chile dem? –

– It nah easy. Mi try _hard to get out poverty. Mi young and make nuff bad choice at first. Lord _have mercy...yuh Papa come 'round...a _hard-workin' man...bring _home every cent him make. Him even marry mi in di church. Him _happy when mi pregnant with yuh...tell mi rest and nah do nuttin'. –

– I&I wish mi _help yuh better. –

– Yuh bright, son, mi know if yuh _have more school, yuh reach far. –

– Dat why I-man make sure mi boy stay in school. Di world change. People nah make it good without nuff schoolin'. –

– Don' give up on prayer, son. –

– I&I pray for miracle, Mima. –

Mother Ida raises her good arm to the heaven and exclaims, – Mi try make yuh understand dat yuh must just keep on. ~*One, one coco full basket.*~ Nah lose faith, son. As dem say, God work in mysterious way. –

Alex gets up from his seat on a soda crate. He takes the dishes from his Mom's tray and goes to wash them while he ponders his Mother's words.

I-man must be patient to fill di so-call basket with di coco yam, one by one. Mi know dat mean success nah come overnight. I&I get so tired...mi t'ink and t'ink wuh to do to get better life for mi son dem. Mima word ring in mi _hear...don' give up di faith, God work in mysterious way. Over and over, di word come to mi.

I-man feel sad for Mima. She sacrifice way nuff for we. Mi glad mi father still 'round... but still he kyann _hear or talk now. Jah, Jah, mi beg yuh help mi family.

He turns his attention back to his boys; it's time to meet them. He gives his Mom a brief neck massage and leaves to walk toward the school.

Both boys love sports like their Dad and are artistic, perhaps from their mother's creative genes. Moses spends most of his breaks at school playing football (soccer) or cricket with the bigger boys. Joseph often races around the schoolyard with friends, but once in a while, he sits under the Royal Poinciana tree, some call flame or flamboyant, with its bright orange-red

flowers. He creates works of art from the pebbles, sticks, seeds, and flowers that cover the ground like a soft colorful blanket. Moses always keeps a watchful eye on his younger brother, no matter what.

Although Alex can't help them much with schoolwork, he makes sure they do it. He does pass along wisdom about life, morality, spiritual ways, and street smarts. He shares the proverb, *~Nuh let yuh left hand know wuh yuh right hand do~* (Don't be quick to share private information with others, not even your best friends).

Alex teaches his boys not to judge their mother, to be respectful to adults, especially women, and to honor their grandmother and other older folks. He encourages them to ask him about anything that puzzles them. If he doesn't know, he will try to find out. He's quick to learn, especially when shown. He goes to the infrequent movies when some local guys set up a projector and a screen at the Crossroads, an outdoor area of their village. Later, his remarkable memory makes it possible for him to translate even the smallest details to his boys, who delight in his storytelling.

Yet Moses and Joseph seem to have an underlying sadness. Many of the neighbor women conclude that they are needing their mother or at least a mother figure in their lives. Whenever the women get the chance, they give big hugs to Moses and Joseph, providing loving female emotional and psychological support.

The absence of their mother is even clearer when the boys cry (like from falling down or being teased) first for Mummy. Alex knows it is a natural response. He won't let this force him to take in just any woman.

Jah, Jah...wuh mi a'do. I-man 'fraid if mi get wrong woman, she change we life for worse and get in way of di love we have. I&I do mi best. Mi boy dem strong. Mi keep di strength, too. Jah, Jah, I&I t'ankful yuh with we to guide and protect.

Most have heard many versions of why Char left. A few women who dislike her decide that she was greedy and found another man with money.

A few folks known for their negative gossiping, speculate Alex must be a silent abuser. They say never to trust a quiet and *underneath* man because that is his way of covering up violent behavior behind closed doors.

Some of the men jokingly speculate he was not working Char right. Such a sensuous woman, blessed with a full-body, breasts, and a butt like hers, was enough to keep 10 men busy. Others wonder if all the ganja Alex smoked was affecting his manhood, but they know better.

A few wonder if maybe he is a *batty bwoy* (gay). They argue that his river washing ability is a sure-enough clue. He squishes the wet soapy clothes and sheets with his hands, making even louder squishing sounds than any of the women. He slaps and beats their jeans on the river stones and hangs the clothes to dry on a line pushed up with a bamboo pole. Then he irons the clothes with seams more flattened than a tailor does.

All in all, the one activity that the men shake their heads about most is Alex's cleaning. He keeps his yard immaculately clean, scrubbing the steps even more often than what others expect as a weekly routine.

The problem is that men don't clean, wash, iron, and cook for the family because it's women's work. Men cook occasionally for friends when there is a funeral, a *lime* dance, or a football match, but not as a routine.

As he works, Alex dismisses what he knows people are gossiping about. *I-man know dem talk...talk...talk 'bout mi. I&I nah care. Mi do wuh mi need to do, nah matter dat mi a man. I-man di parent. Mi must keep we home clean. Mi son dem must have criss place to lay dem head.*



Chapter 5: Lainee's Dream

Oya is persistent, "Come on, Lainee. Jamaica is calling you, and all you want to do is work, work, work." Protesting, Lainee counters, "Oh, it sounds good, Oya, but I just can't get away now. I have so much to do to get ready for our Institute's national conference coming up soon." She turns her attention back to the mailing list she's compiling.

"Lainee, you were supposed to come here so I could teach you a new drum rhythm. Come on, you work too hard," Oya urges, as she taps out a beat on one of her conga drums, gesturing for Lainee to take the other.

"Yes, it would be great to go to Jamaica with you and finally meet the women who have helped you so much with your PhD on bartering. I still don't know how people live with so little money, as you say they do there."

"Well, come and find out first-hand, if you don't believe me. It will be invigorating for you to be in the sunshine, and I'll finish my interviews with Joy and Charm in the straw market in Mobay. It's also about time for you to find your dream villa. You told me last week that it's been 15 years since the idea came to you. Tell me again how you pictured the villa."

"You're right. I'm still intrigued about that revelation I had in 1979 when I was 32...no...33." Lainee slowly gets up, laying her paperwork down carefully. "After my divorce, I felt so confused. One day, I was talking with friends about what we really wanted to do when we retired."

Lainee picks up a carving of a hummingbird that Oya had brought back from one of her four trips to Jamaica during the past two years. She runs her hand over the smooth wood – then gestures as she speaks.

"It's so strange. I had no preconceived notion of what came out of my mouth. I blurted out that I was going to *host a bed and breakfast in Jamaica!* My friends asked me why I said Jamaica, and whether I knew anyone who had gone there. I said, 'No, where *is* Jamaica anyway?' All I know is that it's a Caribbean island, so it must have warm weather. Oya, you know how I don't like the cold. Still, it puzzles me, as I'm not used to getting messages like this in my head. This one is still strong. It seems a path I'm to go on."

“Well then, let’s do it! Let’s go find the villa. I have a feeling that now is the time. How about soon...in November? The airfare is cheapest then. We can go for just eight days,” Oya urges. “It’s your birthday month—maybe a surprise will come to you unlike any you’ve ever expected. The universe sometimes works like that. Be open to receiving something great.”

“Yes, OK, I’ll do it! I definitely will go with you this time,” Lainee grabs the other drum and joins Oya, chanting into the evening along with the mesmerizing beat of their drums’ voices.

Chance Meeting

Later, back at home, Lainee works until about 1 a.m., as usual. When she finally lies down, she’s not ready to sleep and begins to reflect. She’s so grateful to have a friend like Oya. Lainee feels lucky to know her—she’s such a brilliant cultural anthropologist and now an excellent trainer with the Multicultural Training and Research Institute that Lainee directs.

She enjoys replaying how she first met Oya. They were both workshop presenters on a panel about ethnicity and mental health when Lainee was Deputy Director of Mental Health for the City of Philadelphia. Oya was the last presenter, with only seven minutes left...yet in that short time, she was amazing! She totally turned Lainee’s life upside down...or rather...right side up. She talked about things Lainee had never heard of...elements of a fascinating worldview originating from ancient Africa. The concepts were so very different from the Western ones that Lainee grew up with—deeply ingrained in her since childhood—many she never felt comfortable with, but wasn’t sure why. She didn’t know there was any other way of thinking.

Oya had talked about God as Love—being inside humans, all around, and in every living thing—not, stereotypically, as a strict, vengeful old man with a long white beard up in the sky. The church taught Lainee to always beg forgiveness from this God because *He* was nearly impossible for sinful humans to please. She frowns now, that never seemed right to her.

This was also the first time she’d heard about man and woman as two vital halves of a whole, like day and night, one not being able to exist without the other—not as two antagonistic opposites from Venus and Mars as described in a recent book. Everything Oya said was so different, almost opposite of what Lainee was taught...yet resonating and refreshing.

Lainee rubs her temples as she wraps her head around all these ideas which are still so new to her. Oya spoke of the Western values of competition and independence. Lainee knew about the assertion that Oya said is one that reflected those values of individuality—*I think therefore I am*.

Oya, drawing circles and connecting them with lines on a blackboard at the workshop, contrasted those values with ones inherent in family, partnerships, and community. Growing up on a farm, Lainee was familiar with exchanging help with neighbors for harvesting and other farm work. But her family had never thought of that in terms of *I am because We are*. Oya described this phrase as a guiding concept of the African worldview.

Lainee repeats this phrase over and over as she massages her restless legs. She was “blown away” when Oya talked more about this worldview that holds humans responsible for nurturing the Earth rather than having dominion over it as her church and school interpreted to mean that humans could carelessly destroy whatever part of the natural world they wanted to—for the “so-called” good of all. This included digging for polluting coal and cutting down forests, leaving the soil bare and vulnerable.

Her Dad always practices the nurturing idea as he farms, making terraces to prevent the soil from washing away, rotating crops, and using organic fertilizers such as chicken manure. Still, there is a stronger opposing message on the news and all around: that men (she understands to mean White European and American) are to conquer nature and to be proud and protective of their rightful “manifest destiny” to take what they want. She confirms that she likes the nurturing idea better.

Her legs are feeling more relaxed, so she moves to massage her feet. She had never heard of decisions being based on what’s good for at least seven future generations, as Oya said that the indigenous people do.

And THEN--this really grabbed Lainee’s heart and made her jump for joy (in her mind)—Oya actually said at the workshop that people are BORN DIVINE, not in sin as the church taught. A powerful defining moment! As she remembers this truly life-changing statement, Lainee raises up her arms in gratitude and exclaims, “I was born divine. Yes, Yes!”

Following the conference workshop, Lainee had called out to Oya as she was quickly leaving the room, asking to meet her again—wanting to hear more. As they began to spend time together, Lainee eagerly soaked up Oya’s knowledge about diverse cultural beliefs, values, and traditions.

Soon after, Laine met an African film producer at Temple University who gave her a book called *Metu Neter: The Great Oracle of Tehuti and the Egyptian System of Spiritual Cultivation*. At first, Laine couldn't understand any of its complex messages. But after six months of studying the book, she began to grasp its mystical worldview. She realized that it revealed details of the outline that Oya had shared in her seven minutes at the workshop.

Getting excited with these memories, Laine can't quiet her mind to sleep. She plumps her pillow, hoping to get more comfortable. She resolves to continue evolving, connected with Source (she likes this word better than God, the word which comes with so much "baggage"). She wants to understand more about her "true self" – her own unique spirit as co-creator of her life, with Source. She lies back, pondering this for a few minutes.

Then the lowest point in her life comes flooding into her mind, just as if it happened yesterday. She reaches over to her stack of journals and finds a recent one where she wrote a summary of that awful time 15 years ago. As she reads, she relives each moment, reacting to the emotional trials of that trauma turned triumph:

To Zombie Land and Back

I was so confused following my divorce from a good man, who was everything I was raised to admire—a talented architect and artist...a handsome, quiet guy content with just me in his private life. He was White like me—I write this only as I look back. At the time, I'm sure I didn't even consider a man of any other race for an intimate relationship. Once a blind date (from a dating service I signed up with, just for fun) came to meet me at the college scholarship house where I was living. He had dark skin and wore a turban (I guessed he was from India or Pakistan). I excused myself and went back in the house, scared to go back out (fearing he might rape me if I left with him). Finally, a girlfriend went out and made an excuse for me, as I refused to go speak with him again. Shame on me.

Every so often, I revisited memories of my pleasant childhood, growing up on a farm in Kansas, naïve and living in what I now call *ignorant bliss*. Things seemed less complex in those days. Until I was around 30, I felt like I didn't stray too far from the values and beliefs of my upbringing, with just a few insignificant rebellions, such as my

secret marriage to Lee, then our outdoor public wedding where I wore a gold chain bolero as part of my wedding dress, and sandals without hosiery, much to my mother's chagrin! Later, I was divorced from this *perfect* man...just not the right man. I decided that I must not be meant to be married, though in my parents' community being an unmarried and childless woman wasn't very acceptable either.

After Lee and I split up in June 1978, I started to "sow my wild oats" – my parents would have surely disapproved. I was going out partying every night, drinking a lot of wine, and not eating very well. By August, I increasingly suffered debilitating pains in my abdomen. Certain it was just from stress, I didn't go to see a doctor.

In September, I flew to San Francisco to attend a national mental health education conference, which I had helped organize. I stayed with friends in Oakland. Because of the pain, I skipped most of the conference. Every day for a week, I drove to a secluded beach and sat there trying to find peace within myself. Each night, I soaked up needed support from my friends. We played with the *Ouija* board that told me to be still and look inside myself. Something or everything worked. I came home refreshed, pain-free, determined to love being by myself, and to get on with my life in a healthier way.

I stopped socializing, especially on Saturday night, the traditional night for dates and parties. After a month, I felt more connected with my inner-self and let myself go out to a friend's wedding.

At the reception, Edward, a handsome, smart, and charming guy, swept me off my feet. It seemed I couldn't help myself. Within a few days, he moved into my home. Oh, what a good time it was! We went dancing, drank martinis made with Tanqueray No. 10 gin (shaken not stirred, like James Bond's favorite), and just had happy times together. He was an African American, so there were many differences to learn about. He intrigued me. We had such fun.

Then, increasingly, there were the not-so-good times. Especially on the weekends, he just wanted to look at porn magazines and then go to sleep. He didn't like my friends and did everything he could to keep me away from them. He started criticizing me and blaming me for everything that he didn't like—such as when it rained in the mornings. He began buying things with my credit cards: a leather

jacket, fancy shoes, and expensive dinners. My complaints to close friends brought comforting sympathy, but he had captured my soul.

After about six months, I took my friend Carol to dinner. She was a friend of Edward's, too, and had known him longer than I had. During dessert, I pleaded with her to tell him to treat me better, to "shape up," and stop blaming me for everything.

"Lainee, you are the one who's the problem!" Carol shocked me with her unexpected charge. "You're letting him get away with his behavior. He has always been a narcissist, but he's worse now that he's with you. YOU must put your foot down and insist on respect."

I spent months trying, unsuccessfully, to do as Carol advised. It surprised me I put myself through such torment. I've always thought of myself as a really "together" person with plenty of self-esteem. My "bottoming out" came on Labor Day weekend in 1980. I still tremble, as I write, feeling how horrible it was to experience.

Edward and I were to go with friends to their vacation home in the Pocono Mountains, about two hours north of Philly. They were the only friends of mine whom Edward liked, and he seemed excited about going on the trip. But when the time came, he decided we should stay home. He was too tired, he said. I was speechless.

This was devastating to my social self. I had my bag packed, ready to have a fun weekend. After all, it was a holiday; we should socialize. He called our friends, canceled our plans, and went to sleep! I soon decided to let Edward snooze, and go meet my friends, anyway. Taking my suitcase, I was getting into my car when Edward appeared in the doorway of my home and ordered me back in.

I had a choice. I knew it wasn't just about that weekend—it felt much deeper. A big part of me wanted to get in the car and drive away, but my body turned around and walked back toward Edward. My body walked across the threshold into the house and turned into a zombie. My body sat down in the window seat. I (if there still was an I) was totally drained of emotion, resigned to a life of servitude—of being controlled by another—of being a nothing.

My numb body sat there motionless. Edward became happily animated, feeling confirmed that he was in charge. He brought me a

glass of wine. After two hours of attempts, he persuaded me to go upstairs. I joined him on the bed...he went to sleep.

The phone rang; I barely managed to answer. It was my friend Stephanie calling. "You sound terrible, what is wrong with you?"

"Nothing," I said with a flattened tone of voice. She insisted, "No, you're not your usual bubbly self. I'm calling again in an hour. If you don't sound better, I'm coming over."

I felt tied to the bed, as I tried to pull myself back together. It took me 45 minutes to get up. Realizing that Stephanie's next call might wake Edward, I went downstairs to use the other phone. I called to tell her I was coming over to her place and picked up my bag.

Something still kept me in slow motion, and I had to force myself to go out to the car. Managing to get in, I struggled to turn on the ignition and tried to push my foot down on the accelerator. It was like *10 tons of bricks* were holding me back. There was a fierce battle going on inside of me: go...no, you must not; get away...no stay.

Finally, I was able to give the car a little gas, and it inched away. The further I got from Edward, the more the *bricks* lifted off of me.

I escaped! That's what it felt like—to Stephanie's home. She and her boyfriend Andy debriefed me as though Edward had imprisoned me in a cult. For hours, they intensely counseled me, reminding me of my many blessings, career, friendships, and family.

After two days and nights of debriefing, and feeling stronger, I was ready to face Edward—to tell him to leave my home. I had told him many times before to leave—without success. Obviously, he had sensed that I wasn't totally resolved about my demands. This time I really meant it. Stephanie and Andy offered to go with me. I insisted I had to do it by myself, as I thanked them for saving my life!

I drove home and told Edward, in no uncertain terms, to leave. Our relationship was over. I stated firmly, "You have three days to move out. I am serious. I'm not giving in to you anymore."

He didn't try to change my mind. He knew this time I was solid in my resolve and wouldn't budge. He left the next day.

I never, ever want to feel nothingness again. My parents raised me to be confident. My father used to say over and over, "Lainee, you can do anything you set your mind to. Don't forget." And I still have

a precious plaque my Mom gave me when I left for college, *Your talent is God's gift to you. What you do with it is your gift back to God.*

Staying Strong

Lainee closes her journal, thankful for those messages from her parents. She remembered another quote she had seen on a plaque in a store window, right after a confrontation with the new Deputy Commissioner for the Philadelphia Office of Mental Health. He had demoted her from a longtime working position as Division Director of Training and Education, with nine staff. When she met with him to appeal this action, she had set as her goal to stay strong and not crumble. As she faced his piercing, steely gray eyes—yes, like in a romance novel—he accused her of being a poor administrator.

Staying strong was more important to her than the position. After some time of presenting her case and deflecting his anger, the meeting was over. No problem, she had met her goal. Walking to the train to go home, she saw the plaque! She bought it, and the next day she put it on her desk to remind herself, *Nothing is so sacred as the integrity of your mind.* She added firmly...*and of your Soul, your True Self.*

Only about six months later, people at the office started asking her what politicians she knew. “None,” she said, “I just do my job well and don’t gossip.” *Dr. Steely Eyes* (as she secretly called the Deputy Commissioner) had just promoted her to the position of Deputy Director of Mental Health, the Office’s third highest-ranking title he had created for her. She surmised that she earned his respect by being able to work through the chaos he had created throughout the office, perhaps to shake out the weaker employees.

Lainee rolls over again in her bed, thinking to herself: *Hmmm, haven't I been through enough tough relationship challenges? Ahh...but then there was the powerful learning from 12 years with Jeff, I call the Black Panther.* She glances at the clock and sees it’s getting really late, so she forces herself to clear her mind and fall asleep. She’ll relive that life-chapter with Jeff another time.

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Three weeks later, Oya and Laineé fly to Jamaica. Buzzing back and forth, they speculate about what Laineé's dreamed-of villa will look like. Soon, they see out the window they're coming down into *paradise*.

Excitement mounts as they join with the other passengers in cheering the pilot for the smooth landing in Montego Bay. As they walk through the airport, Laineé asks Oya, "Can you show me to a beach called something like Carnwell? Just as we landed, my mind, or spirit, said I must go there."

"Oh, you must mean the Cornwall Beach," Oya says. "Yes, I'll show you. It's close to where you insist on staying at the Jack Tar Resort instead of with me. It is one of my favorite beaches, you'll like it."

"I don't know why, Oya, but I just have a strong feeling I should stay at that resort and go to that beach," Laineé whispers softly and then sniffs the air. "Ahh, I love the warm breezes here—it smells so sweet and inviting—so relaxing. And, well, there's just a great uplifting vibe all around me."



## Chapter 15: Alex's Gift

Lainee is startled out of her deep meditation – by the sound of bells – or something! “It’s ringing!” she screams to the universe as she scrambles to reach for the phone.

“Hello, hello, Alex?! Is this Alex? Oh please, is this Alex?”

The operator interrupts, asking her if she will accept a collect call.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Lainee states impatiently.

Usually calm and collected, though not this time, Alex speaks over her, loudly apologizing profusely without stopping.

–Lainee, mi know mi nah ‘posed to call ‘til Sunday, and mi know we try to save money, and mi sorry to call yuh with nuh appointment, but mi here with some friend dem at Lennie’s, and mi just get di strong feeling dat mi ‘sposed to call yuh, but mi sorry if mi wrong... –

“Shut up, Alex, please!” she yells back. She can’t believe she is being so rude, but she needs to get his full attention as quickly as possible.

“Yes, yes, Alex, I wanted you to call me. Give thanks. I have great news! I spoke to a supervisor at the embassy, and he says if you come in there tomorrow, he will stamp your visa! Oh, Alex, I’m just so excited! Did a policeman tell you to call me...No?...You mean you picked up my message I’ve been sending you through the spirit world?...Oh, you are so amazing!” Lainee is awestruck but continues to shout with excitement.

Alex interrupts, –Dat great news!...Mi t’ink a minute...nuh, mi kyann go tomorrow. –

“Alex, no! What are you telling me? Why can’t you go tomorrow? This is important! This is what we’ve been waiting for...for so long. Alex, Alex, what is the problem?” Lainee is upset. She can’t believe he is saying this.

–Mi nah have nuh money now, but Devan and mi gonna go to di straw market a’ mornin’ to sell walkin’ stick dat yuh call cane. Yuh know, di one Devan carve with the snake, and mi sand and polish with stain. We have ‘bout 30 to sell wholesale to di vendor dem. Dat get mi nuff money to take minibus to a’town. Delroy car broke. Mi try get to di embassy Monday. –

Hearing Alex's firm tone of voice and his reasoning, she knows there is no arguing with him or persuading him otherwise. Time, once again, to trust in Jah for deliverance.

"Okay, Alex. Go Monday, get the visa Tuesday, then be ready to fly here Wednesday at 2 p.m. Call me when you get the visa and again before you leave for the airport. I'll arrange for your ticket to be at the airline counter."

Upon hanging up, Lainee immediately calls Yolanda with the incredible news about Alex receiving her message through the ether and calling her; then the distressing news about his need to postpone the trip a few days. They talk about her successful conversation with Mr. Golden and laugh about her spontaneously using the "gender card" with the stereotypical-female-hysterical crying, even though, for sure, it was unpremeditated. Yolanda exclaims about Lainee adding to the emergency by saying she has a wedding scheduled for next week, and everybody's coming but Alex.

"I was just stretching the truth a little because we do have the wedding ready to go, right?" she suggests to Yolanda. Did she need to add to the drama? Who knows – something worked! Mr. Golden did approve Alex to come in to get his visa stamped, the most important thing.

"Sometimes, when the universe plays games with me, I just need to play some, too. I think the circumstances deserved a little white lie!"

They learn later that a police officer did contact Alex on Friday to give him the notice about the emergency and that he should call Lainee right away. Even though it took until the next day, it was still impressive.

She calls the embassy in the morning, but Ms. McDonald and the *golden-hero-supervisor* don't seem to be around for her to let them know about the change of plans. She leaves messages, hoping beyond hope that Mr. Golden will be there when Alex arrives on Monday instead of Friday.

When Delroy hears the great news, he gladly agrees to take Alex to the embassy even though he must cancel his plans with Bri for an extended weekend of bliss. He gets his car in working order and drives Alex on the long trip to town early Monday morning, January 22nd.

## **Denials**

Alex waits three hours in line at the embassy. Finally, he is able to make his way into the building. As usual, there's a great deal of chattering taking place in the waiting room. Mostly, people are talking about their previous

attempts to secure visitor visas, which failed. Some learn they didn't have enough ties to their home country, or didn't provide enough evidence they would come back, or didn't have proof, such as a bank statement, showing they could adequately cover the expenses of taking a trip.

Many were simply refused U.S. entry for no apparent reason. In all those cases, their passports were dated and stamped *DENIED*, and they were told they could not reapply for another two years. For some, the two years had gone by too slowly, and they were there before the end of the waiting period to try, only to be turned away yet again.

Alex still fears that getting a visa will be a problem. He holds tightly to a large envelope with all the required items, including pictures, letters, and greeting cards from Laine, documenting their fiancé relationship. He has a more recent bank statement she sent him with the substantial amount of money recorded to show her ability to provide for her intended husband and boys. Not leaving anything to chance, she had also sent him a copy of a wedding invitation she made up on the computer. She concluded it is best to have too many documents and evidence rather than not enough.

Listening to the conversations all around, Alex hears some applicants say that funerals of family members are the main reasons for seeking a visa; some want to go to weddings; some want to visit friends or relatives; others have medical reasons, or are just requesting a much-needed vacation. The more he hears the stories of prior rejections, the more he worries.

Alex has heard that the embassy has listening devices and cameras in the waiting room, viewing everyone and monitoring all the talk.

He sits quietly, not speaking to anyone, and trying not to hear any of the many whispered conversations. He wants this visa so badly. A single-entry fiancé visa is all he needs, and he is placing all his energy and focus into getting it. Should he be denied, he believes it means another two years before he can re-apply. *Cha, nuh way mi kyann wait so long. Please, Jah, Jah, please help mi get t'ru.*

He briefly goes into a panic mode. He feels a sharp pain in his stomach, and only then remembers he has not eaten in the past 24 hours. But he is too nervous to think about food. He closes his eyes for a prayer.

After several hours of anxiety, followed by a series of procedures and screenings, he finally makes it into the waiting area to be called up through the intercom to an interview window. He holds a magazine and pretends

he is reading, while listening intently for his name to be called. Many of the conversations pass over him in a blur.

He wants to be very calm and not look desperate when he is being interviewed. Yet, he can't help but stress out, hearing the many visa denials as the immigration officers say, "Sorry ma'am" or "Sorry sir, I cannot grant you a visa today." Every denial causes him to have more doubts about his own chances as he struggles to keep a positive attitude. Some applicants can't verify the residence of family members abroad so they're denied. Of the twenty applicants who are called, only three leave smiling...with their visa requests approved. He hears the desperate pleadings of the denied applicants, and he sees the pleas all fall on deaf ears.

Yet, several things give him hope. No one so far seems to be applying for a fiancé visa, and the majority are requesting to go to Ft. Lauderdale and New York...while he is going to Philadelphia.

It is 3:30 p.m. when Alex is called. He jerks to attention and approaches the window with confidence that Jah will not turn his back on him at this crucial moment. He asks for Mr. Golden...and is told he is not there.

—Bumbacla, nuh way, wuh mi to a'do. Mi should'a come last Friday, somehow.— Alex is so distraught that he almost didn't hear the officer telling him that Mr. Golden had left word to stamp the visa if all the papers are in order. The officer is friendly but business-like.

He asks Alex to answer a series of questions about how, when, and where he met his fiancée, and to show proof a relationship exists. Having done that, Alex isn't prepared for what happens next.

"Where exactly does your fiancée live?"

—In Philly...di address is on di application,— Alex says uneasily.

"I need you to tell me the address. I cannot give you permission to enter the USA without you knowing where you are going."

—Mi sorry mi nah know di full address in mi head, sah, but mi know it in Philly. She gonna meet mi at di airport. Mi know di phone number, yuh can call her,— Alex desperately offers the information.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you have to demonstrate your eligibility for an entry visa to the United States of America to me, not the other way around."

Hearing these words, Alex is petrified. The embassy official sits looking directly at him, without blinking. After a long-but-quick second, the visa



officer says in a decisive manner, "Sorry, but I am going to have to deny your request. You can reapply again later."

### Dreams Dashed

Alex is too overcome to hear the words of denial. His head is spinning, his eyes are blurry, and he feels as if he is almost fainting. Images flash before his mind's eye.

*Mi see Mima with hope on she face...mi breda with him big grin when mi hand over di wata business...mi boy jumpin' up and down 'bout goin' to America. Mi beloved Laine 'specting mi do somet'ing...anyt'ing...to come to her.*

—Oh nuh, sah!— Alex half-shouts. He is hit with the sudden realization that his hopes and dreams and all their planning for more than a year are about to be smashed by a mere stamp on his passport.

After what seems like an eternal period of panic, Alex frantically reaches for his wallet, shuffles through some torn papers, and retrieves a worn-out business card Laine had given him on the beach. For some reason, she had written her address on the back.

—Here yuh are sah, mi have di information yuh ask mi. Now mi can tell yuh di address.— He repeats the address and places the business card in front of the immigration officer.

Shaking his head with an impatient look on his face, but with just the slightest smile at the corners of his mouth, the official reluctantly picks up the card and looks at it for what feels like another eternity. Alex knows the official has heard him say the right address. It also registers in his mind that he has heard the denial, but he refuses to accept it.

*Dis visa mean di world to mi son dem, to Mima, to Boysie, to Laine...mi love and mi life. Mi must get t'ru. I-man kyann fail. Jah, Jah, I-man need yuh bad.*

~ ~ ~

"OK, I will take a chance and grant you a single-entry visa. Come back and get your passport and visa today. Allow us two hours to process it. Mr. Golden left instructions to expedite the request, once approved."

Alex stands there looking at the officer and questioning himself. *Did he say mi get di visa today, nah tomorrow, like usual? Wuh mi to do next? How mi know di visa is grant mi? Wuh him say to do? Where mi 'sposed to go now?*

“Sir, I am through with you. Come back in two hours and pick up your passport and fiancé visa at the window over there,” the officer repeats with a very stern tone. He points with his lips; his slight smile has disappeared.

–T’ank yuh, sah, t’ank yuh very much!–

Alex turns around and heads for the exit, his vision is still blurry, his head is still spinning. He sees no one and hears nothing after leaving the interview window. As he floats through the exit of the embassy, he is not aware of anything around him. He walks like a robot to the far end of the parking lot where his brother is anxiously waiting.

Without warning, Alex suddenly throws his arms up over his head, leaping in the air as he shouts at the top of his voice:

–JAH! JAH! T’ANK YUH JAH FOR YUH DELIVERANCE! T’ANK YUH JAH FOR LAINEE AND A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR MI SON DEM AND MI FAMILY!! AMERICA! AMERICA! HERE WE COME!!–

Delroy is excited and relieved too, especially when he hears the visa will be ready soon, and he won’t have to drive back here tomorrow. After the two hours, Alex makes his way back into the embassy, hoping upon hope that his dream has come true for real. He is more excited than he has ever been, yet fearfully braced for any unexpected turn of events.

He *kisses his teeth* as he identifies himself to the clerk. He takes the envelope she hands him. He numbly finds his way out the door and to a quiet corner of the yard for privacy. Fumbling cautiously, he pulls out a paper. His palms are slick with sweat.

### Blessed Word

He stares at the folded letter...the letter...14 months after he met Lainee and his hopes were raised so high. This letter can make or break him. He slowly unfolds the paper, carefully scanning the paragraphs, blinking to keep his vision from blurring, he searches for the blessed word...*approved*.

There, down in the second paragraph...the fifth word, it says, Wuh again? Yes, there it is...*approved*. He reads the whole sentence out loud, ever so slowly, –Your application has been approved.– And again, –Your application has been approved.–

*Can mi trust mi h'eye dem?* He gropes for the passport with the visa. It’s all there. *APPROVED!* This time, he firmly and prayerfully whispers his new reality, –*America! We a’come! Jah bless and guide we t’ru Babylon.*–

Alex is in a dream world as he exits the embassy yard and heads toward Delroy's car. He silently hands the envelope and its contents to his brother with the letter on top, hoping he will confirm what Alex thinks he has read. Since Alex is so quiet, Delroy is worried. He scans the letter just enough to see the approval and then gives Alex a hug, exclaiming his joy and relief.

–Yuh do it, man! Yuh get t'ru! Give thanks to yuh Most High!–

They find a hotel phone where Alex can use the credit card to call Lainee and share the exciting news they have been waiting on for so long. They are both overwhelmed and laugh and cry with joy...for each other, for their sons, and for their families...all will benefit from this visa.

Alex feels the stress gradually evaporating—the awful stress that has tried to consume him for the past months and increasingly during the most recent days and hours. Now, he is feeling light and truly accomplished.

They drive home with little conversation. This time they are quiet, not from frustration, but from being filled up with gratitude, euphoria, and relief. Alex feels a strong desire to lift his sons up high in the air.

Once home, he rushes to hug his sons, swinging each one around above his head. They laugh with excitement. Then, he goes to his mother's home and joyfully hugs her...then even his sister and each of her kids. It's a time of a powerful mix of emotions.

Tuesday, Alex busies himself all day preparing to leave on his trip to America. Late in the day, he washes his clothes and hangs them out to dry.

With quiet reserve, he goes around his community and informs a few selected friendly acquaintances that he is moving to America, and he will be back soon with his wife to get his sons.

His brothers prepare a farewell feast of fish tea with callaloo and dumplings. Friends come visiting and bringing small gifts of spices, even sweet home-made coconut drops, hoping Alex will remember them when he sends things from the States for his mother. All enjoy the food, drink, and music, leaving around midnight. Alex drops asleep from exhaustion.

Then it rains, blessings from the sky, washing all the past troubles away.

### **Plans Drenched**

Alex calls Lainee Wednesday morning, as agreed, but to her amazement, he tells her he can't go on the plane to Philly just yet!

“What!!! What are you talking about, Alex? Whatever could be the problem, after we’ve waited so long? You do have your passport and visa, right?” She is practically shouting in disbelief.

–Sweetie, yuh know mi kyann wait to hold yuh in mi arm dem and kiss yuh all over yuh body, but mi wash mi clothes and hang dem out, and it rain on dem late last night, after mi asleep. Dem all wet so mi kyann come ‘til dem dry. Mi nah sure when dat be,— Alex explains carefully.

“Stop it, Alex, listen to me!” Laineé states calmly, but firmly. “The flight cannot be changed. You must be on the plane before 2 p.m. today. You need to be at the airport by 12 noon at the latest. You have two choices: either pack your wet clothes into a plastic bag, or better yet, leave them! It’s winter here, and I have warmer clothes waiting for you.”

Alex pauses, surprised by her demanding tone. He realizes again that she thinks about time in a different way. He must go her speed this time.

–OK, sweetie, mi hear yuh loud and clear. Mi gonna see yuh in Philly tonight, with or without mi clothes!— They laugh and hang up, happily knowing they’ll soon be together. Laineé muses with excitement...*Hmmm, I can’t wait to see him...first with clothes...and then, irie...oh yah, man...without!*

That morning, January 24th, Alex’s sons, Mom, Tara, Devan, and his two brothers are at the airport to bid him farewell. His Mom is happy to see him go away to improve his life, but will sorely miss his regular visits and reasoning with her. Moses and Joseph do not let Alex out of their sight for one moment, telling him again and again how much they will miss him, even though he says he’ll be back soon. Alex is pleased that his meeting Laineé may be reviving close-knit family relations, and he hopes it soon will get better for all. Tears flow when the moment arrives for him to leave and go through customs to the departure lounge.

Leaving his send-off party, he takes the plane ticket he got at the airline counter, adjusts his shoulder bag with his few possessions, walks down the long hallway, and with trepidation enters the customs checkpoint.

After he easily makes it through customs, he breathes a sigh of relief. He sees he is in the general departure waiting area and takes a seat near the duty-free shop where they are busy packing up bottles of Jamaica’s famous rum in carry-on boxes for tourists to take home. There are shops all around him, but he’s not interested in any souvenirs. Besides, he has no money.

He notices the plastic shopping bags, now mostly black, and thinks back to the 1980s when they started appearing. People called them *Lada* bags for the small cars imported at the same time from the USSR in exchange for bauxite ore. Unlike the larger familiar ones called *crocus* (made of hemp or jute burlap), these bags were noisy, so people “knew your business” when you opened one. At first, they were clear and offered no privacy, so anyone could see the contents. People started calling them *scandal* bags.

Sometime later, Prime Minister Edward Seaga, at a rally of his Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), waved one of the bags in the air as a symbol of the scandalous behavior that he attributed to those in the opposing People’s National Party (JNP). Especially for his followers that sealed the name.

Although not politically active, Alex is still most partial to the socialist leanings of the PNP, so makes sure never to use this JLP derogatory term. He smiles at Jamaicans tendency to come up with funny names for things.

### ***Babylon Babblin’***

As Alex sits alone, waiting for his flight, he begins to tremble with fright. *Wuh mi doin’...is mi in mi right mind? Is mi really doin’ di best t’ing...leave mi boy dem like dis. Will dem cry every night? When mi gonna come back to dem?*

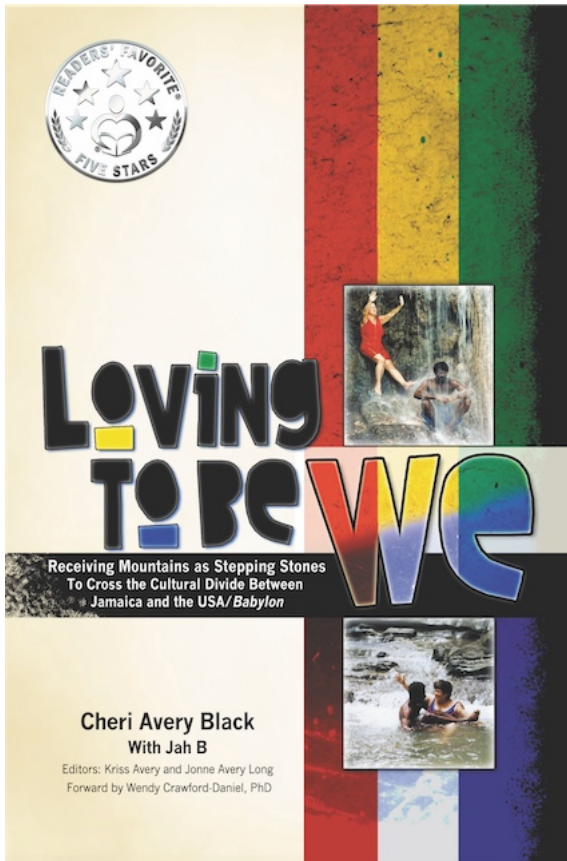
*Is di plane safe to fly? Mi nah like fly a’tall, mi sure of dat. Is mi really goin’ to Babylon...di worst place on Earth? How mi survive with nuh schoolin’...nuh skill?*

*Is Lainee gonna be at di airport? Wuh if she nah deh, and mi have nuh money, even for phone call? Is she foolin’ with mi all along like mi a ‘rent-a-dread’?*

*When mi get deh, will she find out mi nah right for she after all...dat mi nah fit into she life? Will she treat mi like a man? Will I-man find work? Wuh if mi kyann? Will she send mi back to Jamaica with nuttin’? Mi ‘member she send dat Africa guy back. Will everybody laugh at wuh a fool I-man be, like Char say. Oh Jah! Please guide and protect mi boy dem, Mima, and mi.*

It’s time to go up the escalator and down the hallway to gate 13. He must not miss this flight into *Babylon* and, hope upon hope, into Lainee’s arms. It’s still a half-hour before the boarding call when Alex reaches the gate. He sits by the window, peering out longingly at his familiar, beloved Jamaica.

*Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength,  
while loving someone deeply gives you courage. — Lao Tzu*



*This memoir glows with fiery passion as a Jamaican man, striving to lift his sons out of poverty, instantly bonds with a tourist, an older American businesswoman. They face alarming impediments, cross-cultural prejudices, and politics. With unshakable tenacity to their inner truth, they strive to flow with the uplifting island “One Love” vibration.*

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