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—Elizabeth Gilbert, best-selling author of *Eat, Pray, Love*

# WRITTEN IN THE WATERS

A MEMOIR OF HISTORY, HOME,  
AND BELONGING

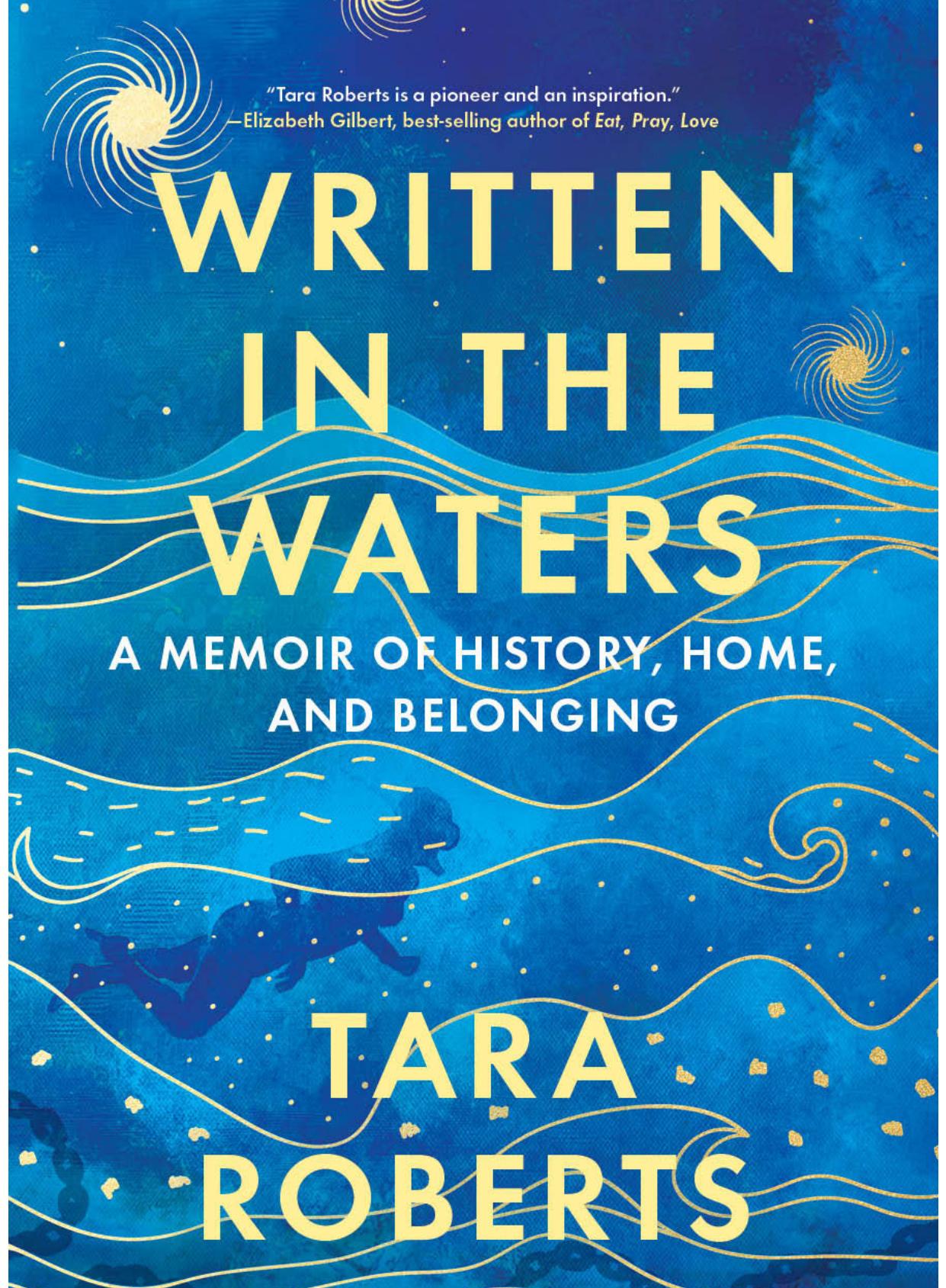
TARA  
ROBERTS



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Washington, D.C.

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*To my mom, Lula,  
who loves to say the best is yet to come,  
and to my nieces Wu and Shy, who exemplify  
the best of what is coming.*

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# PROLOGUE

## **January 21, 2017**

Just over two months after the election of the 45th U.S. president. The morning of the Women's March on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

It feels blustery cold this day, and colors pop everywhere. Pink hats, in particular, stretch far into the distance. Close to a million of us march on the National Mall, challenging the recent election. Women, mainly, with our arms linked, our heads up, expressions defiant. All of us brimming with fight and outrage.

We were so ready for the first female president...

*I was so ready.*

When I moved here from my hometown of Atlanta almost a year earlier to become a director of communications for a global nonprofit, I was broke, depressed, and trying to climb out of the deep hole I'd dug for myself. The nonprofit I had co-founded six years prior to help support young women changemakers was teetering on its last legs. I'd run out of money, my team had moved on, and I was moonlighting as a tour guide at a local museum for \$10 an hour to pay my bills. I needed a job with a salary and benefits.

I also just knew that Hillary would follow Barack at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, and that D.C. would be the most transformative place I could plant myself over the next four years. So I packed up my belongings and moved.

But today, eight months after finding a tiny apartment in the newly gentrifying northwestern neighborhood of Shaw, and almost three months after casting my vote at the polls, I head to the White House—not to celebrate, but to protest.

I meet my college friend Lucinda and her younger sister Lydia, who have traveled by bus from New York City to march with me. We hug each

other and jump up and down when we meet on the Mall, Lucinda's long locs bouncing, Lydia, holding on to her hat in the wind, me, with my grin split ear to ear. I don't get to see them often—maybe only once or twice every few years—because I travel a lot. I am happy to squeeze them.

Shouts of "My body, my choice!" and "This is what democracy looks like!" ring through the air around us, and clever signs like SAME SHIT, DIFFERENT CENTURY dot the landscape.

Lucinda opens her bag and pulls out a homemade sign that reads MAKING AMERICA GREAT SINCE 1619 with the silhouette of a Black girl with plaits and bows sticking out around her head.

I ask what the sign means.

"Black people have been made to feel like this is not their country, like we are interlopers, not real Americans," Lucinda says, rolling her eyes. "But the truth is we were here in 1619 making these colonies 'great' over a hundred years before the Revolutionary War. Our ancestors literally and figuratively built this country."

She continues, pointing to the image on the sign, "And you know, the word 'pickaninny' used to be a racist slur for Black children back in the day, but we are reclaiming it."

Yes. I know and appreciate that the sisters, with four other Black women, used to run the *Pickaninny Papers*, which gave voice to marginalized Black perspectives.

Lydia nods in agreement as she pulls a picture out of her bag—their great-grandmother, also named Lucinda, who was born in 1881. In the sepia-toned image, the woman looks slender and regal, her straight shoulders pulled back in a perfect line, her chin tilted slightly upward in defiance. She wears a floor-length white dress with ruffles around a fitted bodice, white gloves, and a grand hat with a wide brim dotted with flowers.

"We also brought Big Lu for spiritual support," says Lydia with pride. "To remind us of how she lived with so much dignity and grace in the face of relentless attacks on her humanity."

Lydia adds, "If she could kick ass and take names in the face of patriarchy and White supremacy, so can we."

I gape at Big Lu, who is astonishing to me. I feel the strength in the way she stares into the camera so boldly. And to see her dressed so finely—I

mean, white gloves...really? She looks like she should be playing cricket with the aristocracy on the manicured lawn of a manor house.

I feel tears threaten suddenly and unexpectedly—the style, beauty, grace of their ancestor. But also the obstacles, hatred, violence she surely faced. I don't want to imagine what her life must have been like...to be honest, it scares me.

I quickly look away from her picture. And I realize it's the same way I have looked away from movies like *Harriet* or *12 Years a Slave*, or any other films, books, or TV shows that bring attention to our suffering or seem to center on our pain. It hurts too much to go there.

But as I take in Lucinda and Lydia's shining faces, I feel a twinge of something like...shame.

I love Big Lu's regal bearing. I think about the magic she must have wielded to stand with her chin up and her spine so straight. And I think about Lucinda and Lydia's choice of a Black girl to register their protest and rally their hope.

Black girl magic.

So many people of different nationalities and ethnic groups in the crowd today, but now I mostly notice the Black women protesters. They are beautiful, strong, loud...with their Afros, braids, permed hairdos, their locs like Lucinda...with their mouths open in shouts and in laughter.

Black girl magic.

The phrase burrows within me as we march.

The day ends, and I hug and kiss Lucinda and Lydia on their cheeks and wave goodbye as they board their bus. I walk home slowly, dodging marchers, raising my fist in solidarity every so often, smiling back at those who look so energized and exuberant, but also letting my mind churn, feeling like something is slowing down and sinking inside.

I showed up today like I was supposed to, but I don't feel strong anymore. Or powerful. And decidedly not magical.

I feel tired.

And...I feel like a coward.

**February 11, 2017**

My 47th birthday passed a week ago.

I haven't told anyone this yet. But I visited a friend in Vermont to celebrate and made a grocery store run. A White man outside the store saw me as I walked through the sliding doors, stopped, and started saying in a soft singsongy voice, "Race wars are coming. Race wars are coming. Proud Boys are coming for you."

This, on the heels of a conversation with that friend, who is also White, and who had been trying to convince me that Vermont is the most progressive and least racist state in the country.

This, as I am trying to make sense of the way the world has shifted seemingly overnight and closed ranks around gender and race.

It all makes me look around with new eyes.

Now, I see my neighborhood with the cute restaurants and boutique shops in sharp relief. When I meet a friend at a nearby beer garden, I notice I am the only Black face in the crowd. I hang at the pool in my apartment building and realize I have not seen another Black person on the roof at the same time as me.

I go to the office. I know I am the only Black American woman on staff at headquarters. But today I really feel it. The only Black. American. Woman. In an office of about 100 people. How is this still possible?

I feel exhausted.

## February 22, 2017

But then...something happens.

A colleague gets me a ticket to visit the Smithsonian's newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). I don't really want to go. All that traumatic history in one place. But this ticket is a big deal. The museum has been booked solid for months, with hundreds of thousands of people, including relatives and friends, clamoring, bidding, begging for tickets, traveling from all over the country to visit. I feel like I have to go, like I should be a good Black citizen, and be grateful for the free pass.

I decide to play hooky from work and visit one day.

I take the silver Metro line from my job in Rosslyn to Federal Triangle and walk eight minutes to the museum on the National Mall. It is an astonishing-looking place, three tiers of inverted half pyramids covered in a shimmering bronze facade. It cost more than \$500 million and took 13 years to build. All reports say that it beautifully tells the history of Black America, like a song with a refrain and a crescendo. Big, sweeping stories of African American struggles and triumphs over the centuries.

Stories I square my shoulders and steel myself to hear.

I start at the bottom level. In slavery. My chest tightens as I move deeper into the cool of the building. I am nervous to see how we came here. To see what we endured in graphic detail. I feel anxious. My pace quickens. But then I see a piece of her.

She is the *São José Paquete d’África*: a Portuguese slave ship found off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa. I walk up a plank into a separate space that is dark and feels closed in. Immediately, I am surrounded by the dramatic sounds of wind and waves crashing and a deep male voice solemnly narrating the experience of the ship’s passage across the Atlantic. Two hundred twelve Africans died the night the ship sank. I see actual artifacts from the wreck.

The *São José* was one of 12,000 ships that brought some 12.5 million Africans to the Americas between the 1500s and 1800s. On a huge wall map with the ironic names of the ships—*Liberty, Hope, Desire...even Jesus*—are the numbers of Africans who embarked on each ship and the numbers who disembarked.

The second number is always far less than the first.

The map shows the routes, lines indicating some 36,000 voyages made over those 400 years, more than 40 countries involved. I see the enormity of the Transatlantic Slave Trade—or the triangular trade, as it is known, because it followed a three-legged route.

Leg one: Europe to Africa to trade goods for captured Africans.

Leg two: Africa to the Americas to make a profit by enslaving those Africans as free labor.

Leg three: the Americas to Europe with all the money and materials accumulated to build wealth.

Historians call the second leg the Middle Passage. They estimate that as many as 1,000 ships sank during this period. But to date, only a small

number of those ships—fewer than 20—have been found, and even fewer properly documented. They also estimate that approximately 1.8 million Africans lost their lives in the crossing.

Almost two million people.

Tortured. Murdered. Drowned. Lost.

Disappeared into the depths.

Some say that the Atlantic is one of the most turbulent oceans on the planet, that it churns with the spirits of Africans whose names we will never know—souls that have never been acknowledged or mourned. Dreamers, poets, farmers, scientists, griots, educators, mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, children. Just gone.

My heart constricts.

This history is exactly what I have always feared to face—I can't take it all in. It's too much. I need to walk away.

I escape to the second floor aboveground, my steps slow and reluctant but determined to see this through. I enter a sparse space mainly empty of visitors, where the exhibit from below continues with a behind-the-scenes peek into the work of finding sunken slave ships.

And my heart soars.

I'm immediately drawn to a photograph of mainly Black women sitting on a boat, some hugging a Black gentleman with a gray mustache. The women are all in wet suits, different ages, sitting on the boat with broad smiles. The women lean into each other. Some with heads thrown back in laughter. Some looking straight into the camera. One woman has her arm cricked around the neck of another, who inclines into the hug, her head resting on the woman's shoulder.

They remind me of sunshine and rustling trees on a lazy day, of the crunch of fat dill pickles and the smell of barbecue chicken at a family picnic. They remind me of my mother, my aunts, my sister-friends around the world, who, like Lucinda and Lydia, I don't get to see often.

A yearning that I don't fully understand opens within me.

I read the accompanying text. These women and this gentleman are all a part of a group of predominantly Black scuba divers called Diving With a Purpose (DWP); they search for and document missing slave shipwrecks around the world. They helped with the discovery and documentation of the *São José Paquete d'África* shipwreck.

I google them right there in the museum, and discover that since 2003, DWP has been training ordinary people as underwater archaeology advocates to assist archaeologists and historians in finding the submerged history of the African diaspora around the world. People as young as 16 and as old as 90 participate in this work. The only requirement is an interest in scuba diving and a commitment to perfecting your diving skills.

As I read, the women on the boat transform in my mind. Instead of sitting, they now stand facing the bow of the ship with their hands balled into fists on their hips, huge capes around their shoulders, hair billowing in the wind. They become like superheroes to me, and I want to be standing right there beside them, wearing my own cape. Desperately.

The yearning I feel hollows me out with its hunger.

It transports me back to a place of remembrance—back to the 1970s. To 10-year-old me. To Wells Drive in Atlanta, Georgia. To the apartment on the top floor of a two-story walk-up where I lived with my mother—just the two of us in five rooms.

How does the universe match parents and children? I don't know. But I do know that my mother was the perfect parent for me.

She was a reading teacher. And I loved to read. My mom had access to books. She used to bring home boxes and boxes of them from her reading conferences and conventions.

The joy I felt opening those boxes, pulling out the crisp packaged pages, smelling their woody scent, cracking open their stiff spines, and disappearing into other worlds. I could spend all day with a book and all night long reading it under the covers with my flashlight.

I loved fantasy books the most. Magic. Quests. Dragons. Unicorns. Outer space. Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* series was one of my favorites. I yearned for Mrs. Who, Mrs. Whatsit, and Mrs. Which to tap outside my window and charge me with helping to save the universe. I so wanted to be Charles Wallace—not Meg, mind you—anointed with a big life purpose.

Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles of Prydain* was another favorite; I would reread the entire series each year. I wanted to be Taran, discover that I had a hidden birthright and set out with a sword on a magical adventure to combat evil. I would close my eyes and wish hard for the universe to name me as worthy and call on me to do something that mattered.

Back then, my imagination was big, broad, deep. No limits.

But as I grew up, I began to notice that Black girls were never at the heart of these stories. And the books that *did* have Black girls in them were often focused on tragedy and pain, based in the grimdest of realities. I came to understand that there was a prevailing narrative about Black people —a narrative created through a distorted lens that emphasized, to the exclusion of much else, our struggle, our pain, our trauma.

From my front window, I could see a big hill that curved upward between the buildings in my apartment complex. When my mom got home from work, I would ride my bike up and down that hill. I remember huffing up and then soaring down with my legs out to the side, hands off the handlebars, the beads at the end of my braids clacking in the wind.

Ten-year-old me felt free. Connected to sky. To wind. To the great cosmos. Undefined by others' expectations or stereotypes of words like "girl," like "Black girl." I was just me, and I was everything. Big in spirit. Big in possibility. I was a creator, one with the universe, which held me and supported me and encouraged me forward. I could be anything I wanted.

And I knew I loved stories.

Maybe I couldn't go to other planets or dimensions with my own magical guide, but perhaps I could disappear into faraway lands right here on Earth. Perhaps I could wield the pen as my sword. Perhaps I could tell stories that helped to save the land.

I knew then that I wanted to be an adventurer and a storyteller.

**NOW I SIT DOWN ON** a Bench Next to the Exhibit and hold my head in my hands as I remember that dream. And I tell myself a hard truth.

Not only am I a coward, afraid to look back at the past and to embrace my history, but I'm also a pretender.

I did start telling stories young: a little in high school. Then college. Then as a young graduate and professional. I wrote reviews, how-to stories, and essays sometimes. But mainly, I worked as an editor—coaching, supporting, and helping others tell their stories rather than writing my own. Never writing the big adventure stories I dreamed of as a kid. I've spent my

professional days living on the edge of my dreams. Mainly circling, never quite landing.

Maybe that's why I've had 20 addresses on four continents in the last 30 years and only see my friends occasionally. Why I am single with no children.

I am not rooted.

Not in my work. Not in myself. Not even in my own imagination.

I feel like I don't belong. Anywhere.

Or at least I did.

I pick up my head from my hands and look back at the photo. My heart is beating wildly now. These women are beckoning to me. They are inviting me to take a leap and be that 10-year-old girl again, a character in my own story.

I feel a resolve, an uncoiling inside, a desire to take the necessary steps to finally land squarely in my life.

I save the DWP website to my phone.

## February 24, 2017

Two days later.

I hold the phone in my hand, pumping myself up to dial the number from the website.

My heart is racing. I had felt so courageous in the museum. So ready. Now, I feel shy and a little ridiculous.

A seed of doubt has begun to grow. How can I do what those women are doing? I love the water, but I don't know anything about the ocean or scuba diving. What if it's too hard? Doubt begins to spread, and I coil back up on the inside.

I rationalize that DWP probably needs financial support and resources. And the nonprofit I work for supports people with big visions for change. So maybe I can nominate someone from the organization as a fellow to help them get more funding. Even if I am not ready, maybe I can still be useful.

Circling is such a deeply ingrained habit.

I dial.

Ken Stewart, the man with the gray mustache in the picture and the co-founder of DWP, answers the phone. He is friendly and curious.

“Ohhhh, you saw my picture in the museum! That’s a handsome gentleman, eh?” he laughs.

Ken, who is 72, has a lilting, musical voice, like a jazz singer from the 1920s; his voice scats and croons and caresses the phone. The smokiness of his New York City hometown lives in its phrasing, the energy of 125th Street fills up the in-between spaces, and the southern charm of Nashville, Tennessee—his adopted town of 30 years—rounds out the mix.

I tell him that I want to nominate him for a fellowship with my nonprofit. “You want to give me money?” he asks, delighted. “Cause, man, we need money for these dives!”

Ken loves to tell stories. And I love listening. We chat for an hour on that first call. And then another hour on our second call. I fall in love with the DWP mission even more. And I am sure my organization can help support Ken.

I facilitate an introduction.

After a few calls with an officer from the organization, though, it doesn’t work out. But then again, maybe it was never supposed to, because on our last call, after the others hang up, Ken says, “Sister.”

He has figured out I am Black.

“You know you live in the epicenter of Black scuba diving, right?”

“No. Wait, what? Here in D.C.?” I sputter.

“Yes. That’s right. You are right there with all the main cats...Doctor Albert José Jones, for one. Doc founded the first Black scuba diving club in the United States—the Underwater Adventure Seekers, or UAS—right there in D.C., almost 60 years ago. He also co-founded NABS, the National Association of Black Scuba Divers, with another legendary diver, Ric Powell. You know, NABS has over 3,000 divers around the country. You also got Kamau Sadiki there. A lot of the leaders from DWP, they are all right there in your city.

“You are in the mix, Tara Roberts.” He likes to say my whole name. “UAS holds classes in the pool at Gallaudet University and in a bookstore close to Howard University.”

“Really?” I say, marveling that my apartment is only a couple blocks away from Howard.

“You should come dive with us,” he says.

The world stills for me.

Ken says the class will last three months and by the end, I will have my Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) scuba diving certification. After that, I will need 30 ocean dives under my belt to strengthen my underwater skills. And if I complete both, I can participate in the DWP training program next summer.

“I’ll get you in their course right now if you want to do it,” he says.

I can’t speak.

“Are you still there?” Ken asks quietly after a few silent beats. “Do you want to do it?”

It’s the invitation I needed to hear.

My heart is pounding as I take a deep breath and say yes. A yes that will start a rolling, powerful wave and eventually wipe clean my life in D.C.

This is the first heartfelt yes I’ve said in a very long time.

## June 11, 2017

About 40 of us have driven out to the man-made Millbrook Quarry in Northern Virginia.

I am dressed in a wet suit and bent over slightly with an air tank on my back. I walk backward toward the edge of the dock to accommodate the fins on my feet. And I prepare to jump into freezing cold, murky water.

It’s my scuba certification day. The brown faces around me— instructors, volunteers, fellow classmates I’ve come to know over these past few months—cheer me on, telling me I can do it. I hear laughter and splashes. I have fallen in love with this group of divers who are bucking stereotypes and pushing back the boundaries of who Black folks can be in the world.

Shirikiana, a badass filmmaker who owns the bookshop and vegan café near Howard University where we held our classroom sessions every single week for three months, paddles in the water doling out instructions. She’s one of the women in the picture at the museum. She helped me practice my mask skills in our pool sessions.

Doc Albert José Jones, the legend, the grandfather of Black scuba diving in the United States, sits in a lawn chair under an umbrella beside the water. He led all the classroom sessions at Shirikiana's bookstore with quiet, dry humor and jokes you had to listen carefully for.

He winks at me and wishes me luck.

DWP instructor, pilot, and retired engineer Kamau Sadiki is already in the water, helping one of my classmates practice her rescue skills.

My eight classmates.

I have gotten to know them all these last few months.

I turn to my dive buddy, Reggie, a math teacher from Maryland, and we give each other the thumbs-up.

I wonder if my mask is on tight enough.

Too late. Time to go.

I jump in and immediately pop back up to the surface. The water is cold. Reggie jumps in and drifts to me.

One by one, my other classmates jump in.

Two by two, we follow our instructor Kim to the submerged platform in the middle of the quarry to practice the skills we learned over these past three months. We take turns going down to a depth of about 30 feet and standing on a platform we can barely see, testing our compass reading skills, flooding our masks, removing and replacing our masks, and practicing emergency ascents without air.

We also go over tired buddy tows, snorkel to regulator exchanges, and emergency weight belt removal. We learn that people have died in the ocean, that scuba diving is serious work. We are all sufficiently humbled.

And then the testing is over.

We float back to the edges, hand over our fins, removing them one by one as we hang on to the sides. We drag ourselves up the steps and most of us flop down on the grass, exhausted. Did we do enough?

Yes. We all pass. We take a group picture as newly minted scuba divers holding a big UAS sign in front of us. As PADI-certified divers, we can now dive anywhere in the world.

I have on my blue-and-white bandanna and shorts over my bathing suit, and my smile is so wide for the camera that my cheeks hurt.

**AFTERWARD, WE SIT IN THE** backs of cars, on blankets and folding chairs, replenishing our bodies with food, and celebrating our accomplishment with diving stories. It becomes a day of stories.

Doc sits with us, reclined in his lawn chair, umbrella overhead. He clears his throat—although we are already a rapt audience hanging on his and each instructor’s every word—and tells us the story of the *Henrietta Marie*, a slave ship that made two voyages from England to West Africa to Jamaica in 1699 and 1700. The first slave shipwreck to be found in U.S. waters.

It was a big ship, he says, with several cargo decks outfitted to carry iron, beads, weapons, pewter...and captive Africans.

On the second voyage, the ship sailed from West Africa across the Atlantic Ocean to Jamaica with 274 captive African men, women, and children in its cargo hold. About 80 of the Africans died in the Atlantic, and the remaining 194 surviving souls were sold into slavery to the island’s sugar plantations. One morning in June 1700, the *Henrietta Marie*’s crew loaded the ship with the spoils of their trade, ready to head home. Mission accomplished, they thought, and sailed the ship en route to London, traveling westerly around the Florida Keys.

But a big storm hit. The ship slammed up against a reef—one time, two times, three times. Thunder, lightning, rough waves. Wood bowing, then breaking. The *Henrietta Marie* shattering and sinking.

The ship lay at the bottom of the ocean for almost three centuries, until 1972, when salvagers found it. The salvaging team had been searching for another vessel with a reported treasure trove worth around \$400 million when they found the *Henrietta Marie* by accident. It held no sparkling jewels or bars of gold; most of its treasure had already perished or been sold. But it did have evidence of human trafficking: The team found shackles, used to restrain the captives, as well as elephant teeth, tusks, and African trading beads—commodities used in the slave trade.

More diving on the wreck site eventually revealed the ship’s bell, which was inscribed with its name and the date of its initial voyage in 1699 and proved the ship’s identity conclusively.

The artifacts, scrubbed clean and preserved by the salvaging team, were shared at the first conference of NABS, the Black diving organization that

Doc Jones co-founded. The artifacts broke down the divers, he says. The shackles, especially. Big, tough military guys were reduced to tears, particularly when they touched tiny shackles made for children.

It was clear to all of them that they had to do something. So they decided to place a plaque at the wreck site to honor those Africans who had been forced to journey on the ship—and to honor those who had lost their lives along the way.

Twelve NABS divers, including Doc Jones, helped to heave a 3,000-pound plaque to the site with pulleys and ropes, and they dove. Doc said it felt eerie, like diving on a gravesite.

The plaque settled on the ocean floor. The divers turned it so that its front would face due east and south, toward the continent of Africa. Lining up, they said prayers and touched it, one by one, mouthing its inscription as they swam past:

*In memory and recognition of the courage,  
pain and suffering of enslaved African people.  
Speak her name and gently touch the souls of our ancestors.*

This became the beginning, the seed of the idea for DWP. The realization that there were more wrecks out there. More stories to be told. And many more people whose names would likely never be known but who deserved to be remembered and honored...Names like Thambo. Kossola. Oluale. Adissa. Lahla. Abache. Shamba. Abile. Somee. Sakaru. Deza... Names waiting to be spirited home.

## **October 18, 2017**

A line of us newly certified divers and our UAS instructors follow the light ahead in the dark. We are about 20 feet under the surface of the crystal waters of Cozumel, Mexico, outfitted in our scuba gear. The class has come to Mexico to dive in the ocean.

And tonight is our first night dive. It's so dark I cannot see my hand in front of my eyes.

I swim directly behind Kamau, the retired engineer and DWP instructor who is my dive buddy on this trip. The light is strapped to his forehead. Others follow me in a single-file line.

It feels spooky out here. I know there are snakes in the water—a bright yellow one burrowing in the sand earlier in the day had me climbing over Kamau to get away. I don't want to bump into it again by accident. Kamau, on the other hand, doesn't seem nervous at all. His light never wavers.

We see a glow in the distance moving toward us.

Kamau's light stops moving. I file in behind him as it draws closer.

Suddenly, the glow surrounds us. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of tiny fish glow in the dark and dart around me.

I'm not scared, though. I'm in wonder surrounded by this light, feeling grateful to the universe.

Being out here, under the night sky, magic truly seeps into my soul and begets the seed of a plan.

What if I follow these divers around the world and tell stories about them as they search for slave shipwrecks? What if I travel with them to all the places with active DWP missions—Mozambique, South Africa, Senegal, Costa Rica, St. Croix?

The idea takes root in a precious and quiet way. My inner adventurer, which has been gathering courage these past few months, and my inner storyteller, which has been waiting quietly, finally meet and bow to each other.

And in my mind, I take the leap.

## February 11, 2018

Another birthday has passed. I've been back from Mexico for four months now. I have eight ocean dives under my belt from that trip. Only 22 more to participate in the DWP training.

In the meantime, I have things to do.

First, I call Ken to get his blessing.

"You know, the stories that have been told about Africans and slavery, they've been told by White people," he says. "People who have their academic credentials."

He pauses. “I don’t want to take anything away from them, ’cause I don’t have any academic credentials, right? And I admire them. But they can’t tell it from our perspective. From the African folks who lived it. We have to start telling our own story.”

He adds, “We need you to help tell this story, Tara Roberts. So yes, absolutely.”

I tell Ken that I’m planning to quit my job.

“Oh! Wait a minute now!” he exclaims. “Nobody said nothing about you quitting your job! We can’t take responsibility for something like that. Oh, no!”

I laugh and tell him that I’m doing this no matter what, and that I will take all the responsibility. I tell him he doesn’t have to worry.

Next, I walk into my boss’s office and quit.

It’s not as hard as I thought it would be. I’m ready to be in a space where I won’t be the only one.

The DWP training is in June, which gives me four months to get myself together.

And I have a plan. A friend invited me to his wedding in India at the end of the month. I had planned to go using frequent-flier miles, and then head back to the States. But now, I decide I will stay and finish my 22 remaining dives in Southeast Asia.

Something calls me to Sri Lanka. They call it the teardrop of India because it looks like a small tear hanging off the side of the larger country. There is some sadness to the idea, but it also gives gravitas to the place and implies the people have gone through some things. Plus, the country is 70 percent Buddhist and known to be a friendly and welcoming place. Some travel books call it the nation of smiling people. It will be my first stop. I can’t explain it fully. Just something about a country full of smiling brown Buddhists who kinda look like me sparks my imagination.

And I’ve never been to Thailand, but I hear it’s a beautiful place to dive. I will divide my time between the two countries. They both feel right.

I don’t have an assignment. I don’t have funding. I don’t know how I’m going to get this story out in the world. I don’t even know what the story is, exactly.

Relax, I think. One step at a time.

I book a one-way ticket to Kerala, in southern India. I'll get the other tickets once I'm there. I buy an iPad Pro so I can keep a digital journal along the way, and a big backpack.

I decide to keep my apartment in D.C. till I'm back in June. A safety net.

I will figure out the rest as I go.

One bag.

One Black magic girl.

I'm ready.

But I need to do one more thing.

## February 24, 2018

I leave for Kerala in less than 48 hours.

After cleaning out the last of my office, I step out on the street in Rosslyn and walk slowly over the bridge connecting Virginia to D.C. The setting sun warms my face. Birds dance across the surface of the Potomac River, and I feel a tingling on my skin.

I arrive at Slim's barbershop on 14th and K Streets. It's posh, with posh prices, but Slim charges me the hood rate, so I sit in his chair. He puts a towel around my neck and a cape around the towel. He spins me around to the mirror and stands behind me, running his hand over my hair, which is styled in an overgrown Afro.

"OK, what are we doing today?" he asks. "You want me to shape up the sides?"

I take a deep breath. "No," I say, looking at myself in the mirror. "I want you to cut it all off."

He frowns, "You want a Caesar? How low do you want me to go?"

"All the way," I say, smiling. "I want you to shave it all. I don't want a single hair left on top of my head."

"Ohhhh, word, you want to go bald???"

I nod.

"Dope! You're going to look soooo good!" he says, leaning close while looking at me in the mirror and winking. "I just love it when women go bald."

He pulls out the clippers and makes the first pass from front to back.

Twenty minutes later I walk up 14th Street in the dusky evening. I feel the air caressing my scalp.

I hold out my arms, twirl once, and laugh out loud.

I feel delicious, the magic in me stirring. My 10-year-old self is wide awake, head up, eyes a bit wary, though, wondering if she can truly trust me.

I take a deep breath and promise that I won't let her down.

I'm diving deep this time.

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• PART ONE •

# **Descent**

*OceanofPDF.com*

# CHAPTER ONE

I float face up in the calm water of a tucked-away beach in Kalpitiya.

It's two o'clock in the afternoon, and the sun feels hot but delicious on my face and my toes, which are painted bright orange and peeking out of the water. The water slides off my bald head like a lover's gentle caress, leaving it glistening in the rays. I am at least 100 feet from shore. But if I stand up, the water will only lap my waist, maybe my chest, in the deeper pockets.

No one else is around, except a few mangy dogs; even the fishermen with their colorful striped boats listing lazily in the sand have taken siestas. I worry a little about my stuff on the beach alone. But mainly I lie back in the water and let it tug me gently. I close my eyes and feel the sun drenching me, nuzzling me, claiming me. My arms are thrown out wide. I don't think much. I just drift. I feel so safe and relaxed.

Finally.

I've been on the road now for two weeks—first, to the wedding festivities in India and now to this tiny town in the northwest of Sri Lanka. It has taken me days to get to this quiet beach and to float in this tranquil water.

Days of sitting in crowded-to-the-brim trains on my backpack in corridors almost 30 people deep, keeping my head down to stave off bouts of claustrophobia. Days of riding in broken-down local buses and holding on to the backs of seats breathlessly as the vehicles flew down streets at reckless speeds. Days of trekking with my overstuffed backpack from touristy beach to touristy beach along the southwestern stretch of the country. Even one day being thrilled by beautiful Sri Lankan surfer guys

with long, curly hair, who laughed invitingly when they saw me and called me over for a little smoke to pass the time as their idol Bob Marley waisted in the background.

In the end, I schlepped to Colombo, the capital city, and hopped in a 12-passenger minivan stuffed with 25 people. I closed my eyes and visualized wide spaces for the five-hour ride to Puttalam, the biggest city in the northwest. Then I took an hour-long tuk-tuk ride—and grateful gasps of fresh sea air through its open sides—to Kalpitiya.

I arrived at night at an inn I'd booked online that was almost three miles from the beach.

Definitely not close enough.

So I woke up early the next morning, discovered the inn's derelict bike, and set off, veering off the town's one main street onto the sandy back roads, past salt ponds and wind farms with their giant white windmills revolving slowly overhead. I rode closer to the seashore, where hotels, inns, and Airbnbs hid behind gates and fences, and huffed up stairs, opened doors, and walked around spaces for hours, looking for the perfect place.

And then I found it: the Red Angels Beach Hotel. Not a great name, but a gorgeous colonial-style hotel with handmade doors from locally scavenged wood, only about 50 feet from the beach, and the perfect place for me to tackle the next major task—funding.

Before I had boarded the plane to India, I'd started searching for funding opportunities. I'd googled different terms...fellowships for writers, creative writing fellowships, travel writing fellowships, writing scholarships, writing grants, new media grants, journalism fellowships, creative writing residencies, even MFA programs. I'd followed so many links down so many rabbit holes, until finally, I came across a storytelling fellowship by National Geographic and the U.S. Fulbright Program. A Fulbright Fellowship sanctioned by the U.S. government and endorsed by a place that epitomized adventure to most of the world? For \$80,000—way more than I needed to support my travels? It seemed perfect. Well, almost.

The only hiccup was that it required applicants to work in a country in which they were fluent in the local language and had local sponsorship. I had hoped to use the grant to travel to Senegal, Mozambique, and Costa Rica—places where DWP had missions but where I was not fluent in the language. Still, I figured I could base myself in South Africa, the only

English-speaking country outside of the U.S. where DWP operated, and find a way to travel to the other countries from there.

One other small issue: The application was due in a week.

I had been making notes while in India, corralling my thoughts. But now I need to hunker down and give it my all because this grant could be everything. It would justify quitting my job and shaving my head and create a clear way forward. I decide to focus my time in Sri Lanka primarily on the application and then devote my days in Thailand to finishing my dives.

As I lie in the water and smile, I give thanks.

**THE NEXT BEAUTIFUL, SUNNY MORNING,** I sit in the Red Angels' homey little restaurant, which has wooden tables you can push together family style or separate on your own. Roshan, the owner, makes a breakfast of eggs, hoppers, curry, rice cakes, and fresh fruit—a huge meal that will surely last until dinner and keep me on target with my U.S. \$10/day meal allowance.

Roshan is a brown man married to a brown woman, Aneka, with a seven-year-old brown son, Kasun. Our skin colors are almost the exact same shade of brown. Today, they all sit in the courtyard under the shade of an enormous oak tree. The son with his action toys. Roshan with ropes he throws over the tree for his son to swing on. And Aneka with her quiet watching.

Roshan would easily blend in as a Black man in the United States. He is handsome—tall, bearded, scruffy. He reminds me of my cousin Troy when he was younger: the same kind of personable, distracted but charming energy.

Every time I see Roshan, he stops to chat, but he always seems harried. He tells me his dreams for this place—how he scoured the countryside for discarded wood, then transported it here and restored it himself in the workshop across from the restaurant to make all the doors. He wants this place, which has been open less than a year, to feel special and to be his love offering to guests.

Today, there are three of us in the restaurant: me plus an older German couple in their 70s—Anna and Gunter—who took me on a tour of their

future rooms yesterday. They are also investors in the property and have known Roshan and his family for years, so they do not count as true guests. Their own apartment on the property is under construction and has taken much longer than they anticipated.

The space was lovely—high ceilings, granite countertops, big windows, Roshan’s exquisite handmade doors—but Anna wasn’t completely happy about some of the design choices and materials and was worried about the ever extending timeline for completion.

Her dream is to have a place to retire in the warmth and sunshine. Life in Germany has been mostly hard work, mostly gray. She and Gunter are not rich, but they managed to save some money over the years; they met Roshan by chance and were taken by his charm. They had long dreamed of a home elsewhere, a place full of sun-filled days and laughter and windswept evenings at the beach, a place where they could secure their futures and sink their roots into the sand—past the sand crabs, the roly-polies, and the clams; past the basalt and granite; past the iron and nickel—to settle deep into the core of it all.

I hear the fondness in Anna’s voice when she talks about little Kasun. She and Gunter don’t have kids, don’t really have any family left in Germany. But she also voices a tentative doubt that maybe Roshan is taking advantage. She wants to believe in this dream. She wants to be Roshan’s partner and invest in even more properties with him. She wants to ground herself here and to make Roshan’s family a part of her own. But...she looks at me for validation, a question in her eyes. I am American. I understand about these people from developing countries, right?

Anna likely sees the wealth of our home countries as our bond. Our three plane tickets combined could cost almost a year’s worth of a typical Sri Lankan salary at U.S. \$300 a month. But...she’s not absolutely sure of me. I am American, yes, it’s true, but I am the same complexion he is. She trails off, a bit of defeat rounding her shoulders.

Avoiding her eyes, I look down, and see Anna’s swimsuit perched to dry on the wooden railing. She and Gunter spend their early evenings at the beach once the sun has set so they don’t burn in the ever present sun. They go for walks until they come up against land barriers and can’t walk anymore.

I wonder if the four of them—if Anna and Gunter and Roshan and Aneka—ever walk that beach together and talk honestly about power. About the power discrepancy between their countries and the one that exists because of their skin colors. The British colonized Sri Lanka, which they called Ceylon then, between roughly 1800 and 1948; the Republic of Sri Lanka wasn't established until 1972. Before the British, it was colonized by the Dutch, between 1658 and 1796. Before the Dutch, it was the Portuguese, between 1505 and 1658. Never the Germans—but European interference and exploitation have extracted wealth and resources from this place since the 16th century—well over 500 years. Europe, including Germany, has become powerful off the backs of all its colonies combined.

Can Anna and Gunter, Aneka and Roshan create roots together when the gulf between their differences is so wide?

**ANNA AND GUNTER SIT WITH** me at breakfast today with a double portion of the same meal I'm enjoying. So much food spread across the table; it's a feast. Our dishes crowd each other and threaten to topple off the table if we are not careful. Gunter doesn't speak much English, so he retreats into his own world. But Anna talks more about her hopes and life growing up in Germany while Roshan brings us seconds.

I listen and think again of dreams, destiny, chance meetings, and how the tiniest moments can alter our life's direction. Of all the nudges we're given in life and the choices we have to heed.

The roof calls to me after our breakfast. I make my way upstairs to lie on a hammock, gazing up at the clouds drifting across the blue sky, reflecting on my childhood, and our apartment in the SWATS, or the southwest part of Atlanta. It had shaggy green carpet that covered the living room floor and bumped up against a beige linoleum kitchen floor, which blended in perfectly with our worn green appliances.

My room sat between my mom's room and the bathroom. A huge picture of Michael Jackson from his *Thriller* cover stretched along the wall over my bed, along with a picture of Shaun Cassidy from his *Hardy Boys* days. My room held sturdy white furniture. And a white mirror framed by white-and-green candleholders on the wall completed the look. My aunt

Sue had also sewn white-and-green flowered ruffled pillow shams and a coverlet to match for my bed. And my bike, with pink tassels hanging from the handlebars, stood propped against the wall. I used to spend hours in that room by myself, reading of course, but also making up skits, writing in my diary, organizing elaborate scenarios for my Barbies, singing songs in the mirror, and playing games by myself. I was an only child, mainly living in my imagination. I was happy.

I gleaned early on, though, that the details of my life looked like a statistic on paper. My mom was Black and single and making do on a teacher's low salary that kept us only a few moves away from low-income housing. I felt judged on paper, even at a young age. I felt the opinions and ideas of those looking from the outside in weighing down on me like an anchor around my neck.

Is this how Roshan feels sometimes with Anna? I imagine he feels the power dynamic even if he doesn't talk about it with me. Maybe Anna's expectations and fears weigh heavy around his neck too. Maybe his hands and the work of sanding and restoring the doors are his way back to his biggest self, his way of feeling connected to all of it.

I get up and lay my head on the balustrade on the roof, letting my fingers hang down the other side and dangle toward the sea. I reach for that feeling of freedom now. I close my eyes and reach out my senses to the universe just as I did when I was a child.

I let go.

**AND THEN I RETURN TO** my room, and I write. Furiously. I jot down notes on napkins. I type pages of explanation. I walk on the beach and scribble in the sand. I wake up at five a.m. and go to bed at midnight with my iPad always open to catch phrases and ideas as they come.

I rationalize that by starting with the ships that brought so many Africans away from their homes—we can find clues to the rest. We can use these ships as a bridge between the past, the present, and the future.

Who are Africans in the Americas? Beyond a people who were enslaved in chains and lived lives full of sadness and sorrow. Beyond the horror and

brutality performed by people as their worst selves. When were we full human beings? When were we whole?

And I don't mean the romanticized version of our past when we were all kings and queens and royalty in our imaginations. I mean whole. All of it: the up and down, the right and left, the zig and zag. Full human beings filled with good and bad, light and dark, joy and fear.

I think about Doc Jones sharing the story of the *Henrietta Marie* when we were at the quarry. The story was sad, but I found it wasn't so hard to face. I wanted to know more. I loved hearing about how the NABS divers had put a plaque down on the wreck site. It moved me so much to hear about a healing gesture rather than more trauma.

As my pen flies across the page, I ask why I didn't learn about the *Henrietta Marie* in school but yet could tell you all about the *Titanic* and the *Mayflower*. This is a clear example of how the history of Black folks becomes an unexamined footnote in our classrooms. A much too shameful, embarrassing, and painful stretch of history to revisit too closely. Even too painful sometimes for Black folks like me. But without exploring this history and these stories, we will always be stuck in this maze of racial trauma.

I end by saying that we have an opportunity to reverse this direction if we are brave, that these divers, by working to uncover this hidden past, are showing us a way out. Showing me a way out.

I feel alright with purpose and clarity as I finish. The morning the application is due, I proofread my words and am satisfied. It's as much as I can do; I have laid out my case and done my best. I sit cross-legged on my bed and bring my hands together at my heart in a prayer position. I pull them up to my forehead, bend over my crossed knees, and touch them, along with my head, to the bed. I give thanks. Then I sit up and press submit.

That night, I take myself out for dinner at the fancy restaurant in town. I walk several miles, past the windmills and salt ponds, to the road, and then splurge on grilled fish and a glass of wine. And I walk back, skipping here and there.

I have such a good feeling.

## I DECIDE TO STAY IN

Sri Lanka and see more of the country while I wait for an answer.

Over the next week, I explore Kalpitiya. I find a dive shop run by a tall, enthusiastic, and friendly man named Sanjeeva, and I immediately sign up for a two-dive excursion to the Bar Reef Marine Sanctuary for later in the week.

Sanjeeva's operation is part of his family's compound and only a few yards from a small sandy beach. He lives with his parents and his wife and children. When I arrive, his mother invites me to sit and wait for him in a gazebo on the side of the house. He soon appears and while we sit together surrounded by equipment and laminated pictures of marine life, he regales me with stories of the Sri Lankan sea and the protected reef hidden beneath its surface. Bar Reef has the greatest biodiversity of any reef in the country, with more than 156 species of coral and 283 species of fish over 118 square miles.

Sanjeeva seems competent and fun. I know diving with him won't be like my past trip in Mexico, which featured a boat and a captain, an assistant, a second level that you can sit on to watch the waves, and a lunch served between dives. But I figure it will be OK.

I have my own mask and a light, protective garment that covers my body called skins. So Sanjeeva needs to outfit me with fins and a buoyancy control device, or BCD—the vest you wear—plus a regulator and tank.

The day of the dive, there are five of us: me, Sanjeeva, an Austrian couple, and Mohammed, who drives the boat.

Sanjeeva sits us down in a gazebo and reviews hand signals and safety tips, along with our route and the sort of marine life we might encounter during our two planned dives. I haven't been diving in six months, and I am worried that I've forgotten most of what I learned. I tune out his explanation of local fish and try to remember which way to turn the tank valve to get the air into my BCD. As we kit up, I am relieved that I remember more than I thought.

We leave in a small wooden boat, just big enough for the five of us, and head out into the blue expanse. The boat skips over swells and the engine thrums loudly. I love feeling the sea spray as it hits my face.

Eventually, we stop in what seems like the middle of nowhere. But below us is Bar Reef.

I roll backward off the boat into the water. Calm washes over me, and I start to breathe intentionally. Slowly. A meditative state arises; I feel contained and at home in the water. My inner chatter is lulled to sleep, though my attention remains sharp. This is what it must feel like for astronauts on the moon: The time it takes to move my head. The effort to raise my hands. I move in slow motion. Even my eyes seem to take long seconds to slide into focus.

The visibility is about 20 to 25 feet, and I see a spectacular display of colors and activity: bright yellow clown fish, giant barracuda, honeycomb moray eels, shrimp, crabs, mollusks, red and orange coral and sponges.

I'm in another world.

**AS THE DAYS PASS,** I travel to nearby places and even make a quick trip into the colorful hills of Ella, a town in the middle of Sri Lanka. I want to see Adam's Peak, the place where the Lord Gautama Buddha is said to have visited in the third century. When I get to the top to catch the sunrise, I sit there for an hour imagining the Buddha's first steps in this country.

Adam's Peak is almost a mile and a half high and figures prominently in many religious traditions. Buddhists call it Sri Pada—roughly, “the sacred footprint,” a reference to a footprint-shaped mark at the summit they believe is the footprint of the Buddha and an invitation to worship. Some Christians and Muslims believe the mark is the footprint of Adam, made on his first day on earth after being cast out of Paradise. They believe Sri Lanka is the original Garden of Eden. And in Hindu traditions, the mark is thought to be the footprint of the deity Shiva; it rests on the legendary Mount Trikuta, where Shiva ruled Lanka.

Sri Lankans can trace their history back roughly 3,000 years, an incredible span of time. Talk about rooting. How does seeing such a complete picture of their past impact their belief in self? I wonder.

I can trace my roots back to my great-great-grandfather, John “Jack” Roberts, who was born in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1839. That means my mother can trace back to her great-grandfather. And that means her father

can trace back to his grandfather. And that's it. At most, we can look back 183 years.

We know that Jack was born enslaved; I saw his name entered on the records for a plantation in North Carolina. It hit me hard. I could imagine a hand—pink and chapped, wrinkled with rough skin, hairy knuckles, and calluses, or maybe dainty with oval-shaped nails and slender fingers—writing quickly, even absentmindedly, recording Jack's existence casually, like a grocer records goods for the shelves. Maybe he was benign. Maybe she was brutal. Maybe they were a team and indifferent. Maybe it doesn't matter.

All I know is that before that, my family tree is blank—a common circumstance for most Black folks living in the Americas. We are a people interrupted; we do not know from whence we come, and we never will. Not fully. Genealogists often attribute this disruption to the fact that before 1870, the U.S. Census did not count identifying details of enslaved people. So it is hard to find the specifics of their existence; too much has been lost, forgotten, or intentionally distorted.

More to the point, those years of history that we can trace back are also in slavery, or in decrepitude or struggle. Seen within a context that automatically constricts. How does that limited view shape a people? Shape me? How can we walk confidently in this world and go boldly into the future if we don't know our roots? Or if we think our roots are only about our pain?

Breathe.

I feel the breeze on my skin up here in this sacred spot high above the world and remember the excitement coursing through my body in that moment of discovering DWP.

I feel certain that this is all part of a whole slowly unveiling itself—that the universe is moving me to a new place of understanding.

I breathe in again deeply, just as I do below the surface, my chest expanding.

## **STILL NO WORD.**

I start to get a little antsy.

I come back to Kalpitiya and decide to call Autumn, a spiritual seer, adviser, and psychic who has provided me with guidance from time to time over the years. I think she will calm my growing nerves; she is so careful and thoughtful with her abilities. And the things she tells me tend to be right on target.

Once she clears the energy on the call and says a grounding prayer, we begin to talk. “Do I have a shot?” I ask, getting straight to it.

She doesn’t mince words. She says it’s going to be tough. She thinks a higher-up at Nat Geo doesn’t believe the project is the right fit for them.

What?!

She says that this likely won’t work out for me.

I’m devastated.

Doubt and insecurity awaken in me for the first time since finding this grant.

**A WEEK LATER, IT COMES.** Early in the morning. An email from the selection committee. I see the Fulbright U.S. Student Program in bold. I can’t take the suspense. I click the link quickly, like ripping off a bandage, to read the news.

And what?! I’ve made it to the next stage!

I love the first sentence that starts with “Congratulations!”

I’m a semifinalist!

Yes! My confidence comes roaring back.

This is preordained.

Yes.

**WITHIN A FEW DAYS, ANOTHER** email comes.

I open this one quickly too, already thinking about what I am going to wear to the finalist interview, and how I am going to get there and then back to Thailand for my dives. Where will they do the interview? I wonder. Probably in D.C. Maybe I should wear all black or a top with a pop of color. My mind goes around and around about shoes. Should I wear heels? Or

some funky flats? These are the thoughts running through my mind as I raise my fingers to click the link.

Then I read the first two sentences...“Dear Tara Roberts, I regret to inform you...”

Shit.

“...your application is not among those selected for further consideration.”

The elation and happiness—gone, just like that.

Disappointment and failure so quickly on the heels of my triumph.

How could this be happening?!?

I fall back onto the bed, my hands over my eyes.

What am I going to do now?

**THE NEXT MORNING, I HEAD** toward the roof and the hammock. Before I get too far, I see Anna edging toward me out of the corner of my eye.

I turn quickly, pretend I don’t see her, and walk the other way toward town. My heart can’t take her right now.

I want to run away. I want to skip across the water, on feet made of air, my arms windmilling me all the way back to Atlanta, to the safety of my room in my mom’s house where I can close the door and cry.

I can’t believe this is happening.

All I had been rationalizing and feeling—all those signs felt so real.

I’m a fool.

A broke fool. A broke, unemployed fool. A broke, unemployed, dreamy fool on a fool’s errand.

My mind is in turmoil. I can’t stop my heart from thudding erratically in my chest. The blood is roaring and swishing in my head. I want to yell. I want to throw things.

I buy junky comfort food from the little corner store and skulk back to my room praying that Anna and Gunter are at breakfast. I get there without seeing anyone and close the curtains.

And I lean into the disappointment: the anger, despair, fear, sadness.

I am out of funding ideas.

I write in my journal for more than two hours. And then I eat everything I bought—a pack of chocolate cookies, an entire bag of potato chips, a chocolate ice cream bar, and a little cake with glazed sugar on top. My body goes into a sugar coma. I literally knock myself out with sweets and fall into a sleep of the dead.

When I wake the next morning, my stomach aches, but my mind is clear and resolute. I look into flights home and start googling editing jobs. Maybe a job is not ideal, but it's what I know. I have bills to pay. I find a listing for a Women's March editor. *Essence* is looking for a deputy editor. Mashable is hiring. Before I took the job at the museum for \$10 an hour to work on my nonprofit and moved to D.C., I was an editor at *Essence*, *Ebony*, and *CosmoGirl*. I have contacts.

I square my shoulders and open my résumé.

Resolved.

It was a good dream, but it's time to move on.

I pause—what will I tell Ken?

**I GO FOR A WALK**, thinking I'll buy my ticket home after.

Along the sandy road, I walk past Sanjeeva's house.

And I see Sanjeeva. He waves me over, tells me they could use one more person for a dive this morning. Somebody backed out and so they have a space. Do I want it?

I think, Whatever, yeah, I'll go. It wouldn't hurt to get one more dive in before I head home. At least I can do that. At least all of this led to me gaining a cool, new skill. I can say I dived in Sri Lanka a few times.

I grab my things from my room, and we go out. Five of us again: Sanjeeva, Mohammed, two people from England, and me. I trail my hand along the side of the boat as we close in on Bar Reef, the warm water feeling good on the back of my hand, the smell of the sea swirling in my nostrils, the bluish green water awakening my wonder.

The first dive is good.

Sanjeeva is my buddy again. We swim along, and I float face down a few inches above the bottom whenever I can, my hands and legs splayed

like a dead person, just letting the current move me back and forth, relaxing into the flow.

We continue on around the reef for a while and then come up for a snack on the boat. Sanjeeva shares around bananas, protein bars, and peanut butter crackers. No one is super bubbly and talkative. We just rock in our wooden boat in the middle of the sea in silence.

It's perfect, just what I need.

Then it's time to go in again, and Mohammed drives the boat about a mile away to another part of the reef. The second dive starts off much like the first. I see a reef shark and a giant shrimp whose busy tentacles make him look like a decorator staging his home for sale. I watch him for a while, relaxing even more in the water, letting go.

Eventually, we return to the spot where the boat is anchored with about 10 minutes left to dive. We have ascended to shallower waters—only about 30 feet below the surface.

Sanjeeva signals to me to look at something in the coral. I swim over. He points to a part of the reef, then swims away. I don't really see where he is pointing; my eyesight is not great at distances in the water, and I can't remember all the signals for particular fish. But I try to look closely and stay there for a few minutes after he swims away.

Soon after, I see a little yellow-and-blue fish swimming in my direction. I go into a dreamy state and smile thinking of animated shows where humans and marine creatures become friends. I wonder if I will make a little friend in the sea.

The fish swims toward me, and the closer it gets, the more I notice the details. It has an appendage on the top that looks like the trigger to a gun. And its mouth is moving—opening and closing—like it is talking to me. Hmm...I can even see its teeth as it gets closer. And closer. And closer.

The teeth look bigger now—jagged, broken—and the fish is clearly focused on me.

I began to get alarmed.

Soon, it's right there, in my personal space, mouth still chomping. Number one rule in the ocean is to not engage sea life if you can help it. It looks so little and cute. I don't want to harm it. But what the...? I put up my hands in defense.

It swims closer to my face, and suddenly, I feel a flash of pain on my finger. I backpedal and finally turn to swim away in panic. I get clear of the fish but notice a trail of blood in the water.

My finger, almost white in the water—I’m not wearing gloves—is missing a bit off the top. Part of my nail is gone, and the tip of my finger looks lopsided.

I swim over to Sanjeeva, rather dazed about what just happened, and show him my finger. He immediately grabs my BCD to hold me steady and signals that we will ascend after our three-minute safety stop. You have to do this stop at about 15 feet to ensure that the nitrogen absorbed while diving has enough time to leave your system.

Sanjeeva is calm. And I stare in fascination at my finger, which continues to bleed steadily while we wait. Sanjeeva helps me up to the surface, over to the boat, and out of the water.

As we wait for the others to conclude their safety stop and join us, I start giggling uncontrollably. I’m in shock. Sanjeeva tears cloth off his shirt and wraps my finger. The cloth quickly soaks in blood. The other divers finish their safety stop and climb onto the boat. They gawk at my finger.

When I describe what happened, still giggling, Sanjeeva says it must have been a triggerfish, that he had pointed out a triggerfish nest to me, and that one of the triggerfish must have felt threatened.

We race back on the boat to his house and Sanjeeva calls for a tuk tuk to rush me to the small clinic in town, where they clean up the wound, give me pills to ward off a possible infection, and wrap me in gauze.

It costs U.S. \$30.

I ask the doctor, who looks like he is 18 and entirely too young to run his own clinic, whether the tip of my finger will grow back. He doesn’t give me a firm answer and looks away in pity.

I head back to the Red Angels in the waiting tuk tuk and go to sleep in my room.

**NOW, IT'S EARLY THE NEXT** morning. I have walked down to the beach and am sitting with my bottom in the water, allowing the surf to rush

up and away, waiting for the sun to rise, holding my bloodied bandaged finger straight in the air away from the water.

I look at it and think angrily—a piece of my finger was bitten off in the waters around Sri Lanka.

Now that I'm no longer in shock, I can't believe what just happened.

Why is this so hard? I think. I left my job, my home, spent all my savings, committed to finding a way to untangle this twisty, complicated dark cloud of history that weighs us all down. And first, the bad news about the funding, and now, I've lost the tip of my finger.

It's too much. I feel tears threaten.

A piece of me was taken away. A piece I'm never going to get back.  
And it happened in the place I had come for answers.

The sun rises. The whole area is suddenly painted in warm yellows and oranges. As the sun gains traction in the sky, I feel its glare on me. It's like it's pinning me to my place, daring me to remember that I come from Black magic women who endured tragedy but kept on moving on.

Months in the cargo hold of those boats facing horrors I'll never even let myself imagine. Working in fields until fingers and feet bled and backs gave out under the crack of cruel whips. Their babies sold before weaning. Their husbands killed for protesting. Women bearing the weight and entry of unwanted men. Tongues silenced for speaking out. Injustice upon injustice. Century after century.

The sun reminds me that I don't have the privilege or freedom or even permission of my ancestors to feel sorry for myself.

Lucinda and Lydia's Big Lu would probably be disappointed.

So would the millions of people who died in the crossing.

I wipe my tears.

They are right.

This is nothing.

I owe it to them, to myself, to future generations to push onward, no matter what. Even if that means charging credit cards, taking out loans, working day jobs I don't love. Even if that means inching forward slowly... I cannot stop this journey now.

In ancient times, people cut themselves and shed blood to create sacred bonds with one another or to seal a commitment. Maybe I can reframe this shedding of my blood as a bonding with the ocean. Maybe the triggerfish

was the ocean's great servant, called to initiate me. Maybe this was a necessary step to formally begin this quest on spiritual terms.

If Sri Lanka is the country where Adam, the Buddha, and Shiva took important steps on their journeys, maybe it's also fitting to add Black girl energy to this place. I felt that I'd been called to Sri Lanka; maybe it was so that I could inhabit this place of beginnings and greet the spirit of the ocean who was here before us all.

Her.

Yemayá.

The mother of all orishas in Yoruba cultures. She is the patron spirit of rivers and oceans. She is connected to the moon and to feminine mysteries. She is often syncretized with the Virgin Mary.

And she dances in my imagination. I came across her in college, in a philosophy of religion class, and have been intrigued ever since.

In paintings, she is a mermaid sometimes. Other times a woman. She is old. Young. Fat. Thin. She is a whirl of blue, of white. With braids. Long flowing hair. Bantu knots. Shaved head. Light brown skin. Dark brown skin. Ivory skin. She looks the way you want her to look.

I think she is the soul of the ocean. Not Aquaman or Poseidon. The ocean feels she-ish to me, decidedly feminine.

There's something about her vastness and endless horizon—we can chart her edges, but we will likely never truly get to the bottom of her.

Something about her quiet, unpredictable power—she rages at times, sinking ships, sending walls of water to cover whole towns when angry, but mainly, she exerts a steady power that does quiet, big, invisible work, changing coastlines, carving mountains over time, subtly shaping our world.

Something about her ability to shape-shift into five parts—the Atlantic, Pacific, Arctic, Indian, and Southern—artificial divisions because, really, she is one body. We call her these names to help us make sense of her complexity.

And she is the origin of all life. She covers more than 71 percent of our planet. All life started in her womb.

She spoke to me then; she speaks to me now.

Maybe she is the patron saint of all those Africans lost beneath the surface...maybe she is *my* patron saint.

In the end, I probably won't really notice the piece of me that's been taken. But I do feel the loss. I can tell my finger will never be the same.

But maybe I shouldn't feel the same. Maybe this tiny piece of me isn't too much to ask. My ancestors gave so much more, after all.

Maybe Yemayá is letting me know that this won't be easy, that there will be pain and heartache. And that's OK because she will be with me throughout it all.

**I LEAVE KALPITIYA ON THE** bus in the morning two days later. I am headed to the airport to start the next part of the journey in Thailand. Roshan and Aneka and I hug before I leave, exchanging numbers and promising to stay in touch.

And I see Anna and Gunter at breakfast again and wish them well. This time, I mean it.

Why shouldn't they find home here? Who am I to disparage that dream? It's important to lay down roots somehow. In Anna's case, this is the place and family she yearns for. In my case, this idea, this mission, calls me forth and somehow manages to ground me. I wish for us to all get what we desire.

The bus leaves the town behind. I roll down the coast in a window seat with the wind in my hair—yes, my hair is starting to grow back, albeit unevenly. More and more sprouting strands feel like bristles when I touch my head. But they are growing. As am I.

Into what, I don't know. I await the next curve of the path to reveal itself.

# CHAPTER TWO

The guy at the Dive Hands Lanta dive shop looks with sympathy over the counter at me as I stand there, my shoulders drooped and a frown on my face.

Somehow, I managed to arrive on the island of Koh Lanta, located off Thailand's mainland on the west side, at the tail end of dive season. It's a quiet, relaxed island with excellent dive centers. But apparently, the windy season starts at the end of April, beginning of May. And with all that wind stirring up big, choppy waves, it becomes a dangerous time to dive in the region. He tells me there's no more diving anywhere else in Thailand. Dive Hands Lanta is one of the only dive centers still open.

"We have boats going out until Friday," he says. "That's it. We might even stop before Friday if the weather is bad."

I count my four dives in Sri Lanka last month, including the triggerfish dive, plus the eight dives in Mexico for a total of 12 dives. I have 18 more to be ready for the DWP training next month.

As of today, I have only five days to get in these 18 dives.

The guy at the shop—his name tag reads Boon-Mee—tells me that if I sign up, their van will pick me up at my hotel at 6:45 a.m. each morning and return me back around 5:30 p.m. A full day. They will feed me breakfast, lunch, and snacks. We would do two dives before lunch and a final one before heading back to shore.

Five straight days of three dives a day. I will still be short three dives, but I can figure out a way to make them up later.

I sigh inwardly.

My back already hurts as I imagine the weight of all those tanks.

But I think about the ancestors again. And I know I'll do whatever I have to do.

"Can I sign up for dive trips on all five days, then?"

He looks at me in surprise and says, "Um, sure. Why not? And if we don't go out on one day, we'll let you know."

I hand over my credit card.

Boon-Mee reads my name on the card. "OK, Miss Tara!"

OK.

Let's do this.

**THE NEXT MORNING I WAKE** up early, at 5:30 a.m., and am ready to go at 6:15, resolution taut throughout my body. I wait near the check-in counter of my hotel.

An open-air truck with 10 other sleepy-looking people arrives right on schedule. I board last, as my hotel is the closest to the dive center. No one speaks as we rumble down the main road for another mile, watching the sky slowly lighten to a pale gray. The dive center is quiet but busy when we arrive, the staff buzzing around efficiently and with good cheer.

They hand out equipment, and we board a ship that couldn't be more different from Sanjeeva's wooden five-seater. This ship has three levels: the lowest, holding just our tanks and wet suits, two changing areas, and two bathrooms with sinks and toilets. Next is the main level with the captain's booth, a small kitchen, a lounge area with tables, and a large covered space with wooden benches lining the sides. And finally, an uncovered top level has benches for sun lovers.

When the ship takes off, I almost don't feel it moving. It is so big.

The captain gathers us around for our dive briefing, and then we head to the Bida Islands, which are located in Mu Ko Phi Phi National Park, about two hours away.

I am the only Black person on this boat of about 30 people. Everyone else is either White—all the paying divers—or Thai, most of the staff.

I feel self-conscious and conspicuous.

None of the other divers talk to me. To be fair, I'm the only one there who is traveling solo. Some smile at me. But mainly, everyone stays in their

own groups chatting in excitement and with familiarity. I hear British and Australian English, German, and, of course, Thai.

I sit on a bench and look out. It's beautiful: blue water everywhere. The rapidly dwindling island fades away on either side. The smell of the sea fills my nostrils. I feel like an intrepid explorer, going into the unknown, diving into the depths. I take deep breaths, tilt my head up, and close my eyes, allowing the ship to lull me into a moving meditation.

Boon-Mee clears his throat behind me, pulling me from my reverie. "Excuse me, Miss Tara," he says. He pronounces my name as "Thatta." "I will be your dive buddy since you dive alone. I will also be the instructor for a small group of us. Will you come join so that we can plan our dive together?"

I unfold myself and move to one of the tables where Boon-Mee has laid out laminated sheets with pictures and descriptions of the kinds of fish we might encounter. Already seated at the table are a British family: parents and two teens. Other clusters of people are gathered at the other tables.

Boon-Mee introduces us.

I smile, say hi, and take a seat.

Boon-Mee tells us that Koh Bida Nok and Koh Bida Nai, the parks we'll dive today, are essentially two very large limestone rocks. Beneath the surface, they form coral walls, and above the surface, they look like a small plot of land; there will also be, he says, a lot of colorful soft coral. We will go to Koh Bida Nok first; the dive plan is to follow the walls for a few miles, then turn back.

"It will be a good dive. How much you have dived before?" Boon-Mee asks.

The British family, whose names I've already forgotten, have experience; the adults are rescue divers, and the teens have their advanced open water certifications. I tell him that I'm newly certified as an open water diver, the very first level, and that this is only my second trip doing an ocean dive.

"You will do well, Miss Tara," he says with a smile. "Let's practice our hand signals."

And we do. Diving with Sanjeeva refreshed many of these for me already; the only thing I don't know is how to communicate the amount of air I have left. In the dives I've done, tanks come full with 3,000 psi, or

pounds of air per square inch. But at Dive Hands Lanta, they use the bar system. Two hundred bar or kilograms of air per square centimeter equals a full tank. The hand signals are also different.

“Yes,” he nods, smiling. “The signals are different. Let me show you. Half a tank looks like this.” He puts one horizontal hand on top of a hand that is vertical. Then he shows me a closed fist. “This is 50. You should never go below 50. When you get to 50, we should be coming up from the dive.” He puts his fist on his chest and says, “If that does happen, this is how you signal you are below 50.”

My nerves rack up a notch.

We arrive at the site, kit up in our gear.

I walk sideways in my fins to the edge of the launch area. I hold my goggles with one hand and tuck my regulator into the buoyancy control device. Then, I do a one-two-count giant stride off the boat into the water.

As I fall, the water rushes to meet me. I am enveloped in the ocean’s embrace. It’s a holy communion with Yemayá. I feel cushioned and buoyed by her. I nod my head in supplication.

Boon-Mee is already in. The British family drops one by one.

He checks us each, then makes the down signal with his hand.

We descend. I go down slower than the others, in what feels like slow motion. My ears take an extra moment to equalize. When I look down, I can see straight to the bottom, to the sandy ocean floor. Visibility is more than 50 feet. Fish dart here and there, and the reef spreads out in front of us: rocky, vibrant, colorful, full of life. I see snappers, tuna, porcelain crabs with pink dots dabbled along their outer shells, butterfly fish flashing brightly colored yellow stripes, and a reef shark that is about four feet long: The images from Boon-Mee’s laminated sheet come alive.

I stare in fascination at gorgonian fans: delicate membranes of deep colors bowing up and down in the water, alive in their own simple way. At the fish with the huge pink lips. At the school of tiny silverfish, all dressed in the same silver suit, who pass in formation like they are headed off to boarding school. At the sea rods and sea whips, waving their fingers at me. We know of at least 200,000 different species in the ocean. But because we have explored less than 10 percent of it, experts think there could be millions more.

There are also prey and predators down here, of course; it's not a fairyland. Some will eat and some will be eaten. But what I love most is the fullness and diversity of this life down here—life not necessarily as we humans might recognize it, but life nonetheless.

I wish every person in the world could go below the surface—to this mystical world with its whirl of blues and purples and grays, where difference just is and there is room to expand into our biggest and truest selves.

We finish the dive, then head up for our three-minute safety stop. I surface with these thoughts in mind and climb back onto the ship for lunch. There is a full spread of *gaeng keow wan gai* (green chicken curry) and *khao pad* (fried rice). It's delicious. We eat and rest.

Soon, we are ready for the second dive of the day.

Boon-Mee shares the dive plan once again. He says our next stop is nearby Koh Bida Nai, which, unlike Koh Bida Nok, has more boulders and fallen rocks that will make for some interesting swim-throughs, which are arches or short tunnels. Also, there are walls and caves and a coral outcrop called Fantasy Reef, where divers can explore a staghorn garden and maybe see leopard or blacktip sharks. Boon-Mee says we will get to as much of it as we can.

We jump in and descend again.

We're about 10 minutes into the dive when we approach the first swim-through, which is about 20 feet in length. The walls are maybe two feet wide.

I feel nervous for the first time. Will there be enough room for me and my tank through the arch? The fit seems too tight.

I take a deeper breath than necessary and hold it as I pass through the opening. I count to 10 and close my eyes to slits until I make it out—the last one in our group to do so.

We continue on, sweeping down into a cavern only about 50 feet deep. The current picks up a bit; I am going faster than I would like. The walls feel closer and seem to stretch all the way down into an abyss and all the way up to infinity. I can't see which way is out. And I feel the weight of the water on top of me.

Another swim-through appears: an arch, longer this time, with an exit that looks so far away. The opening seems even tighter than the first; I think

my tank brushes the top, but I can't tell for sure. Everything seems wrong. And with the regulator in my mouth, the mask covering my eyes and nose, and my body constricted by the air tank on my back, I start to feel trapped. My heart beats faster. I feel tears leak from my eyes. I try to slow my breath. My chest rises and falls rapidly. I can't get enough air.

We make it out and then flow into another cavern, just as deep as the other.

My breath becomes shallower. Quick *in* breaths. I don't even notice the *out* breaths. My hands begin to shake as I worry that I'm not going to be able to make it back to the surface. If I don't get myself together, I could spiral out of control right here. Dead Black girl in the waters of Thailand.

I tell myself that I'm OK, to just remember to breathe. But I bump into coral. My fins crash into a reef. Dust explodes in the water around me and fish swim out, disturbed. My arms are windmilling out to the sides, trying to keep me from bumping into the reef again, but my fins hit it again. I don't know how many homes I destroy. More tears.

I finally get back into open space, but the current is still pushing me along.

And now, although the mask feels tight around my nose, water has seeped inside. Soon, the water covers my nose, and is inching closer to my eyes.

Everything looks foggy. My breath is ragged.

I attempt to clear my mask, one of the first skills I learned as a new scuba diver. I tilt my head back and press the mask at a point on my forehead until there is a tiny opening at the bottom, then blow out quickly through my nose. Nothing happens. I still have water in my mask. I blow again. It finally clears.

But now, pressure all around my nose, a throbbing pain like I have a sinus infection, radiates around my nasal bones.

And I realize have lost sight of Boon-Mee and the British family.

I look around in panic and finally see a flash of color. I am far behind. I swim forward as quickly as I can, my limbs flailing.

I catch up to the others as we finally come out of the cavern and back into a wide-open space. I breathe a sigh of relief, but I'm still rattled, and I am so tired.

Boon-Mee comes to check on me.

He signals to ask if I am OK.

I try to smile even though I know he can't see it, then signal I'm OK. I don't want him to know I struggled.

He taps his pointer and middle finger on his palm to ask about my air supply.

I look at my gauge. It's at 40 bar.

Shit.

He said earlier that we're never supposed to go below 50.

I stare at it in disbelief. Such a rookie mistake. I wish I could pretend it was another number.

I wish I didn't have to tell him the truth.

I put my fist to my chest.

He swims closer and looks at my gauge. I can tell Boon-Mee is immediately alarmed. He signals for me to breathe from his octopus, an alternative breathing device that hangs from the side of the BCD and is used in the event a diving buddy gets low on air and needs to share an air tank.

He checks his gauge, which I see is at 100 bar, exactly halfway, where mine should be. He unfolds his octopus, mimics how to exchange it for the one in my mouth, and then hands it to me. I manage to exchange it smoothly. Once it's in my mouth, he gestures for me to slow my breathing —I guess I'm still breathing rapidly—and signals to the other divers to head back now.

I make an effort to calm down. But I feel like a child breathing through his octopus. It's bright yellow, clearly marked as a supplemental device for someone in trouble. I feel humiliated that my trouble will be so apparent to the others. We take another, faster route back, avoiding the caves and swim-throughs, thank goodness. We do our three-minute safety stop, surface near the ship, then climb aboard.

Boon-Mee sees the expression on my face and pats me on the back as I take off my mask on the ship. "It's OK," he says. "These things happen. We made it back safely. That's all that matters."

I smile back, appreciating his kindness. But all I can think is that Kamau and my instructors at UAS would be disappointed. Then I realize the truth: I'm the one who is disappointed.

The UAS instructors taught me better than this. We spent three whole months training, whereas most divers get certified in a weekend. But UAS

took the extra time to help us get it right, because they know most folks don't think Black people can swim, let alone dive. Some think we don't belong in the water at all, with clubs and policies excluding us from the sport over the decades.

UAS wants its members to be able to stand tall on these dive boats and look anyone in the eye with the certainty that we can handle ourselves underwater.

I want that.

But I didn't get to experience it on this dive. Not only am I the only Black person on the boat, but I am the only one who needed to be rescued.

We eat lunch.

I stay to myself. The British family doesn't say anything to me, and I wonder if they feel cheated out of their last 20 minutes of this adventure. I wouldn't blame them if they did. On the final dive, which is a short excursion along the same reef, I keep my head down, determined to not need help. And I don't.

Boon-Mee tells me I did well afterward.

I smile again, still embarrassed.

We return to the mainland, and I'm dropped off at the hotel at 5:30, as they said. Almost a 12-hour day.

I am exhausted.

I take a shower and fall straight in bed with a heavy heart.

**I WAKE EARLY AGAIN THE** next morning, still feeling out of sorts, and head out to the lobby to wait for the truck. As I sit there, I consider the main thing I want to practice during my dive today. It's so obvious, I feel ridiculous, and somewhat regretful, for not thinking about it earlier.

Peak performance buoyancy or neutral buoyancy.

Back in Mexico, Kamau told me that neutral buoyancy—the skill of being able to remain stationary in the ocean at will—is the most important thing for a diver to learn. Especially a diver who will be mapping shipwrecks.

"You will be down there over a piece of wreckage, sketching it on your drawing slate. And the currents will knock you about if you're not careful,"

Kamau said at breakfast one day.

Even though it was just the two of us at the table, I had a hard time trying to catch his soft voice. Kamau is tall, about six foot two—he towers over me. He has wiry, ropy muscles and sharp-edged, almost Romanesque, facial features underneath a curly Afro. You would think his voice would be as strong and as sharp-edged as he is. But instead, it's so soft you often have to lean in closely to hear him.

He said, “The current will push you into reefs, into other marine life, into your buddy. Mastering it makes all the difference.”

I didn't take him that seriously then. So later that day, when Kim, the instructor who oversaw our scuba certification at the quarry, offered us newbies a neutral buoyancy class in the shallow edge of the ocean near our resort, I declined. After three days straight of diving, my back hurt so much and I was so tired that I just couldn't imagine an extra class. I didn't go.

Afterward, Kamau shook his head at me, incredulously. “Really?” he asked in that soft voice. “You really didn't go, Tara?”

I felt self-righteous in my pain that day. Justified.

But a year later, I still remember that head shake and the sound of his voice: incredulity mixed with disappointment. I wonder if practicing my buoyancy would have made a difference in my air consumption yesterday. Would I have been less prone to panic if I'd been surer in my ability to control where I wanted to go?

Probably.

I hop on the truck, which is right on time at 6:30, with a different group of folks still half-asleep. When we arrive at the center, I wave to Boon-Mee, who tells me he will be my buddy again today.

We all board the boat. I look around in the rising daylight, and again see only White British and German divers who mainly keep to themselves, as well as a small group of Australians who will also be part of Boon-Mee's group.

During the briefing, Boon-Mee tells us that we will dive Koh Phi Phi and swim along the Palong Wall (which is more of a slope than a wall and is only about 60 feet deep); Maya Bay, which drops down to a sandy bottom; and, if there is time, Loh Sama Bay, a small bay with coral gardens. No caverns and swim-throughs on this dive.

I think all three sound perfect for my plan today. I go back to sit on the bench alone with a tea and try to remember what I know from my training about achieving neutral buoyancy.

First, I remember that, to avoid touching something sensitive on the bottom, like coral, you breathe in to rise. And to avoid bumping into anything overhead or to sink a little lower, you breathe out. To hover, you have to take full breaths very slowly, like you're sipping air through a straw. And if you take very fast, full breaths, you will rise and fall back-to-back—a skill to practice for navigating different diving environments at the same time. Like swim-throughs and caverns.

OK.

We arrive. I kit up again and we all descend, following Boon-Mee around another beautiful site.

As I peer into nooks and crannies and swim along the reefs, I practice. I practice over delicate coral, contracting the muscles in my legs so hard that my fins stick straight out. I try to stay still in the water as fish swim around me.

I want to look like Boon-Mee, who swims with his arms folded across his chest. He never uses his hands to propel himself forward or back. Kamau is the same way, except he swims with his hands clasped together in front at his waist. They both look so cool and relaxed. I remember diving with Kamau on our last day in Mexico; during our safety stop, he folded his long legs cross-legged and sat in the middle of the water like a yogi. I tried to do it too. But I couldn't get my legs to cross properly with the fins in the way, and then I kept sinking, which meant I had to blow air into my BCD. Very unmeditative-like.

One day, maybe. I'm not there yet, but my control is getting a bit better. Soon, I'm no longer scrambling back from reef walls that I inadvertently hit when the current drives me along.

I feel proud of myself, and at least I don't run out of air.

When we get ready for our safety stop, I'm still at 70 bar. Not bad, Thatta.

## **ON WEDNESDAY AND THURSDAY, I** practice more and steady myself.

I think about rip currents: the powerful, narrow streams of water that form when waves break near the shoreline and then move rapidly away toward the ocean through low spots or breaks in sandbars or near piers and other structures. Rip currents are capable of sweeping even the strongest swimmers out to sea and are often called “killer currents” for good reason.

But here’s the thing: Swimmers, divers, and surfers learn to manage them. We learn you can’t swim against them. If you try to fight them and swim back to shore, you won’t win; you’ll just tire yourself out and the current will likely break you. Instead, you either must relax and allow the current to carry you out to sea until you reach the point where it weakens, or you need to swim parallel to the shore or perpendicular to the current to get out of its stream. Either way, you become passive and move in a way that may seem contrary to your best interest. You have to be in a state of flow.

So that’s what I do: I relax and release a little bit more. I try to trust in a bigger logic. I begin to master control of myself.

And each evening, after 12 hours of this work, I drop into bed after my shower, exhausted, my back aching from carrying the tank and weights. And I fall into deep, dreamless sleep.

## **THE LAST DAY.**

We dive the Koh Haa, five uninhabited spits of land.

Boon-Mee is not here. We’re a smaller group on a smaller boat. And I’m buddied with another instructor.

The divers are a bit different too. Today, in addition to the Germans and Brits, a female Thai diver traveling alone, like me, joins us.

I make my way—maybe a bit too eagerly—to the Thai diver who sits cross-legged on a bench by herself. I’m so happy to see someone who’s not part of a group that I feel like an overeager puppy. She looks like she’s in her mid-20s and has spiky, short hair. She is friendly and tells me her name is River. She’s from up north and fell into diving by accident. Now she’s a

rescue diver—the next certification after advanced open water—who takes herself on a scuba adventure each year.

River sits with a huge underwater camera case in her lap. On her side is a bag holding a fancy camera, along with lights and a lens. She tells me that she's teaching herself underwater photography. I immediately love her bright, can-do spirit, and ask what she likes to photograph.

She says that she focuses on small things. And she shows me her photos. She pays no attention to obvious targets like reef sharks, clown fish, barracuda, or even the gorgeous gorgonian fans. Instead, she looks for tiny creatures or organisms living on corals underneath a bit of algae or peeking from the crevice of a rock on the sandy floor. Truly, the small things.

"We miss so much by going so big and wide," River says. "But life is in the details, in the small moments. Looking for the small things forces me to pay attention."

Damn. That's good.

It's a bumpy ride out to the Koh Haa dive site. The waves are getting stronger. I understand why this will likely be the last day dive boats can go out.

River and I dive in different groups, but are close enough that occasionally, she takes pictures of me underwater and beckons me over to show me what she is photographing.

First, she points out a creature that resembles a fuzzy white inchworm, maybe three inches long, with spiky black bristles. Next time, a tiny pop of purple on an outcropping of blue coral and green sea rods. The plant looks like an individual leaf of radicchio. How did she spot either of them out here? I experience a different kind of wonder with her. And I reflect on what tiny things I'll need to pay attention to along this journey.

## AFTER LUNCH, WE DESCEND FOR our second and third dives.

I practice my buoyancy. Up breaths, I rise. Down breaths, I fall. I rise and fall in a state of flow.

I imagine myself as an astronaut. Or an alien visiting a new world. Saying hello to the locals.

Others might think I'm a real diver, an expert diver, if they watched. Only occasionally do I windmill my arms. Mainly, I keep them clasped in front of me.

Something moves in my peripheral vision as I peer into a crevice. I turn my head and see a huge sea turtle over five feet in diameter, with light pink skin and big black dots. Its legs and stubby arms work in tandem and seemingly, in slow motion.

I don't try to interact. I learned my lesson in Sri Lanka. Instead, I bow my head in respect and keep my hands folded across my body as it nears. My breathing is slow, calm. For the first time in five days, I feel only peace in my mind. I've learned the lesson that the only thing I can control below the surface is myself.

The turtle—maybe Yemayá's messenger—turns its head, and I swear it winks at me as it gently floats past.

**TO CATCH MY RETURN FLIGHT** home, I fly to Phuket, the biggest of all the islands in Thailand and known for its beaches, shopping, and nightlife. I give myself an extra day there before leaving the country and decide to visit Kata Beach, which, though less busy than the more popular Patong Beach, is still lively enough with bustling shops and restaurants.

I spy a fairly bare portion of sand, populated with rows of empty chairs. I spread out, contemplating ordering a mango juice from the menu the waiter has handed me when I hear a toddler's voice speaking in English.

“Mama, Mama, I wanna get in the water!”

It's a little Black girl, around three or four. And she is with a Black woman—her mother, I presume. They have American accents.

“Yes, my love, we will get in the water.”

They come closer. I see the mother more clearly. She's about five foot two or three, with a headful of natural black hair swept in an updo. As they come toward me, the mother smiles; they put their things down on a chair near me. She seems a little harried.

I smile back. “She's adorable.”

She is. The little girl, full of curiosity and confidence, is wearing a pink one-piece, with floaties tied to her arms. She pays me no mind; she's just intent on getting to the water.

The mother says, "I'm just going to take her for a quick dip. Can we leave our things here?"

I say yes and I watch as they go to the water.

The little girl runs and shouts in glee. Her mother follows in her wake a bit more slowly, but just as enthusiastically.

"Wait for me, love."

They splash in the water for just a little while and come back.

"Thank you so much for watching my things. Whew. She's been wanting to get in the water all morning. She was going to bust if I didn't take her! I'm Sherri, by the way, and this is Moni."

Turns out Sherri is a single mom. She pulls out toys for Moni to play with, pays the lounge chair fee, and orders a mango drink from the hovering waiter. Settling in, she tells me her story with little prompting.

She met a guy. It was intense. The pregnancy was a surprise. The guy left. The little girl is the joy of her life; she is taking time off to travel with her and see the world. She has two months of vacation and always wanted to visit Thailand. She thinks it's important to start exposing Moni to other cultures now.

I am fascinated. I used to dream of having a child and traveling the world with my bundle of joy. But when push came to shove, I thought a child would slow me down. Now, seeing Sherri and Moni, my heart beats faster. Did I make the wrong choice?

I was 38 when I reached the crossroads that many women face in their lives—when you either choose to make it happen or not. My boyfriend of four years had broken up with me a year earlier, and I hadn't really bounced back. I'd thought that relationship would lead to marriage and felt lost when it ended. I spoke to a medical intuitive about my menstrual cycle, which had become ridiculously heavy and frequent around the same time. She scanned my body and declared that I had no emotional blockages or other physical problems. That my body wanted to be pregnant, that if I had a baby, my cycle would become normal.

I cried on the phone that day.

I wanted a child. Badly. But I didn't want to do it alone. I had watched my mom struggle financially and emotionally to raise me without the help of my father, who was only a tangential part of my life growing up. He existed on the outskirts, only coming into focus on the occasions that I trekked the 600 miles to visit him in another state. Mainly, he was absent and not that interested in me. And I was OK with that.

Their relationship always perplexed me. My mom had met my father, who was a graduate student, when she was an undergraduate. I hear he was slick and brilliant—the first person in his family to go to college and get a Ph.D.—and he became a history professor and the chair of his department at Elizabeth City State University, an HBCU in North Carolina. In the one picture I have of the two of us, I am a fat baby, and sit on his lap. He has his arm around my waist, and he is leaning to the side, his stylish black horn-rimmed glasses gleaming in the light, a neat mustache, and a big ring on his finger. Shorts covering the tops of his smooth brown legs. You can tell he has swagger. He must have, to have snagged my mom.

She was the homecoming queen of Elizabeth City State University back in the 1960s. In her homecoming picture in the yearbook, she looks so beautiful in her crown and white satin dress, which spills on the floor around her feet. She's elegant, delicate looking with fine, thin features. Although she's tall at five seven, she's kinda skinny. Not very curvaceous, but lovely, graceful, and doe-like.

They were together five years. But he drifted away. I gather that it was off and on. That my father had side chicks. Or maybe my mother was actually the side chick. My uncle, who married my mom's sister and was my father's best friend, tells me at my father's funeral that my father had three main goals in life: to become the chair of his department, to marry a White woman, and to drive a Cadillac. He achieved all three.

I didn't fit in the picture.

Maybe I sound bitter.

Well, maybe I am.

I saw my father only on annual visits with my grandmother, as they lived in neighboring towns. He married Linda, who was kind to me over the years. They had two boys and then divorced a few years later. I hear he was abusive. He also had a difficult relationship with one of his boys, but he was at least present for them. They lived in the same city, in the same house for

a while; he provided for them and was a consistent presence in their lives. He did not provide for me financially and rarely initiated contact.

My mom, on the other hand, worked three jobs trying to keep food on our table.

When he was close to the end of his life, suffering from early stage dementia and liver disease because of too many rum and Cokes, I visited him at his home to make amends and say goodbye. My brothers didn't think he had long.

I knocked on his door.

He opened it and peered at me with a puzzled look on his face.

“Sheila?” he asked with a crease between his brows.

I shook my head, my smile frozen in place.

“Dawn?”

I shook my head again, a funny feeling now in my stomach.

“Wait, I’ve got it...Debbie!”

He didn’t remember me.

“I’m Tara,” I said in a small voice. “Your daughter.”

To his credit, he looked aghast and apologized over and over again. We sat on his porch, on the steps, and he asked me to forgive him. I tried to smile and said I would.

His face lightened with memories.

“Hey, remember when we drove down to Disney World?...”

“Wasn’t it funny when we got to the time-share?...”

“Oh, what about that time we had dinner at that fancy restaurant?...”

My heart felt heavy in my body.

I had none of these memories because I had never been invited on any of these trips. Even though he had to pass through Atlanta to get to Florida, he never stopped to see me, never asked me to join.

I always felt like something must have been wrong with me. Maybe I wasn’t pretty enough. Smart enough. Good enough for him. Maybe I wasn’t worthy of his love. My mother was fair-skinned. She’d been born with red hair, freckles, and light brown eyes. And Linda was a White woman. Back then, I felt like I was just an ordinary, brown-skinned girl with nappy hair. Maybe I didn’t deserve to be loved.

I know firsthand the struggles of a kid to feel OK inside without the love and attention of her father. And I know the other side, my mom’s side:

how difficult it is to raise a kid alone.

I didn't want either for me or for my kid.

But watching Sherri and Moni, I wonder if I'd been shortsighted.

Maybe I could have made it work.

I became obsessed with being a mother after my visit with the medical intuitive. I thought I could find a partner, get married, and start the journey of parenthood if I really put my mind to it. I joined Match and eharmony. I asked friends to set me up. I dated like crazy. And I dated crazy. The beautiful model who didn't understand how to conjugate verbs but wanted to be a poet and insisted on reading me everything he wrote. He was such a good kisser. The playwright who brought out my creativity and wore headscarves everywhere—I never saw his actual head. His plays always had slightly inappropriate mother/son displays of intimacy. Only after I met the personal trainer with the gorgeous body and sexy smile and found out he kept four fully grown Afghan hounds who bayed and barked constantly and pooped on the floor in the foyer of his NYC apartment did I realize I needed another plan.

I thought more about doing it alone. I read every book I could find on being a single mom. I read about sperm banks and in vitro fertilization (IVF). I talked to my lesbian friends who had used turkey basters. I talked to my hetero friends who had ended up pregnant without the guy in the picture. I looked up single mom support groups. I talked to my mom, who said she would support me.

The kicker came when I roped my dear male gay friend into agreeing to be a sperm donor and co-parenting with me. He was into it. He worked on Wall Street, was stable, kind. And I loved him. We'd been friends for more than 15 years. He told me he'd do it, but to think about it carefully because I might want to have this kid with a partner one day.

I did think about it for weeks, but I thought he was my answer. I called to tell him to get his swimmers tested, that it was on, I wanted to do it. He agreed.

Two weeks later, he passed away suddenly from a heart attack.

I was devastated. And that ended all serious consideration for a long while.

By this time, I was a freelancer with no insurance or money for medical procedures anyway. A good friend said then that if I was serious, if I really

wanted a child, I needed to settle down, get a job with benefits, and move back to Atlanta where I could be close to a support system.

But I couldn't do it. I just couldn't imagine my life with the kind of job that would give me benefits that might include IVF treatments. It wouldn't be a side job working for a magazine, or a small organization with a few employees. It would probably need to be a corporation. I felt like I'd be stuck in a box. It makes my heart clench even now when I think about it.

And then it was too late. My menstrual cycle ended abruptly. And I went into menopause at age 40.

I'd missed the moment to do it naturally: That's exactly what the medical intuitive had warned about. Of course, I spent at least another year thinking that maybe it could still happen if I tried hard enough and looked into alternative healing methods.

The three doctors I saw in rapid succession gave me the side-eye when they heard I was going through menopause but still wanted to give birth to a child naturally. They all said firmly that my body would not be able to produce a child, that it was medically impossible. But I wasn't convinced this was true. Doctors only know so much about the human body.

I went to a healer in Brazil who laid hands on my womb. I got tarot card readings. Because I was no longer producing eggs, a younger friend offered hers so I could carry a baby to term. I studied the procedure.

Then I found out that the healer in Brazil was indicted on several counts of molestation and rape. My friend who offered her eggs got married and started building her own family.

I considered adoption. But ruled it out while watching on the sidelines as several friends went through the wringer financially and emotionally when the birth parents changed their minds during the adoption process.

And then I realized I was searching for all these answers outside of myself, and this had nothing to do with me following my intuition or listening to my heart.

The truth is: I had made a number of decisions that took me away from the path of having a child of my own. And so I just stopped one day.

I stopped everything. I stopped researching. I stopped looking for other solutions. And I surrendered to the universe. If it was meant to happen, it would, with no intervention on my part. And if it wasn't, I would be OK

with it. My life would not be defined for the worse because I did not have a child. I moved on.

At least I thought I did.

But meeting Sherri and Moni, all that longing comes rushing back. Maybe I could have had a kid and still traveled the world. Maybe I didn't need a partner and could have worked for a year or two in a nine-to-five job to get it all in motion. Maybe I could have fostered an older child, then hopped on the road. Maybe my kid and I could have had an unusual and interesting life together. Maybe we would have grown up together.

I still feel her loss. I feel the ghost of him. I feel the possibility of them. And part of me mourns.

Some physicists say the universe splits off every time we come to a juncture and make a choice. That another you, somewhere, made the choice you didn't make. A new universe exists. Imagine how many times you make decisions in a day, month, year, over a lifetime. Imagine how many universes must exist if that theory is correct. Maybe in a universe out there, Tara and a kid hop on planes and trains and buses, living a life of adventure.

I don't know.

I hang with Sherri and Moni until the sun sets. We laugh and float in the water together. I enjoy watching Moni with her rich brown skin, her little legs still puffy with baby fat, her can-do attitude.

At one point, a wave knocks her down. I'm closest so I pick her up. And even through the tangy smell of the sea, I smell her baby scent as I hold her and walk her over to her mother.

It touches me deeply.

But this work, this mission, also touches me deeply. I didn't make the choice to have a child. I chose this life instead. I pulled it toward me with eyes wide open and both hands tugging furiously.

I stop questioning.

And I realize something new that makes me extremely uncomfortable. Maybe I'm more like my father than I thought. He also leaned into his dreams and his life's mission above all else. He was the only one of his brothers and sisters to have a professional career beyond their small town in North Carolina—my brother Melvin says he was the third Black person to get a Ph.D. from Ohio State University—in the 1960s. He had focus and determination and pulled his life toward him too, despite the odds.

I have begun to think of my journey as one that travels a curvy path. The design of my life doesn't run narrow and straight; instead, it curves gently and sometimes turns in on itself, even seeming to tread backward on occasion. But somehow, miraculously, it still manages to move me forward.

I just need to keep putting one foot in front of the other, focusing on the small things like River suggested, and seeing where my choices take me.

**I ARRIVE AT PHUKET'S AIRPORT** early. I'm ready to fly home, and to participate in the Diving With a Purpose training in four weeks.

As I wait for my flight, an email with a link to another grant appears unsolicited in my inbox.

The universe is calling.

The link takes me to a page for storytelling grants from the National Geographic Society. This storytelling grant is very different from the Fulbright Fellowship. It's much less money—only \$30,000—but still more than enough for me. And this grant has no requirement to focus on only one country or to have language fluency. Plus, the Society is making the ocean a priority this year. And they have an interest in human history and elevating stories of marginalized cultures.

It might be perfect, but there is a catch: The grant application is due in two days.

I download the application. Heart racing, I'm writing before I even board the plane.

# CHAPTER THREE

I write furiously on the plane. And at the airport.

Ken has sent someone to pick me up, but my driver gets into a fender bender and is delayed a couple hours. I use the time to edit and fine-tune my answers. I create a document for the application questions and choose my words, looking for that rhythm I felt on the beach. Eventually, it comes. I get excited again.

I sit in a quiet corner with my bags under my legs and imagine myself in these faraway places, helping to bring the stories of these communities up from the depths. It feels right. My heart swells.

I read over my words one last time, put my hand over my heart, and press send.

**DOWN THE OVERSEAS HIGHWAY,** A 113-mile stretch of road spans the coral and limestone islands of the Florida Keys and connects them to the mainland. Past unmanned tolls and an oversize Whole Foods, right near the famous Mrs. Mac's Kitchen is a right-side turnoff.

This turnoff leads to a cul-de-sac of blocky, concrete buildings, perhaps boring and uninviting to the average eye. All, that is, but one. Located on one side of the half circle, it teems with life and laughter. Scuba gear dries on the grass and picnic tables out front. The front door slams open and closed as people move outside to chat and slap at the mosquitoes buzzing around. Smells of chicken—baked, fried, roasted—along with mac and cheese and collard greens for the evening meal waft through cracks in the

door. There is also vegan chili and a freshly cut mango so sweet it dissolves on your tongue and makes you moan just a little as it goes down.

This activity is happening in the place I'm staying: the National Park Service's Florida Bay Interagency Science Center in Key Largo. I'm at the Diving With a Purpose annual weeklong training.

I made it: from D.C. to Sri Lanka to Thailand and now to Florida. Four months, 27 ocean dives, and what feels like a whole lifetime later, I am here. I didn't get those extra three dives in, but Ken graciously allowed me to come anyway.

I arrived three days ago on a Sunday afternoon. Walking into the Science Center's big, humble front room with my bags, I couldn't stop grinning. The center is equipped with three lumpy couches and five long scratched and weathered folding tables, folding chairs, and an open kitchen. In back, I find two bathrooms and six rooms with two bunk beds and a desk each.

I'd been assigned one of the bunk rooms with 11 other people, including Sydney, a dancer and newly graduated college student who majored in archaeology. She used to be afraid to swim but learned how just to participate in DWP. There is also Justin, 30, and Ayana, 28, the wunderkinds. Ayana and Justin were already terrestrial archaeologists and professors, as well as the founders of the Society of Black Archaeologists. There is also a sweet archaeology Ph.D. student named Gabby studying at the University of Tulsa; a college environmental science major named Rachel, who's been involved in this work since she was 14 years old and was one of the women in the photograph in the National Museum of African American History and Culture; and Justine, an archaeologist and co-founder of YDWP, DWP's youth chapter. Rounding out the group are Silviana and Aisha, two returning YDWPs; Phillip, a member of UAS who was at the quarry when I first got certified; and of course, Ken Stewart.

Ken, my pal and herald, the one who called me forth and who continues to encourage me onward in this voyage of becoming.

When we finally meet in person, he says, "Tara Roberts. You are here."

I grin back and say, "Yes, Ken Stewart, I am here."

I pull him into a hug.

He is shorter than I imagined and a ball of energy. Ken steps with the quickness and slickness of an uptown New Yorker and is meticulously

groomed: salt-and-pepper beard and mustache as neat as can be. And he has that beautiful voice that rises and falls with the cadence of a soulful love song.

Kamau is here too. Well, not in residence at the Science Center, but here for the training. Other divers like Kamau—with partners, spouses, and children in tow—stay at a hotel a few miles away. Over this next week, they will come daily for briefings and slide presentations, returning to their hotels in the evenings.

Everyone staying at the Science Center is in their teens or 20s or early 30s, except me and Ken. And yet Ken keeps talking to me as if I'm one of them. "We need you young people to take over from us old people," he says whenever we sit down together. "You're young, and we need you to help guide the way forward."

It's strange because I realize that it's not just Ken; everyone thinks I'm much younger than I am, and I don't correct them. I feel something like embarrassment—or is it shame?—to admit out loud that I am still figuring out my life at age 48.

I don't live like anyone else I know. For one, I keep moving. Two, I don't have a partner. Most people are coupled, I find, even if nontraditionally. When you are grown, you're supposed to have settled down...to at least have a partner and your own permanent address.

Sometimes, I think I'm a freak.

I think back to Anna and Roshan. It's easy to see differences in terms of race, gender, and age, but it's less obvious when the differences center around priorities and lifestyle. Maybe Anna, Gunter, Roshan, and Aneka are more alike than I gave them credit for. They all want Kalpitiya to be home, and they all value nuclear family.

Most of DWP's seasoned divers are in their late 50s and on up. They're the ones I'm probably closest to in terms of life experience, but most of them are settled into their lives. Few seem to be living untethered like me. And those who are branching out into new spaces have already done their years in the office, already produced their kids, given marriage a try. They did what society expected of them. Even Ken had a wife, is retired from his corporate job, and has grown kids and grandchildren and a stable place he calls home in Nashville.

I feel like I don't quite fit at the hotel with the older crew. But I also don't fully fit with the younger crew either, even though most of them are pushing their own boundaries—especially around gender and sexuality—and are smart, thoughtful, and living nomadic lives like me. But society makes exceptions for the young, grants them the space to experiment. Their choices now don't reflect on their characters much. I wonder if any of this young crew will bow to the pressure to roost in 10 or 15 or 20 years—to suit up and play their proper role in society.

I once heard a story about writer, folklorist, poet, ethnographer, and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, the OG Black woman explorer. Apparently, she lied about her age for years, telling people she was 10 years younger than she really was. After her mother died when she was 13 years old, her father cast her out of the house and she had to halt her education to work. At 26, she went back to complete her high school studies, but said she was 16 to qualify for enrollment.

What's most interesting to me is that after she finished her studies, she still maintained the fiction of her age. When vaunted author Alice Walker—another sista-writer hero of mine—found Zora's unmarked grave in 1973, she had a tombstone made and inscribed it with the wrong birth date. Only careful research by Zora's biographers in the 1980s and '90s revealed that she'd been born 10 years earlier.

I wonder if Zora lied about her age because she felt it was easier than dealing with the expectations of what a Black woman could or could not be as she aged.

In any event, Zora did not live like anyone else around her. In 1928, at age 37, she was the first African American woman to graduate from Barnard College. She traveled around the South gathering folktales, songs, and dances, documenting the lives of workers and their families at mines and railroad camps. She received two Guggenheim Fellowships to do research in Haiti and in Honduras. She was a singer and a poet. She wrote articles, short stories, plays, and books, and in the 1920s was one of the most widely read authors of the Harlem Renaissance. She also withstood withering criticism from her male peers, who derided her work because she wrote her dialogue in rural African American dialect. Her characters, to some, appeared backward or inappropriate.

People didn't get Zora. She died penniless in a welfare home in 1960, her books long out of print, her contributions largely forgotten. Attention by writers Toni Morrison and Alice Walker in the 1970s brought her extraordinary life to the forefront, and led to the reprints of works like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, now considered one of the most important books in Black literature.

My father also died with little fanfare. His church funeral was half-full; only a few people spoke to his memory. A preacher who didn't know him delivered the eulogy. Considering the number of fractured relationships he left behind, this turnout made sense.

But a new, even more uncomfortable thought has wiggled its way deeper into my mind. Maybe my father also didn't fit in, no matter how much he tried. It couldn't have been easy for a smart Black man, born in the rural South in the 1930s, to do something different than what was expected of him—something trailblazing. His legacy has mainly been forgotten: No books mention him, and his picture doesn't appear on the internet. But perhaps, even more so than with his two boys, his legacy of difference rages loudest in me. Maybe we are connected by a thread only the universe could have strung.

This evening, as dusk approaches, I walk to the dock at the end of the complex, which connects the center to the waters of Everglades National Park. I sit on the edge with my legs stretched out for just a few minutes. I close my eyes and listen to the motor of a small boat passing by and the crickets chirping in the distance.

I think of Zora again. I think of my father.  
And I feel more alone than ever.

## Day One

Bright and early at 8:00 a.m., 30 of us grab coffee, tea, and fruit, and sit at the tables in the Science Center. Erik Denson, a chief National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) electrical engineer, DWP board member, and lead instructor, uses a low-tech projector to teach us about maritime archaeology.

Archaeology is the study of human history and prehistory through both excavation of sites and analysis of artifacts and physical remains. Maritime archaeology, we learn from Erik, applies the same principles through interactions with oceans, lakes, and river systems. Often, maritime work focuses on shipwrecks.

I already knew from the National Museum of African American History and Culture that between the 16th and 19th centuries, 36,000 voyages brought Africans to the Americas. This information exists through the meticulous examination of records by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, which sourced these numbers. According to its estimates, anywhere between 500 and 1,000 of those ships might have wrecked.

But I didn't know that most of the ships went down near coasts, on reefs, and in relatively shallow water, with maximum depths of about 80 feet. I also didn't know that these ships are notoriously difficult to find and identify.

Apparently, you can't just go for a dive one sunny afternoon and happen upon a slave shipwreck. Most vessels from that time period were made of wood; when they perished, they splintered on the ocean floor and disintegrated over the centuries. Moreover, our ocean is covetous. She claims such losses, hiding pieces under sand and in coral reefs, and even delivering bits for marine life to make into homes.

We learn that the work of finding slave shipwrecks actually starts on land, in the archives. These are typically housed in government-funded or university collections (the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, for example, was created by Emory University; the University of California, Irvine; and the University of California, Santa Cruz). Archives often include items like logbooks, sales transactions, business records, advertisements, and insurance claims.

These archives reveal so much—namely, just how many industries were connected to the slave trade. Most people think that plantation owners in the South were the only ones with interest in the business and profitability of human trafficking. But in fact, this interest extended over many industries across the United States and Europe. For example, shipbuilders in Rhode Island, Maryland, Denmark, England, and the Netherlands built the ships; banks in New York, England, and Germany funded the voyages; blacksmiths built shackles and instruments of torture; ropemakers supplied

rope; caulkers scraped hulls and made sure the ships were seaworthy; insurance companies insured the voyages against loss. When a ship went down, captains or financiers, or both, would file claims to recoup their investments. Insurance companies would investigate, leaving a trail of records, sometimes ending in court with depositions that gave firsthand accounts by the crew.

These often detailed claims help to pinpoint wrecking events and give clues about where a ship may have come from, how many stops it made and where, who was aboard, what materials were traded, how it went down, and how many Africans died in the event. It must be noted that Africans lost on such journeys would not be named as individuals in these claims; collectively, they were valuable cargo, but individually they were dispensable, replaceable, with perhaps a bit more value than the teapots or spices on board. The families of captive Africans would not be reimbursed for the loss of life.

The slave trade was a win-win for businessmen, investors, and ultimately consumers of goods like cotton shirts and pants, tea, and sweets. It was lucrative for almost everyone except the Africans who had been captured and were bound for enslavement.

Once a rough location is identified through the archives, there is still much more to accomplish before scuba divers get involved. First, archaeologists begin the process of surface surveying, using technology like magnetometers, side-scan sonars, or sub-bottom profilers. These scanners sit on the boat, and as it plows over the area where a wreck may be located, they scan for magnetic anomalies—objects made of steel or iron, like the small metal findings that might have held wood plankings together. The boat goes up and down the area, one strip at a time, back and forth. They call this process “mowing the lawn.” And it has to be done over and over again, because the ocean floor discloses at whim. What may be seen today may not be seen tomorrow.

Finally, the scuba divers like us (or underwater archaeology advocates, which we’ll be called when we finish the course) enter the process. We investigate the anomalies from the scanners. We apply our eagle eyes to discern specific kinds of anomalies underwater. We look for straight edges and lines, 90-degree angles and perfect circles, none of which occur naturally and may reveal artifacts. We also look for remains unique to a

slave shipwreck, like shackles, which were used as restraints; big piles of ballast stones or bricks, which were used to offset the weight of human beings in the cargo hold; or glass beads, which were often used to trade for captured Africans.

It's such a detailed process and often takes years to find and then document one site.

Erik concludes by telling us that we are here to document the Winch Hole, a ship that went down in the Keys in the 1880s. Though it is not a slave shipwreck, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) partners with DWP to document such remains in the waters around Key Largo. The arrangement allows DWP to train new underwater archaeology advocates and gives NOAA more hands for its important work.

We have lunch and then head out to a mock wreck site they've set up to practice what we will do under the water.

And this is where a new set of troubles begins for me.

**WE COVER OURSELVES IN HATS**, sunblock, and even long sleeves because it's hot in the Florida sun. At 97°F with no cloud cover and 70 percent humidity, you think you just might fry out here—literally sizzle in your shoes. We spread out across the lawn opposite the Science Center. In front of us is a long length of measuring tape stretched chest high and straight.

We are assigned buddies in teams of two. I'm paired with Barbara, an older White woman who is a returning advocate from last year. She is an engineer training for her DWP instructor certificate.

Jay, another retired engineer and instructor from UAS, and Kamau lead the session; they are both lead instructors at DWP. Whereas Kamau is tall and lean and wiry, Jay is built like a linebacker at six foot five and about 250 pounds. He reminds me a bit of Popeye, the 1930s U.S. cartoon hero with the burly arms and a hankering for spinach. Jay has a Popeye-like laugh—a distinctive caw that lives in his throat but that can somehow travel across rooms, or big lawns, with superhuman speed.

"OK, everybody," Jay says in his booming voice. "The measuring tape you are standing in front of is called the baseline. It marks the length of our

mock wreck site. The point at this end of the tape will be the origin point. See how it starts at zero and goes up to 200 feet, our end point at the end of the tape? A baseline just like this sits in the middle of the wreck.

“If you are facing the origin point and looking lengthwise down the baseline, you will see artifacts on either side, to the right and to the left. So some of your teams will be assigned to the right side of the baseline, others to the left side. And each team will have a section to explore that is within a 50-foot radius and that extends outward about 20 to 30 feet.”

Barbara and I are assigned to the right side of the baseline and are given the section between 100 and 150 feet. This means that when we are below the water, we will look for artifacts within this 50-foot area. Our job will be to measure the artifacts we see, plot the distance of those artifacts to the baseline, and then sketch them so that we can make a drawing that our architect Gayle will use to create a 3D rendering of the site.

Various objects like pipes and bricks, substituting as shipwreck artifacts, are some distance in front of the mock baseline and spread across the line for us to practice on.

I start to sweat, and not from the heat.

You see, the key to doing all this work centers around trilateration mapping and *in situ* drawings. Trilateration mapping helps to determine the position of a point with respect to two other points by measuring the distances between all three. It’s a bit like triangulation. Except with triangulation, you identify specific points by angles. Trilateration, on the other hand, uses distances.

“*In situ*” refers to an artifact that has not been moved from its original resting place or the place where it was deposited. Finding artifacts in this state is critical to interpreting them, and to understanding the circumstances that influenced their history. Once the location of an artifact is carefully documented, the object can be moved for conservation, additional analysis, or display. An artifact that is not discovered *in situ* is considered out of context and will not provide an accurate picture of its historical background.

Ayana, who is also a returning advocate, adds a bit of her expertise to the discussion. “Once you disturb a site, there’s no making it how it was before. So we have to be really intentional about how we are documenting in order to ensure that we’re not disturbing the wreck, or ocean creatures.”

To do an in situ drawing means we will be below the surface, spending maybe 45 minutes to an hour drawing the artifacts we find and not moving from the area. This is why neutral or peak buoyancy is so important, and why Kamau was so insistent that I practice during my ocean dives.

We also have to measure each artifact individually using expandable rulers, pencils, and slate with Mylar paper that we can draw on underwater. Jay tells us to make sure to use straight lines instead of angles, indicate the position of north on our drawings, and reference the direction of the baseline. “Remember to scale the drawing properly,” he explains. “Usually one foot equals one inch. Make length, width, and depth measurements of the objects. Indicate any special features in your drawings—for example, if the artifact is wood or metal—or the presence and position of fasteners, holes, and even surrounding coral.”

His voice is loud in the quiet afternoon. “Drawings should contain a ‘legend’ in the top right or bottom left corner, which gives a detailed description of the objects contained in it. If objects cannot be correctly named, they should be described as best as possible.”

Jay stresses precision. Kamau nods seriously next to him.

“You can’t be off,” he says in the silence. “This is part of the historical record, official archaeological documentation. This is serious work.”

Oh Lord.

It’s not hard in theory. But already, I feel the tension building inside.

Here’s the thing: I’m not a very precise person. I’m often hazy on the specifics. It’s because I often see things as I want them to be, but not always as they are. I walk into a room and afterward I probably can’t tell you any details about who was there or what it looked like. But I can tell you the vibe or energy or emotional undercurrents of the room instead. I am more like an impressionist.

Knowing that I have to be precise on this important work makes my heart pound faster.

I used to be really good at math...everything except geometry. I had no trouble with algebra, even got A’s in calculus. I loved algebraic formulas and would thrill each time a problem was successfully solved.

But geometry is the study of spatial relationships: the distance, shape, size, and relative position of figures to each other. It involves some calculations, but mainly it involves understanding how space works in

relation to itself. In fifth grade, I got a C in geometry and another in 10th grade, which was the last time I wrestled with a compass or protractor. It seems so far away.

I've read that it's usual for some children to struggle with geometry. Educators say people typically use one of two approaches to math: the arithmetic way, which depends on having good logical abilities, or the geometric way, which depends on having good spatial abilities. Research says that people tend to have a natural proclivity one way. Clearly, I'm on one end of the spectrum.

I'm the person whose friends instinctively guide when crossing the street. When I worked in Manhattan, in particular, my friends would literally put their hands under my elbow at curbs because they feared I might step into the street unaware. I also often have a hard time with directions. I always go the wrong way when faced with a choice. I can't immediately tell my right from left. I have to imagine my writing fingers moving to remember which is which. And I often reverse numbers when they are spoken to me. It happens all the time—695 becomes 659 in my mind.

I close my eyes and groan a little.

Barbara and I have a pipe in our section. She measures it. I let her lead the way and try to follow everything she does. If I can memorize her steps and call them to mind when I'm below the surface, it will be OK.

We spend the day practicing.

Everything she does makes sense.

Maybe it won't be so bad.

## Day Two

We dive. And it's bad.

We head out on the boat to the Winch Hole wreck site, about 45 minutes from shore. Many of the divers are dressed in their own distinctive gear—like Kramer, whose wet suit is decorated with gray and black horizontal stripes that make him immediately recognizable underwater. Or they've added their own personal flourishes, like Jay with a red-and-white bandanna covering his bald head. Or they go completely minimal like Andrea, who

comes from the Bahamas and wears a bikini. Some, like me, are in borrowed gear from a local dive shop. I brought my snorkel, mask, skins, and gloves again, but borrowed everything else.

We have a medium-size boat: only one level, smaller than the one in Thailand but much bigger than Sanjeeva's tiny boat in Sri Lanka. It fits all 30 of us, plus the boat's crew.

Buddies sit together in the shade on benches along either side and discuss their dive plans.

Then, one by one, they begin to jump in.

Barbara and I discuss our approach. We decide to swim around the whole site first, then go look over our section. We'll search for the two biggest artifacts to capture in our section, and then she will draw one and I will draw the other.

OK, I can do this.

I jump in.

I've got a sheet of Mylar paper on a clipboard attached to my BCD, a measuring tape in a windup device, and two foldable rulers in a mesh bag that also contains a weighted buoy to hold down the bag when I drop it on the ocean floor.

Barbara and I begin to descend together. It takes a moment for my ears to equalize so I go slowly. Barbara follows.

I look around when we are under the surface about 30 feet. And I marvel.

First, I see the baseline, which looks just like the one at the mock wreck site—white with one-inch markings—only here it stretches across a coral reef, twisting back and forth slightly in the current. The reef's plants and sea life obscure it in places.

Coral reefs are alive. They are in fact animals, and they support about 25 percent of all ocean life. I was not expecting the water in Florida to be this clear and picturesque, or the reefs to be so intact. But it's gratifying to find fish, sponges, jellyfish, anemones, snails, crabs, lobsters, and rays in abundance darting in and around the reef.

Divers are settling in near the baseline—some huddled close together exchanging hand signals, some swimming to points of interest on the seafloor, some pulling out their rulers and beginning their *in situ* drawings. It's amazing.

Barbara and I find our section of the wreck. We swim around the area observing. We see one very large iron-encrusted artifact, maybe some kind of a pipe wedged at the bottom of the reef and partially on the ocean floor, and another piece with straight and uneven lines that we think may be wood planking, similarly wedged.

Barbara points to the plank to indicate that she will draw it, which leaves me with the pipe.

I try to sketch it first. And my drawing is OK. I definitely wouldn't make it in art school, but it generally captures the angles of what is on the ground. But when I try to measure the dimensions, and I have to accurately do so all along the entire area of the piping, I start to get confused. Part of the pipe is round and vertical. Part is horizontal and on the ocean floor. And part is angular with jagged edges, broken and encased in coral. None of the measurements are uniform. But I have to draw a representation of the whole thing with all its varied lengths. I also have to place the artifact in context by drawing its distance to the objects around it, and then translate those varying distances from feet to inches, indicating each section with arrows, to fit them on the page.

The numbers become a blurry jumble on the page.

I give up after a while.

## **I FEEL SO FRUSTRATED AS** the boat takes us back to shore.

We head to the Science Center. Then we spread out in our buddy pairs and sit at the tables to transfer what we've measured onto a larger piece of draft paper. We use protractors and compasses.

I hate protractors and compasses.

I look at Barbara's drawing after about 30 minutes of quiet sketching. It's elegant and beautiful—full of clear lines and arrows, topography indications, a legend—she even noted where a lobster lived on the reef.

My drawing is a mess of confusion.

All the numbers and arrows swim in front of my eyes and don't make a lot of sense.

Barbara finishes for the day and leaves for dinner.

I try to translate the scribbles I did underwater on the sheet next to Barbara's drawings. My strokes are light and unsure. Barbara's are dark and confident.

I give in when I notice I'm the only one left in the room. I have two more days to get it right, but I am not happy. I hate to be last.

I don't have to be first, but I just can't be last.

## Day Three

We dive again.

It gets worse.

Barbara has started working on another artifact. I'm still trying to figure out the first one.

My measurements seem even farther off. I've moved on from the in situ drawing and am trying to measure the pipe in relation to the baseline. I only need two measurements on the baseline to form an equilateral triangle with a point on the artifact.

Barbara holds the end of the measuring tape at the artifact. This is not hard. Using a sight line, most advocates best estimate the first point and then do a calculation to figure out the next point. But I'm overthinking it and getting the numbers all tangled in my head.

I feel so frustrated.

And in my frustration, my fin jiggles the baseline. I freeze immediately. I'm mortified. If my fin knocks the baseline out of place, they will have to set it up again, and it will ruin everyone's work for the day.

I can't believe I've forgotten what I learned in Thailand only a few months ago and allowed the current to push me around again.

Fortunately, no one notices and the baseline steadies back in place. But I move away from it quickly and decide I'm done with measurements for today. I help Barbara by holding the measuring tape at her artifact for the rest of our dive.

Barbara is gracious. She doesn't look at me like I have two heads when we return to the boat. She asks me if she can help. But what can I tell her? I'm embarrassed that I can't do this on my own. No one seems to be struggling like me.

I'm too prideful. And I don't know how she can help me anyway; it feels like something is wrong with my brain. I check out Ayana, Justin, Sydney, and Gabby's drawings. All of them seem to have no trouble. Kamau's is a work of art, with notes and indexes, neat lines and arrows, even explanations of the surrounding topography.

I wrap up earlier than everyone else. In the bunk room, I put my head in my hands.

Maybe I can't do this after all. If measuring is a key component to being an underwater archaeology advocate, this work may be out of my grasp.

Sydney comes into the room and pulls me away from this dark path. "Hey, they're about to tell the story of the *Guerrero*," she says. "You coming?"

I guess there is no use sulking in my room all evening. I join her in the common room.

Participants are gathered on couches. Ken, Jay, and Kamau take turns telling the story of the *Guerrero* slave ship somewhere in the waters of Key Largo—the ship that launched DWP.

Ken starts the story.

**ON THE WINTRY AFTERNOON OF** December 19, 1827, the *Guerrero*, a Spanish pirate ship, sailed down the coast of Florida toward Cuba. Trading captive Africans across the Atlantic Ocean had recently been made illegal by the Spanish, English, and Americans; the heavily armed *Guerrero* was under the command of pirate José Gomez, who led a crew of 90 sailors.

Gomez outfitted the boat with 14 long brass 12-pounder guns and 10 iron 12-pounders. The ship's mission: to sail the Atlantic, attack slave ships, hijack the Africans on board, take them to Havana to be sold into slavery, and reap financial bounty.

The British Navy often patrolled the shores around Florida and the Bahamas searching for illegal ships, especially those that might sneak through the Bahama Channel to Cuba. On this day, the British schooner H.M.S. *Nimble* was patrolling the area. It was a smaller ship, with only 58 crew and five guns, commanded by Lt. Edward Holland. The crew spotted

the *Guerrero* near Orange Cay in the Bahamas, and Holland thought the ship looked suspicious. What was a warship like it doing in the area?

He was right to be wary; the *Guerrero* had recently raided another vessel and had 561 captive Africans aboard. The *Nimble* hailed the *Guerrero* by firing two warning shots and commanding it to stop for inspection. The *Guerrero* turned and fled.

The pursuit was on.

The ships fired at each other—cannons exploding, water erupting over bows, men frantically running around—for six hours.

Night fell. And the weather turned bad.

Around 7 p.m., the *Guerrero* appeared to slow and signal surrender. But Gomez didn't see the approaching Carysfort Reef and ran headlong into it. The *Guerrero*'s hull was ripped wide open, its masts toppled. The *Nimble*, right on its tail, tried to avoid the same fate, but failed. It struck the reef about two miles away from the wreck of the *Guerrero*. Both ships were stranded only six nautical miles from Key Largo—at most an hour's sail away.

None of the hundreds of captive Africans on the *Guerrero* would have known what was happening that night. They wouldn't have known where they were or the reason for the cannon fire. Terrified and crammed in the hold, they were helpless.

Forty-one Africans drowned as water rushed into the hold that night. Maybe the water came in initially as a deluge, relentless waves growing higher and higher as they quickly took the feeble and sick. I think about them finally letting go, offering prayers to their gods as they breathed out in release and sought Yemayá's embrace.

Five hundred and twenty survived.

I think of their voices rising and falling: wails, screams, cries, groans, shrieks. Sounds painful to undiscerning ears—perhaps even enough to make the sailors above put their hands over their ears, enough to reach the crew in the Carysfort lighthouse more than two miles away, as later accounts confirm.

But secretly, they are communicating with instructions embedded in the discordant rhythms. Instructions for survival. Breathe now as the wave washes this way. Hold your breath as the wave washes that way. A consensus to live.

What would you do with your hands and feet shackled in iron as the ship tosses back and forth in the ocean and water fills the hold? Would you cry, scream, pray to your god? Would your mind race as you search the darkness for something, anything? I envision a man named Esso and one named Ahdabi—strangers in another life, but comrades in this cargo hold. They hold hands, crossing limbs together despite the shackles: human beings united in purpose, making a pact without words to survive.

The next morning, on December 20, two wrecking vehicles stationed nearby went to aid the two ships. They called for help and were soon joined by two other wreckers. One anchored near the *Guerrero*, rescuing 20 of its crew and 142 Africans aboard. The ship departed immediately for Key West. But the wily *Guerrero* crew hijacked the ship before it got far and sailed to Cuba.

The second wrecker took 54 of the *Guerrero* crew and 246 Africans. It couldn't leave until the next day, and the crew had heard what happened to the first ship. So its captain requested that the ship be anchored close to the *Nimble* overnight to help protect it.

But the Spanish crew was determined, and they almost matched the *Nimble* man for man. That night, they hijacked the wrecker from beneath the *Nimble*'s nose, and sailed also to Cuba.

The third wrecker took only 12 of the *Guerrero* crew and 122 Africans; it also couldn't leave immediately and had to shelter overnight. But its captain commanded the crew to arm themselves against the *Guerrero* crewmen and stay vigilant till morning. They managed to stay in control of the ship, and the next day sailed over to the *Nimble* to transfer the *Guerrero* crew and the Africans.

So what happened to all the hijacked Africans? Officially, nearly 400 of them were sold into slavery in Cuba and lost to the records.

Or were they?

African heritage in Cuba is alive and thriving today. You see it in foods like yam and okra, in music featuring African instruments like the batá and bembé drums. You see it when you dance rumba, palo, salsa, or son cubano; when you worship a Yoruba orisha like Shango; when you participate in a Santería ritual; or when you look into local faces and see the high cheekbones and smooth dark brown skin common to Benin or Ghana or Senegal. You know the culture of Africa lives on there.

And you realize that these captives from the *Guerrero*—that Esso and Ahdabi, along with the estimated one million other Africans who were enslaved in Cuba—contributed to that whole. Parts of them have been incorporated into this legacy that has been passed down for generations and has been formed into something new and rich that will last for many more.

Esso and Ahdabi's legacy is not lost after all.

Of the around 120 Africans remaining, seven died. The others made it to Key West, but became stuck in legal limbo for another two years. They were delivered into the custody of the U.S. marshal for the Eastern District of Florida in St. Augustine, almost five hours away.

The marshal paid for some of their expenses out of his own household income. But when it became too much, he hired out the Africans to local plantations for two dollars a month each. We don't know what exactly happened to the Africans while they were rented out on those plantations, but we do know the condition of those rescued became indistinguishable from slavery while they awaited the courts to decide their fate. Though there were laws covering Africans seized while being illegally imported into the United States, they did not apply to those who entered the country "accidentally." This was the fate of the "*Guerrero Africans*," as they were called.

In April 1828, President John Quincy Adams requested that Congress pass a supplementary law dealing with the situation, but the attempt failed. A year later, in March 1829, Congress finally appropriated funds to reimburse the marshal and transport the *Guerrero* Africans to Liberia—this despite the fact that they were from Nigeria, more than 1,000 miles away.

The marshal's actions are often painted as understandable and even sympathetic in historical accounts. But the records don't comment on what the marshal did with the money he received from the rentals of the Africans after being reimbursed by the government. Did he double his investment? Does his situation present another example of a win-win for everyone but the Africans in the cargo hold?

A ship was engaged in June 1829. But of course the marshal had problems gathering the *Guerrero* Africans. Two plantation owners refused to return those who had been "rented"; the marshal had to persuade and force. Eventually, around 92 boarded a barge that set sail on September 30, 1829.

The barge arrived in Barbados on December 30, badly damaged and out of drinking water. We have no idea what happened on that ship or why it would take two months to go only about 1,500 nautical miles (normally a weeklong journey.) The Africans were transferred to the brig *Heroine*, which sailed on January 16, 1830, and arrived in Liberia on March 4, 1830. They settled in New Georgia, a town a few miles from Monrovia, where they joined people who had been rescued from the slave ship *Antelope* by the U.S. Revenue Cutter *Dallas* in 1820 and sent to Liberia in 1827.

Historian Gail Swanson has been trying to discover what happened to the 92 sent to Liberia. She is still searching for answers.

**FOR THE LAST 18 YEARS,** Ken and other members of DWP have been searching for that ship.

They began in 2005. The idea ramped up a year earlier, with the publication of Gail Swanson's book *Slave Ship Guerrero*. Filmmaker Karuna Eberl made a documentary about it that featured Brenda Lazendorf, the lone maritime archaeologist in Biscayne National Park in Florida, along with Ken and members of NABS. Karuna showcased the film in Ken's hometown of Nashville, Tennessee.

Ken befriended Brenda. "She always said that she knew where the *Guerrero* is," Ken says. But she needed help; she was the sole archaeologist in the park. And that's where Ken realized he could step in by providing divers to map the site. Unfortunately, Brenda died before the training finished and took the coordinates of the ship to her grave.

For Ken, finding this ship has become his mission; each year, Youth Diving With a Purpose participants search for it, but it still hasn't been identified. "It's personal," he would go on to tell me later that evening. "The foundation of DWP is the quest for this wreck. I don't want to say it validates our existence. But if we find it, we could end this chapter. I could end this chapter."

## I STAND TO HEAD TO the back as people leave for their hotels.

Walking back to my room, I pass Justin, who is adding last-minute flourishes to his drawing. “Wow, you did an amazing job,” I say. “Mine looks nothing like that.”

Maybe he senses my embarrassment, because he looks down at his drawing again. “Well, you know, I have been doing this a long time now,” he says. “This is the kind of thing we archaeologists do all the time.”

Right, I think. Justin is an archaeologist. So are Gabby, Sydney, and Ayana. And Barbara, Jay, Erik, and Kamau are engineers. All the people I’ve been comparing myself to have been training in this kind of math for years. Of course, they know how to do this better than I do.

Why do I put such pressure on myself? Clearly, this is not about overcoming underdeveloped 10th-grade math skills in a week. Maybe this effort is really about community and togetherness—about overcoming a tendency to do things alone.

I think of the *Guerrero* Africans, who must have worked together to survive. I want to believe that those 520 survivors leaned on one another to make it through what was probably the most terrifying experience of their lives.

The truth is, I can’t do this work underwater alone. I just don’t have the skills.

And the bigger truth is that none of us can do the work above the surface without leaning heavily on each other.

## Day Four

We dive again at the wreck site. It’s the last day to get our measurements and drawings right.

Yesterday’s anxiety has disappeared with a puff. I feel different. It’s hard to name the feeling exactly, like a pressure in my second chakra or my pelvic region. It’s almost orgasmic, like a throbbing, but too strong to be pleasurable. Instead, it makes me feel aware and focused. It started last night after hearing the story of the *Guerrero* and talking to Justin, and it grows steadily as the day begins.

I meet Barbara on the boat. Even though she has finished her work, she says during our dive planning that she's happy to support me in whatever way I need. I tell her I'm stuck and come clean about not being able to figure out how to get accurate measurements. She squeezes my hand and tells me not to worry, that we will remeasure everything together.

And now, we are here at the site. The rest of the teams have done their giant strides into the water. We are the last team to go.

Barbara jumps in. I start to follow, but then stop because I suddenly notice the way the bubbles have quickly disappeared. The sea has already absorbed the divers who jumped in, becoming placid and calm again in mere seconds. No one would ever guess that below the surface, this training is happening—that 15 teams are hard at work on the ocean floor.

I shake my head and think. All of us divers are deeply connected to the 561 *Guerrero* Africans, and to the millions of souls who experienced the transatlantic crossing. And our day of reckoning is at hand: It's time for us to raise their stories from the depths, to tell them in their fullness, in their wonder, with love, honor, and respect. We are finally helping to heal a wound that has festered far too long in this world. That is the dream, the promise, the possibility of this watery resurrection we're attempting.

The feeling in my second chakra intensifies until it feels like a beam of energy is shooting from me.

I can do it...actually, Barbara and I can do it together.

And we do.

**I COMPLETE MY DRAWINGS AND** my measurements, and come up to the boat feeling triumphant. Other teams climb aboard, and soon, the captain sets sail back to shore.

The feeling in my chakra has subsided, and now the energy calmly radiates throughout my body. It's magic, this ocean breeze on my skin and the spray of seawater on my face as we race home after a long week's work. It's soul-lifting to look at the tired faces of those around me and to know these ordinary people have shown up, despite busy schedules, to volunteer their time for no other reason than that they love to dive and believe in this important work. I give thanks for being a part of it here with them.

I move over to Justin and Ayana, who sit along the edge, facing the shore. Ayana has pulled down her wet suit so that her bathing suit can dry. And Justin rests with his head against the railing. Both have their eyes closed. They look tired.

I plop down near them and clear my throat.

Ayana opens her eyes and looks at me with a warm smile.

Encouraged, I lean in and ask her something I've wanted to know for a while. "Why did you come back again from last year? Why is this work so important to you?"

Ayana looks back at me thoughtfully. "Tara, did you know that less than one percent of all archaeologists are Black?"

I did not.

"Do you wonder then why less than 20 of a possible 1,000 slave shipwrecks have been found and properly documented so far?" she asks. "It's partly because there is little incentive to find these ships, since their treasures have already perished. Plus, it can take years and a lot of resources to find such a ship."

She pauses. "But it's also because this part of history has not been a priority in the field of maritime archaeology."

I nod.

"So, it's absolutely important that there are folks who look like you and me doing this work. We ask different questions than our White counterparts. We see different things, have different perspectives. Justin and I are terrestrial archaeologists who are trained to work on land-based sites. But when we heard about this work, we knew we had to be involved. We knew we needed to learn to do our work in the sea too."

Justin has opened his eyes by this time; he has been listening to Ayana. When she finishes, he adds, "This work can't just start and end on land. The ways in which people used waterways, used the Atlantic for the transportation of goods, of knowledge, of people is essential to that story." He pauses. "I mean, we have history and heritage on the sea. Most of this Earth is water. And we have connections to it. Whether or not we feel it or see it on a regular basis, it is there."

He is right, and I nod in agreement.

"Why don't you come and visit us in St. Croix?" Justin asks. "We're working on a dig at a sugar plantation there with our organization, the

Society of Black Archaeologists. We're bringing students from HBCUs. It's a big dig. You'll get to see Black archaeologists in action and understand just how our perspective is different."

Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has often cited this African proverb: "Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter." It highlights the idea that history is often written from the perspective of the victor—the ones who have the power to control the narrative. For Adichie, the takeaway is that until the voices of marginalized people are heard, the dominant group will always be seen as heroic and the oppressed group will continue to be seen as inferior. She calls for a more inclusive and diverse representation of who gets to tell our stories.

Suddenly, I realize that scientists like Ayana and Justin are storytellers too. Every question an archaeologist asks, every interpretation of a discovery on a dig, is a way for them to tell a story that communicates something about the past.

Then I think of the artifacts themselves, like the ship in its disintegration, or the ocean full of marine life that has turned bits of the wrecks into homes. I think about all those who have died in the Atlantic and the more than 500 divers from all walks of life who joined DWP. They are all storytellers too. I imagine their perspectives, helping to deepen and complexify the world's understanding of our history.

I tell Ayana and Justin I will definitely come to St. Croix.

## IT'S GRADUATION DAY.

We sit in the front room of the Science Center. Many of us have on our DWP shirts—blue, short-sleeved, collared shirts with the logo over the breast.

Jay's big voice calls us up one by one. Erik hands us our certificates. Ken snaps pictures. Kamau smiles.

We did it.

I did it.

# CHAPTER FOUR

I fly back to Atlanta in triumph.

I take the car from the airport to the leafy streets of Historic College Park, the neighborhood where my mom lives. Her one-story brick house sits on a manicured hill. It's a pretty three-bedroom, two-bath house with an open floor plan, decorated in shades of browns, taupes, and beiges. My mom says she will live here until the ambulance takes her out feetfirst.

It's also the place I live while in limbo.

Before the DWP training, I returned to D.C., ended my lease, sold my furniture, and packed the rest of my belongings, which all fit into just 15 boxes. A friend and I drove an oversize SUV to Atlanta and carried my stuff to my mom's shed and to the little bedroom that is now mine.

So here I am living with my mom, who will soon turn 79 years old. And she loves that I'm here.

She tells her sister, my aunt Myrtle, and all her friends as often as she can, "Well, you know Tara is back here with me now." ... "Mmm-hmmm, yes, did I tell you Tara is here at home with me?" ... "Yes, Tara lives here with me now."

I'm embarrassed I must crash with my mom at this stage in my life.

But she's proud to have a central place in my life again, and would have me be her roommate for the rest of our lives.

I picture the two of us sitting on her couch as she switches back and forth between the evangelical channel and CNN. In the future, we're both gray-haired and wrinkled, snacking on her favorite vanilla almond cream bars, talking about how the government doesn't do enough for senior citizens and comparing our aches and pains.

I have to get out of here soon.

No word on the grant yet.

I need a plan B.

Well, I think, I don't have to go to every country where DWP has a mission. Maybe I could just focus on one mission at a time. Then I would just need funds for travel to one country. Maybe about \$5,000.

That would be a much simpler amount to raise.

All I would need is one good writing assignment.

Doable.

I start crafting story pitches.

## **IT'S JULY. ONE MONTH AFTER** the DWP training.

No word back on any of the pitches or on my grant application.

The balance in my bank account hovers close to zero after my jaunt around Southeast Asia and DWP's training fees and expenses. I have no reserves.

I start applying for jobs. Plan C.

## **IT'S AUGUST. TWO MONTHS SINCE** I completed my training.

I still haven't heard back about any of my submissions.

I begin checking my email every hour.

I don't have a plan D.

## **IT'S THE FIRST WEEK OF** September.

Kamau and Jay call to tell me they are heading to Mozambique in November for a two-week mission: They plan to bring word of the *São José Paquete d'África* slave ship's fate to the descendants of the Makua people who were on the ship.

They invite me to join them.

I start feeling desperate.

I have to be a part of this.

How can I raise money quickly?

I could do a GoFundMe campaign. Or—I hate to think about it—Mom has savings.

I didn't want to ask friends and family or strangers, but maybe this is another lesson in asking for help.

OK, I can do this.

I go for a long walk, feeling stronger, as plan D comes into focus.

I return to open my computer. In my inbox is an email from National Geographic.

Oh...

My fingers tremble.

It just means too much.

Urghhhh...

My heart literally hurts. It feels like it's in my throat.

I take a deep breath, roll my shoulders back, and grit my teeth.

I click on the link while holding my breath.

The first line says, "Congratulations..."

I don't see the rest.

Tears come to my eyes.

The universe heard. Embraced.

It is.

I am.

Something irreversible has been set in motion.

The adventure is truly beginning.

I will somehow be an intrinsic part of this story I long to tell.

No turning back.

# CHAPTER FIVE

The \$30,000 grant money has cleared my bank account. In fewer than seven days, I board a plane heading nonstop to Johannesburg, and then on to Nampula, Mozambique, where I will be driven the 100 miles or so to the Island of Mozambique to join Kamau, Jay, and the rest of the crew.

My mother buys cake and pizza and invites friends and family over to her house for a celebratory send-off. She wants me to share news of my upcoming journey with them. I didn't plan to turn my leaving into a big thing. I've never been so public about my travels. When I backpacked around the world, I didn't stand in front of a group, sharing my plans before I left. I just left.

But my mom insists. She says this journey is important.

So now in her living room, in front of the big TV, at her prompt, I tell everyone what I am doing.

I've put on my jazzy red cigarette pants. I feel shiny and bubbly whenever I put them on.

I look into the eyes of 30 of my high school and college friends; of family; of my mom's church friends and her former colleagues from Spelman College, where she worked for 39 years; of the guy who cuts her grass; of the granddaughter, a rising middle schooler, of one of her oldest friends. There are people I know well and people I'm meeting for the first time. All brown faces.

I tell them about this missing part of history. And they all listen quietly.

They have questions. They make connections, suggesting where else I might go, who else I might call on. Never have they heard of a group of Black scuba divers with such a mission. They have wonder in their eyes.

They ask if I will dive too.

I say yes.

They shake their heads.

They ask if I am afraid.

I say no.

They nod their heads.

There is silent approval. There is a subtle squaring of shoulders. There's a charge to the air, an energy that says, It's about damn time.

After more food, more questions, more communion, they pray over me. They bless me with their love and coat me in their protection.

Then they write down their email addresses and tell me to share with them along the way. They say they'll follow me. That they want to learn too.

They're eager to fill in the gaping holes of their history, and they anoint me as their navigator.

**MY MOM ALSO ASKS BISHOP** Jack Bomar, her pastor at Hillside International Chapel and Truth Center, to bless my journey. He looks crisp and fresh with his wavy hair pulled back into a neat ponytail to reveal a lightly bearded, handsome face. He is taking over for Dr. Barbara King, my mom's minister for more than 40 years, who is in the process of stepping down. Dr. Barbara stands almost six foot five—a towering presence physically and reputationally. People like Oprah, singer Gladys Knight, spiritual leader Iyanla Vanzant, and other well-known figures visited the church regularly or counted Dr. Barbara as a friend.

My mom joined her church in the early '70s, when I was a little girl. I grew as the church grew, the two of us the same age. I remember when it was just a small chapel with an overflow room. Now, it has blossomed into a proper church in the round that seats more than a thousand people. It grounded me in a branch of Christianity called New Thought. According to its principles, there is no such thing as heaven and hell or sin, God is everywhere and in everyone, and our mental states become our lived experience. Radical Christian ideas.

But I was also curious about other perspectives, especially when I went away to college and began to meet people with different spiritual views.

I dabbled in astrology, tarot, and I Ching with friends. I attended Vipassana meditation retreats around the world. I read Rumi and practiced Sufi whirling. I walked in nature and appreciated the beauty of trees. I learned about the healing properties of plants and human connection to the stars. I read Gary Zukav's *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* and contemplated metaphysics. I was touched by the early morning call to prayer when I visited Islamic countries. I felt at home at ashrams and yoga classes taught by Indian yogis.

I never understood why I had to choose between any of them—why I had to align myself with one practice and forsake all others. I believe we have unlimited paths to deeper understanding of our place in the universe, and I wanted to embrace aspects of them all.

I didn't know Bishop Jack well, since he came to Hillside during my years away. But I know my mom adores him. I even suspect she has a little crush on him, though he's closer to my age. She always straightens up a bit around him, worrying about her hair and clothes. And she becomes a little more helpless in his presence, leaning on his arm and falling into giggles if he helps her to stand. For his part, he's nothing but courteous and kind to my mother.

He and Detric, the church's aide and our friend, come together, both looking sharp in their skinny pants and vests. They have a plant for my mom.

Pleasantries are exchanged.

My mother tells Bishop Jack and Detric about my work and asks Bishop Jack to bless it.

He agrees, and we stand in a circle.

Bishop Jack closes his eyes and says a grounding prayer. Then he opens his eyes and looks at me with his head tilted to the side. "I want to say this to you, Tara, because you're trying to bring recognition to a whole nation of people whose lives were lost during the Middle Passage.

"We teach in our teachings that spirit never dies. Spirit lives on. Now, as you're doing research and gathering information, you're conducting 'the outer.' That's great.

“But make sure you take it to the next level. Do that spiritual work. Meaning, if you can, get into the essence, the spirit of those ancestors. Invite them. If you come across names, speak their names. Ask them to bless you; ask them for permission to tell the story. Ask them to go before you to make the way straight, smooth, and harmonious. In doing so, you’re tapping into the ancestral spirit that’s always with us.”

I hadn’t thought about the ancestors in this way—as guides, supports—primarily because I’d mostly avoided thinking about them and our history of enslavement. Oh, I read the relatively brief sections on Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman in school. I watched *Roots* because that’s what all Black families did in the 1970s. I read Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as I matured into teenhood. But that’s all I did: the minimum to look like an informed person. I was afraid to delve too deeply, to engage too closely with this past. It caused a literal ache in my stomach to think about the brutality and injustice, particularly the sexual violence enslaved and poor Black women must have experienced with no recourse. When my own DNA report reveals that 15 percent of my ancestry is from England, Ireland, Wales, and Norway, or when I think of my aunt and uncle with blue eyes, or my mom’s fair skin, freckles, and reddish hair, the observation hits even closer to home.

But maybe it doesn’t have to hurt anymore. Maybe this honoring of the ancestors is a way of approaching the past that isn’t centered in our trauma but is instead about the celebration of our humanity.

Bishop Jack’s words cause something to stir in me. I ask, “Do you think this work might help heal the ancestors too?”

“Yes,” he answers with a smile. “You hear it all the time. About the restlessness of spirits, souls who are lingering for a reason.” He pauses, reflecting. “You know, there’s a legend that says that most hurricanes that hit this country originate on the west coast of Africa. That restless souls are coming to us to heal and to support our own healing.”

To heal and to support our own healing.

“You might feel a need to shift when you’re going down this road,” Bishop Jack continues. “If so, you’re being guided and directed by the ancestors, OK? Follow the urge.”

A memory pops into my head.

I remember something Dr. Maya Angelou said to me once when I was interviewing her for a story for *Ebony* magazine when I was an editor there. I was at her house in North Carolina, and she took a moment afterward to offer me a bit of her wisdom.

We sat at her kitchen table. She was using an oxygen mask by then, and I had to listen closely to hear her clearly. She said something I discovered later that she said often in the media. In that rich, deep voice, calling me by my last name as she expected me to call her by hers, she told me that I had been paid for. She said my mother and my father had paid for me. My grandmother and grandfather had paid for me. And she told me it was my turn to pay for someone else yet to come.

Maya is now an ancestor, and in those words and throughout her life, she also paid for me and countless others. Going forward, I will think of her and all the ancestors as the unseen ones who are holding space for humanity's healing, just as we hold space for theirs.

Bishop Jack, Detric, my mom, and I grasp hands and move in to hug each other, concluding the blessing.

**WHILE ASLEEP TWO NIGHTS BEFORE** I leave, breath tickles my ear.

Soft.

Gentle.

A word...seemingly in the distance.

Can't grasp.

What?

Closer...it comes.

Closer.

Till it teases my ear. Surrounds it. Overwhelms it. Sits within it.

One word.

A whisper.

What??

Louder.

What???

Now, clear as a bell.

Layers of lips stretching off into infinity, giving it resonance,  
reverberating into eternity.

Half-lucid, I sense its importance.

Eyes still closed, I sound out the word while reaching for the pen and pad on the nightstand to scribble it down.

I put down the pen and pad, turn over, and slip into uninterrupted dreams for the rest of the night.

## I WAKE UP AND STRETCH.

I feel a deep joy as I lie cozy in bed. I stare around my room. It has a big window to the right of the bed that looks out on the deck in the backyard. The house curves around this deck; all the rooms on the backside have windows that look out onto it. It is pretty. Birds walk and chase each other on it.

Then I pull my attention back to the room.

I reach for the water bottle on the nightstand to my left and see the pen, pad, and scribbles.

And I remember.

The whisper. The word.

It comes back to me.

I remember the importance I felt when writing it.

I pick up the pad eagerly to see what I wrote...

“Eeway.”

What?

I frown, disappointed. I thought I’d written something real. But it looks like a nonsense word.

The sharpness of the dream comes back to me. And I can now hear the word as whispered to me. It was right in my ear as if a choir had leaned in and spoken in unison.

But this word...

I try to hear and write it again phonetically.

Maybe it was *eewaaay* or *eeweh* or *eewhey*.

Still nothing words.

Or are they?

Somehow, they feel important. I write them down in the Notes app of my iPhone so I won't forget.

## **IT'S FINALLY THE DAY I leave.**

I give the backpack in the corner a satisfied pat as I wait for my Uber. I'm only bringing the stuff I absolutely need and can carry on my back.

And then a separate duffel bag with my diving equipment, which I plan to donate—bag and all—to the team in Mozambique. This holds my fins, snorkel, skins, and ocean socks.

Finally, a smaller day pack has my audio and visual equipment.

It will be OK.

The car comes. And I head to the airport to meet Jay and Kamau.

Finally, on my way.

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• PART TWO •

## **Bottom Time**

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# CHAPTER SIX

The air smells different here in Nampula—earthier and richer, like soil from a freshly tilled farm. But there's also a sweeter note of...what is it?—Jasmine? Gardenia? Coconut? As I step out of the plane and onto the tarmac, I pause and turn my face to the sky to feel the sun of Africa bathing my hair, eyes, nose, lips—caressing me, welcoming me home.

OK, I know I'm being ridiculous.

The sun is the sun, no matter where you are in the world. But for a moment, I notice a fluffy white cloud above me, moving slowly away. I imagine that it traveled with us from Atlanta, dancing past jet streams, edging ever easterly across the Atlantic and over the southern tip of Africa. I imagine it as my escort, guiding me to this place, to the continent of my origins. And now that it has done its job, it moves on dutifully, ready to escort someone else in need of a little hand-holding.

I shake my head at my fantasy. I'm not a neophyte traveler to Africa who believes its American progeny are descended from kings and queens. I've visited East, West, and southern Africa several times before—even lived in Zimbabwe for a summer. I know the continent is rich in many ways, but it's also full of contradictions and dichotomies in others.

And yet...this trip feels different.

Over the next three months, I plan to travel to Mozambique and South Africa in the south, then Senegal in the west, searching for slave shipwrecks and lost ancestral stories. Unlike my other visits, I'll be looking specifically for traces of the past—my past.

I keep wondering—and secretly wishing—that something extraordinary will happen for me this time around. I once read a story about how a group

with Mende helmet masks greeted Dr. Angelou in Liberia. They said they recognized her features, that she must be from the Mende tribe, and then welcomed her home. I know that's not very likely to happen to me, but... what if?

I smile and shake my head again to clear it as I walk toward the two-story building with the huge red letters on top that say NAMPULA.

It has been a long journey. Fifteen hours from Atlanta to Johannesburg with an overnight in a hotel, then a switch to a smaller commuter plane this morning for the 2.5-hour journey to Nampula, Mozambique.

Eight of us, including Jay and Kamau, along with archaeologists, curators, and historians representing the Slave Wrecks Project team, roll off the plane. SWP—led by the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) and including DWP, the U.S. National Park Service, the Iziko Museums of South Africa, and the George Washington University, among others—is a group of organizations around the world dedicated to finding and documenting slave shipwrecks.

We all look a bit tired under the hot sun, but you can feel the anticipation and excitement beginning to build.

We file into the airport one by one. We are greeted by a group of officials, along with a tiny lady—five feet tall if you're being generous—in a fitted, long, sleeveless dress with bright green and purple circles. Her name is Yolanda, and she is the co-coordinator of SWP in Mozambique. Yolanda is in her late 50s and looks harmless, but when she barks at the officials and baggage handlers in Portuguese—commanding them, gesturing, and orchestrating like a master conductor—they bow to her will.

We all bow to her will.

“*Bom dia*, welcome home,” she says, finally turning to us with a grin. This is the SWP team’s third mission in Mozambique. They know her well.

“Our little pit bull,” says Kamau as he hugs her.

“Ruff ruff,” says Jay, and they laugh together, his big voice and trademark caw carrying throughout the airport as we walk to the cars.

Yolanda directs the porters to load our 50-some bags and trunks into three jeeps and a car. When they’re done, I hop in the back of a jeep where I am squished against the window. But I don’t care. I’m excited for the two-

hour journey to Ilha de Moçambique, the island in the north of the country where we'll be staying the next two weeks.

**ILHA DE MOÇAMBIQUE IS A** tiny place—less than two miles long and half a mile wide—but it has a long and illustrious history.

For four centuries—from 1507 to 1898—Illa shone brightly as the colonial capital of Portuguese East Africa before the capital was moved to Lourenço Marques (now Maputo). A rich and bustling central hub of international trade for the Portuguese in Africa, it attracted influential Europeans, Arabs, and Asians who settled there and left traces of their cultures. By the 1940s, movie stars like Rita Hayworth and royalty like Prince Aly Khan would fly into the tiny airstrip on the mainland to vacation. In 1991, UNESCO declared it a World Heritage site, lauding the beauty of its architectural unity and sophisticated mix of African, European, and Arab influences. Ilha contained a majesty and allure that inspired imaginations around the world.

It also contained a lucrative trade in the sale of captive Africans until the late 1800s.

During this period, more than 500,000 Africans were trafficked from the island by the Portuguese. According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, ships would travel from Ilha down the Mozambique Channel to the waters of Cape Town, where they would stop and restock. Then, they'd reboard for the approximately two-month journey to Brazil. At least half a million people stolen from their homes and their lives.

But many travel blogs and online guides that I read do not reference the island's slave trade.

Most people don't realize that eastern Africa, and the Island of Mozambique in particular, was a center of the Transatlantic Slave Trade for the Portuguese. I didn't.

Half a million people.

This erasure of our history.

Many African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and Afro-Latinos might be able to trace their roots there.

I might be able to trace my roots there.

**I FIRST SEE THE ISLAND** from a distance as we drive along a one-lane bridge that is about two miles long—the only access for cars to the island.

My first thought is, Wow.

The water leading to the island is an inviting bluish green, its waves lapping lazily against an unspoiled white sand beach. Empty dhows (kind of like dugout canoes with sails) are scattered here and there and gently rocking on the waves. The boats are mainly blue—a combination of light, bright, and dark blues—and white, with tall poles for sails that are pinned down.

It takes us almost an hour to cross the bridge; we have to pull over to the side turnouts whenever cars going in the opposite direction build up. But with each inch closer, I begin to think that I'm entering a fairy tale.

We arrive at low tide. I see more dhows parked on the sand and colorful stone buildings in reds, yellows, blues, and greens with white trim around the windows and doors. The sun glistens off the water and sparkles in the soft light. A fisherman perches on a stool in the low water near the beach; two kids play near him. A woman walks across the seabed with a basket on her head—back straight, one hand holding the basket, the other on her skirt, a colorful green print like Yolanda's.

One man stands in a dhow with the sail furled. He is backlit against the sun; I can't see his features. But he is dressed in white, and his pose has an elegance. His long, brown limbs are arranged to give him purchase; his brimmed hat, the pipe in his mouth, and the ease in his stance soothe something in me.

I wonder if he—if any of them—could be descended from an ancestor connected to me. Could he be my relation? Could this island be mine?

It makes my eyes bright.

**OUR JEEPS AND THE TRUCK** arrive at the gated entry to the island, which a man guards.

Yolanda turns into a tiny dictator again when the guy at the gate refuses to let us in without a bribe. She jumps out of the car and stomps over to him. The top of her head only comes to his chest, but her bark is loud. She

is indignant and ferocious. Soon, he opens the gate without an exchange of cash.

And then we're rolling down the cobblestone streets, past grand stone fortresses with ancient cannons that face the sea, past churches with neat squares and fruit trees, past elaborate signs for boutique hotels in bright colors. It's even more picturesque than what I saw from the bridge. Though the town is crumbling, with buildings in disrepair, they somehow manage to retain their elegance and beauty.

It's eerily quiet. No one is out on the streets; the buildings look empty. But I read that between 14,000 and 18,000 people (mainly Africans of the Makua ethnic group and a smattering of foreigners, mainly White Europeans) currently live on the island permanently.

We pull up in front of O Escondidinho hotel, near the center of the island. Its owner must have chosen the site for its location but also, perhaps, from a willingness to remember. The design of the first *O* in the title brings to mind a slave collar. This has not been confirmed, but it could be possible.

As we open our doors, the silent streets come alive. A group of kids—maybe 15—come from nowhere to swarm the cars. They look to be nine, 10, 11, 12 years old, scrawny, with dusty brown legs, scratched knees, a rip or two in T-shirts and shorts.

Steve, a White American anthropology professor at the George Washington University and one of the co-founders of SWP, steps out of one of the jeeps first.

“Steve! Hi, Steve! Steve is back!” the children yell.

This project has been Steve's baby for the last eight years. He loves this place.

He wipes sweat from his brow, reaches into the back of one of the trucks, and hauls out a big bag. He sets free soccer balls he's brought, which tumble to the ground.

The kids yell gleefully. They run, grab, and kick the balls to each other.

Steve joins them, disappearing into a sea of brownness. So does Dave, another White American who's a co-founder of SWP. He is a chief with the National Park Service and an underwater archaeologist; he is also passionate about this place.

I grab my bags and begin walking toward the hotel, eager to get to the air-conditioning. It's sticky hot outside.

Before I get to the door, though, another kid comes running. He's maybe 12 years old, and he calls Kamau by name as he runs to us.

"Kamau! Kamau!"

He's a handsome boy with smooth, blemish-free skin, bright white teeth, and shining, reverent eyes.

Kamau, ever cool and laid-back, acknowledges him with a half chuckle. "Elliot," he says in his soft voice, and gives the boy a one-armed hug.

They walk off together, Kamau's arm around Elliot's neck, his head bent to listen to the boy's stream of chatter. A few other boys with their arms linked in fellowship follow along.

My heart swells in hope at the image of them from the back. Will I make such a bond here?

I carry my bags into the hotel and up the two flights of stairs to my room, which has a high ceiling, big windows, an old desk, a small sitting area, an old-fashioned AC unit, and terra-cotta floors. I'm tired after the long journey. I prepare for bed. As I slip into the sheets underneath my mosquito net, which I make sure has no openings, my eyes pop open and I realize: I saw no girls in the swarm of kids.

Only boys.

I would love to connect with a little girl here.

I fall asleep.

**THE NEXT MORNING, WE GATHER** in the hotel's small, open-air dining room. Its wood tables covered in flowered runners overlook a small pool. Local art lines the wall. Plates of *ovos* (eggs), *paõzinhos* (rolls), mangoes, pineapples, and pots of coffee and tea span the tables.

Steve stands at the head of the room and asks us each to introduce ourselves. The gang that came in with me—Paul, who is a historian and curator at the NMAAHC and leads the Slave Wrecks Project for the museum; historian Kate, also from the NMAAHC; Nicole, Steve's assistant from the George Washington University; and Dave, Meredith, and David, all archaeologists from the National Park Service—say hello and offer their impressive résumés.

Added to the mix are esteemed archaeologists, historians, and divers from Mozambique and South Africa: Dinho, a Black former commercial scuba diver from Mozambique; Vanessa, a White scuba diver and researcher from South Africa; Chafim, a 20-something Black terrestrial archaeologist from Mozambique; Muhammad, an Indian from Zanzibar and one of the foremost scholars on the Indian Ocean slave trade; Yolanda's husband, Ricardo, whose roots are from Portugal and Brazil, considered the top maritime archaeologist in Mozambique and co-runner of the Center for the Study of Slavery on Ilha with Yolanda; Diego, a Brazilian American Fulbright scholar who has been living on Ilha for the past year doing his studies; and Dean, a Black DWP diver from Washington, D.C., who lives in Mozambique with his wife. Then there's me, a National Geographic Explorer and storyteller. The words feel surreal coming out of my mouth.

Steve outlines our overall tasks for the next two weeks as follows: One team, led by Jay, will train local people as scuba divers. Another team, led by Dave and Vanessa and including Kamau and Dean, will head out each morning in a small motorized boat with a magnetometer to "mow the lawn," sweeping and diving the waters around the island for anomalies. A small team, with Diego and Chafim, will excavate a terrestrial site that has an underground tunnel to a house where captive Africans were secretly shipped out to the Americas. The rest will confer with Mozambican curators and historians to help co-create a more inclusive story about the slave trade in museum exhibits and public spaces around the country.

And close to the end of the mission, we will all do a day trip to Mossuril, a district of Nampula, to visit with a Makua chieftain. We will bring him word of SWP's findings regarding the *São José Paquete d'África*, the Portuguese ship that left Ilha de Moçambique on its way to Brazil in 1794 and wrecked in Cape Town, killing almost half the Africans on board.

This ship is the reason SWP started work here.

Throughout it all, I'll roam around freely, following people at will, watching all these threads, listening, learning, and trying to make sense of the place and its history.

We leave the hotel with our bellies full and our orders clear. Before we get far, though, some of the boys from yesterday—probably about eight of them who have been sitting around waiting for us—descend.

They surround us, asking for names of the people they don't know and remaking acquaintances of those they do know. They speak English. And they charm. They all follow the museum team, which is the biggest team and the one I also have chosen to follow. Slowly, deftly, their charm and familiarity devolve into a subtle ask for money and goods.

One attaches to me. I tell him my name before I realize that this is a shakedown.

He starts with, "What is your name?," which grows into, "Oh, Ms. Tara, you are so beautiful."

And by the time we get a block or so from the museum, he is saying, "I am hungry. Help me eat."

I hear variations of this around me. And I feel incredulous—at myself for not immediately recognizing what they were up to. And then, I feel disappointed. I notice they leave Chafim, who is Black African, the only other Black person in the group, and who has walked on ahead, alone, but they go after me and all the other foreigners in the group. This little boy (who I have named Sly Eyes, because he seems way too knowing and calculating for a 12-year-old) doesn't see me in the way he sees Chafim.

That disappoints me a lot. I'm a foreigner to him. He sees me as American, not as a Black sister or a long-lost cousin coming home, not as a part of one big global Black family.

This concept of one people, of Blackness with a capital B, is not new. Pan-Africanism, as it has been called, is a belief in the cultural unity of Black people around the world. I had no idea until this moment that I subscribed so deeply to it.

The philosophy sprouted roots as the first rebellions and suicides on slave shipwrecks occurred, with people of different ethnic groups and languages and no connection to one another banding together to overcome their shared conditions. It continued with plantation and colonial uprisings, evolving into a belief that people with dark skin have commonality, and that it makes sense to work together. It grew wings and became a named thing in the mid-1800s, as a vision of a unified African utopia crystallized, transforming into a place where freed people from the African diaspora could live in peace and solidarity after slavery had been abolished. And over time and across countries, scholars and activists like Americans W.E.B. Dubois and Carter G. Woodson, Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey,

Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal, and American Maulana (Ron) Karenga, who also founded the December holiday celebration of Kwanzaa, evolved the idea into a belief of a single race made up of Black people around the world. The Negritude movement in France and the Harlem Renaissance in the United States were literary offshoots of this movement that firmed up the idea of a cultural Black identity.

I realize that I wanted these boys to see me as having come “home” to my origins, to my ancestral family. I cringe at my romanticism. I know better. I know the realities are much more complex on the ground, especially for little Black boys who are often treated disdainfully or with fear. But still, I back away slowly and ditch Sly Eyes and his begging counterparts.

Disappointment, frustration, and even a little anger war in my mind. I turn quickly around a corner and walk toward Villa Sands, the boutique hotel where Jay and Dinho are training the divers and where I hope I can avoid dealing with my swirling emotions.

## **I PASS BY MAINLY EMPTY** streets and empty buildings.

Where are all the people?

Occasionally, I see a shadow of a person inside one of the crumbling structures, or a woman in hijab sitting outside watching a toddler, or a man standing at a corner smoking a pipe or talking on his mobile phone.

The few I pass ask “*Tudo bem?*—All good?” with warm smiles. I smile, nod my head in response. I see fishermen hawking their catches on the beach. I smell the sea in the air. It is comforting.

I turn down the block with Villa Sands, a lazy but decadent street with a few businesses, guesthouses, and palm trees. The building to my left is peach, a color that makes me smile. But it also has gashes of peeling paint hanging off it, as do all the other buildings on the street. When I turn into the open-air restaurant and courtyard of Villa Sands, though, I feel like I’m on a movie set.

The rich blue infinity pool in the foreground of the blue and green Indian Ocean, the crisp whiteness of the building—no peeling paint anywhere, the sunset bar with elegant glasses of fruity cocktails, quiet jazzy

music floating in the air, polished cement floors, egg-shaped metal hanging chairs with colorful cushions...it's Miami for globe-trotting fashionistas and moguls in southeastern Africa.

In the infinity pool are 10 people in scuba gear, including Jay, who is yelling instructions: "Don't hold your breath underwater! Breathe normally." He floats with his air tank strapped around a white T-shirt.

Jay serves as the dive training coordinator for the project. Under his tutelage, for 12 days, eight hours a day, all new trainees will watch videos, read chapters in the instruction book, review lessons, take exams, and practice their water skills in the pool. The students will graduate from this Professional Association of Diving Instructors (or PADI) training as certified open water scuba divers. They will also become community monitors for the island, charged with helping to preserve the maritime archaeological history of this place to share this heritage with their neighbors and visitors to the island.

I pull out my camera and photograph them as they practice their mask and breathing skills—all these Black African faces, ranging in age from 18 to 58, peeping above the surface and sinking below. They are coastal police officers, fishermen, sailors, radio hosts, business owners, students. They are strong swimmers, commercial divers, free divers—one of them can even hold his breath for five minutes underwater. Two are female: the first women to sign up for this training program in the three years it has been offered.

All live on Ilha, and all want to help preserve the island's heritage around slave shipwrecks, as well as stop treasure hunters from plundering its underwater artifacts (which has become a problem for the island). The trade over the centuries means that wealth—gold coins, porcelain dishes, perhaps priceless artifacts—lies on Ilha's ocean floor. And over the years, seekers have come to take it away without giving back.

A line of kids sit in lounge chairs and hang behind potted planters around the pool, listening and watching too. Even SWP's coordinator Yolanda, with all her fierce energy, has come to watch. She's not a diver yet, but she is fascinated by scuba diving. She tells me that she was born in Portugal, and she looks like her Portuguese ancestors. But she also proudly proclaims herself Black. She's descended directly from a slave trader, a Portuguese nobleman who was the first governor on Ilha—and from an

enslaved African woman, a daring Mozambican princess who fought for freedom and traveled to Portugal to beg for the life of her husband. Yolanda holds the contradiction—and the possibility for reconciliation—of the slave trade on Ilha in her DNA.

Later, the tired trainees convene at the bar. I float around nursing a ginger ale and perch near Dinho. Dinho was born and educated in Maputo, the capital. He's only been on Ilha a few years, but is of Makua heritage, the dominant ethnic group on the island. He's already a community monitor, and has been supporting Jay with diving instruction.

Why did he say yes to this training?

"It's really important that we try to recover part of our history," he explains. "We have to try to find the stories of the wrecks so that people understand what really happened here."

Dinho used to work in South Africa as a commercial diver doing underwater welding and construction. He first came to Ilha for work with a European salvaging company that hoped to grow rich from their findings. He didn't think it mattered back then. But when he found a gold coin in the water, which he shared with his employers, they didn't let him dive the site anymore; he realized they had ill intentions and he quit. Now, he sees the value in preserving the heritage in the water and wants the whole community to participate in this work.

"We have everything, you know: two and a half miles of beautiful coastline and shipwrecks, coral reefs, and many species of fish. It's really important that we try to protect it all."

I wonder about the way the rest of the people on the island view this idea of underwater heritage—specifically, the Begging Boys (how I think of them as a group). Some of them were part of the crowd of kids watching the training, and I ruminate on whether such ideas of preservation feel like a fantasy when they're just trying to eat.

I ask him the question I've been struggling with.

"Those boys..." I hesitate to bring them up. "The boys that came to the hotel in the morning and were asking for money..."

He doesn't let me finish. "Those boys." He sucks his teeth. "You should not give them money."

"But...they say that they are hungry..."

He shakes his head. “They are not hungry. Those boys have enough to eat at home. But foreigners like you guys come in and give them things. And they take it. And then they begin to expect it. It’s a bad habit. And it encourages their bad behavior.”

He repeats, “You shouldn’t give them anything.”

“Those boys...” Gisela, who is sitting next to Dinho, overhears us and shakes her head. “It is complicated.” Gisela is one of the two women who have signed up for this training. She is part owner of Villa Sands, along with her husband, Marcus, who is Swedish. Gisela, whose name is pronounced the Italian way—Gee-Zella—is effortlessly beguiling; you kind of automatically fall in love with her warm ways. She is Mozambican, but spent a lot of time roaming the world restlessly, looking for love and adventure—particularly in Italy, where she went to school and lived for years until she met Marcus. They have two young girls together, both of whom were also a part of the crowd watching the training this afternoon.

“Our history is complicated. We are just learning how to be ourselves again,” she explains. “And the boys embody that tug between the old ways and the new ways.”

She’s right. Mozambique has only been free to be itself—to reset, remember, reclaim its voice, and shake off the grubby hands of its colonizers—for about 30 years. And Ilha has been one of the centers of that reset.

The Portuguese arrived in Mozambique in the late 1400s and ruled until Mozambique gained its independence in 1975. Five hundred years of rule.

Then in 1976, the country descended into a civil war that lasted 16 years. As many as a million Mozambicans were killed in the fighting or starved due to interrupted food supplies; and nearly six million were displaced across the region. The Mozambican Civil War destroyed much of the country’s critical rural infrastructure, including hospitals, rail lines, roads, and schools.

People crowded onto Ilha to escape the killing and unrest. UNESCO notes that the overcrowding led to poverty, water supply and sanitation problems, erosion, and the serious decay of buildings on the island.

But it never mentions Portugal as a root cause of any of this pain. Five hundred years of the Portuguese living in a place but still somehow remaining Portuguese rather than African. How can conquering a place—

disappearing the value and relevance of the people in that place—not result in some part of its soul breaking?

Gisela says, “These kids see the difference in the wealth of the tourists who come here and the wealth of their families who live here. And on some level, they realize this is unfair. Why shouldn’t they have that too? But they don’t see a pathway there so they beg instead.”

The legacy of slavery and colonialism is unfair.

But Gisela says the boys and the people here endure all the same. “To be born in a place like this where the stories are rich, the culture is rich, is special,” she says. “We believe in the ancestors and the spirits here—at least in my family, and in most Mozambican families.

“Once a month, we put food down and we speak to the spirits. But because of globalization, how can you explain this to those outside of Mozambique? They look at you like you’re crazy!” She pauses, reflecting. “But this is our reality. And I believe in that world. Not only do I believe, but I do things with my girls to make sure they speak with their ancestors. They always ask, ‘Why must we speak with people who are not here?’”

She smiles. “I say, ‘Because you are Mozambican!’”

“I saw them watching you earlier,” I say. Two beautiful girls with bushels of hair. Really, the only girls I have yet to encounter. “How old are they?”

“They are five and seven,” she answers.

“What do they think about what you are doing?”

She laughs. “They are asking, ‘Would it be possible for us to do it too? Do we have to wait until we are 10 years old?’”

I laugh with her.

“They see me handling tanks, and are like, ‘Wow, you are so strong!’ They tell me I look so different now!”

Samira, the other woman who is part of this training and who was sitting on the other side of Dinho, moves closer. It’s the three of us now.

“Here, women are supposed to get a husband,” Samira says. “You marry and that’s your life. But those things are not the limit. We can go beyond that.”

Whereas Gisela is worldly, Samira is promising. She’s only 18, the youngest person to train with SWP. She’ll graduate from high school this year, and she has plans. She speaks five languages fluently, is the daughter

of a local leader, and wants to go to Harvard. She's Makua, with big, pretty brown eyes and a direct gaze.

"When you are female, they don't always take you seriously. But I don't care!" she says passionately. "I decide what I want to do, and I hope other women on the island will feel the same way."

"You really love this place, eh?" I ask.

"Yes," Samira says.

Gisela adds, "Me too. And I want Mozambique to become a better country. I want us to have courage to really step into our freedom and to be ourselves the way we want to be and can be."

**THE NEXT DAY, I VISIT** O Museu da Ilha de Moçambique, a long, two-story building, reddish brown with white trim around its windows and doors and a steeple on one end that looks like it belongs on a church.

The colonial-style architecture on the island—with its bright colors and neat, crisp lines—attracts me, surprisingly, because it references buildings made by Portuguese colonizers and constructed across their empire. Some of them are built in partnership and collaboration, but much of it is built with no say by the local people, intended to displace and minimize local culture. Other African countries like Angola and Cape Verde are also home to sizable heritages of Portuguese colonial architecture.

The museum was established in 2004 and is stuffed with delicate tables and chairs, chests, and lush paintings depicting Portuguese noblemen and women over the centuries. Room after room contains the histories of Portuguese colonizers and their belongings. But almost no Black Africans who lived, worked, and were enslaved on the island are mentioned by name. I see only one picture of a modern-day Black African man who had worked as a cook in the kitchen. It's as though Black Mozambican ancestors only existed as background fodder to the larger lives of the Portuguese. This is the main reason why SWP currently supports the museum's curators in developing a fuller, more inclusive story about the history of the island.

I want to know more.

What are the Indigenous African stories on this island? And where are the 11,000-plus Black Africans who live here? I haven't seen them in Stone Town (what the locals call the area of town where we are housed). I haven't really seen anyone in Stone Town.

Richard, one of the tour guides I met on my way in, offers to give me an insider's view of the island that afternoon. It's a slow day, he says. And he's bored.

I take him up on his offer. We walk about a mile through quiet Stone Town, past the Fortress of São Sebastião, which defended the island from invaders (after the Portuguese), and the Chapel of Nossa Senhora de Baluarte, one of the oldest European buildings in Africa, into a whole, other world.

Here, the architecture is starkly different: I see the traditional homes made with mud, grass, and palm fronds that are popular throughout the continent; no brightly colored buildings with white trim. The few stone structures are cramped spaces that seem mashed together.

I smell food, see smoke coming from under cook pots. And I see people. All the people missing from Stone Town. Women doing laundry and making dinner. Kids playing along poorly irrigated streets...pollution...dirt...trash...dirty water...but also life. Men talking and hawking wares. People lazing, relaxing. Voices. Laughter. Twisty warrens of corridors that go left and right, over and under, around and behind.

The people stare at me curiously, and Richard keeps up a running dialogue as we walk around. He tells me this is Macuti Town, where all the Makua people live. I see practitioners of Islam, which, along with Christianity, dominates on the island. I peek in on a celebration for the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, which just happens to be on this day. The celebration is separated by gender: Women are in one place, men in the other. I am invited to sit with the women, who all wear hijabs and smile shyly at me as they sing.

We walk past the market, a street-long display of wares on tables and blankets, with everything you can imagine for sale—from sneakers to underwear to salted fish. I see more boys running around, but also girls finally—laughing, holding hands, braiding hair, carrying crying babies, fussing.

All this life within a mile-long container of disrepair and squalor. Richard says that Macuti Town developed unequally from Stone Town over the years. The Makua people were forced to dig stone from the area and bring it to the north part of the island, where the Portuguese lived. This erosion of bedrock from their neighborhood caused it to settle below sea level, which decades later is causing drainage and sanitation problems, all of which were exacerbated during the war.

I ask why the Makua don't move into Stone Town where this problem does not exist and just restore the buildings there.

Richard, who is not Makua and is from elsewhere in southern Mozambique, shrugs and says, "I don't know. But it's OK as long as foreigners keep moving into the buildings there and giving jobs to the local people."

"But," I frown, "the Makua people could restore these buildings themselves, build their own businesses, and employ the community themselves."

"They don't know how to restore the buildings."

"But," I frown deeper, "they could learn."

"It's OK," Richard says with a bit of perplexed look on his face. "We want the foreigners to come so that we will all have work on the island."

I open my mouth to challenge him. I want to debate the merits of entrepreneurship and innovation with him. I immediately think there could be an innovation lab on the island. I picture global investors pooling money for youth challenges on how to transform Stone Town. I see social business pitches for cafés, multinational tech hubs, food incubators. I imagine an architectural consortium training a new generation of builders and designers.

And...then I stop. I suddenly feel the gulf in our thinking. I feel my Americanness and my deep indoctrination into the principles of capitalism —another thing I didn't know was so deeply embedded in my thinking until now. And I cringe inwardly at my automatic assumption that these Africans would need outside training, that they wouldn't have capacity and ingenuity enough to draw on their heritage to thrive.

I close my mouth. And we keep walking. We pass the island's only hospital and step back into Stone Town.

Richard drops me off at the house that the Slave Wrecks Project's terrestrial archaeological team is excavating.

Chafim and Diego are hard at work with shovels, trowels, and buckets; they've found a tunnel that leads from a church to the inner courtyard of a house. Africans were likely brought to the church and then smuggled through the tunnel to a house at the edge of town to be shipped away to the Americas. The tunnel's walls are close; only one person can walk through it at a time, and that person has to crouch down to go forward, bending at the waist. Upon exiting, they arrive in this courtyard, which has high stone walls. No one would have known what was going on here.

Once in the courtyard, the captives were ushered forward to a door at its edge. A door that opens onto a small sandy beach and the ocean. No steps. No dock. No pier. Just a doorway that leads to a quiet stretch of beach and a wide vista of blue. This is where the dhows, those beautiful boats I saw coming in, must have parked, and where chained people must have been led. From there, they would have been spirited away to the bigger ships, never to return.

It's a Door of No Return. A literal door. I thought these were only symbols—marketing campaigns made up by West African governments and diasporic communities seeking to memorialize the slave trade and jump-start tourism to their countries.

The best known Door of No Return is at Maison des Esclaves (House of Slaves), a building on Gorée Island in Senegal. It's a museum and memorial to the victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It represents the final exit point from the continent and showcases the conditions of captivity: likely dark and brutal, as captives would have spent days shackled to the floor. Built around 1776, the building was turned into a museum in 1962 and became a World Heritage site under UNESCO in 1978. There is much controversy about the number of people actually held in Gorée. Some records claim that millions of people were led through its doors; others say only a few thousand. But either way, the building has become an important modern-day memorial of the trade.

Elmina Castle, also called St. George of the Mine Castle, in Ghana is another such museum that represents an exit point. It was extensively restored by the government in the 1990s and preserved as a Ghanaian

national museum. In 1979, it was also designated a UNESCO World Heritage site.

But here in Mozambique, in this unknown house, is a literal door. I never thought to find such a place in East Africa.

Diego, who is Brazilian with Portuguese, Indian, and African ancestry, has been living on the island for the past year with a Fulbright scholarship. He takes a break from digging to tell me more about the site. “This was a place where people did business,” he explains. “It’s in the archaeological record. It’s in the oral history. We need to study Ilha de Moçambique in a lot more detail—and as much more than just a future tourist site—so that we can learn more.”

He wipes his brow in the hot sun. “Today, I think we put a lot of value on studying science and technology. But we’re not doing enough to give people a fundamental understanding about the history of the world and how things came about. The human side of things.”

Chafim, who sits next to him, adds, “Archaeology helps you understand people. From a piece of pottery, you can learn bits of what someone’s life was like 5,000 years ago. You can make more sense of the world.”

I leave them to rest, then move over to the door where Kamau stands. I look out into the distance, and I think about the door, this building—the last place the captive Makua people would have touched before they left the continent. And I think about the ship: the *São José Paquete d’África*. She left the waters of Ilha on December 3, 1794, with 512 people—most likely Makua—in her belly.

**I SEE THE SHIP SITTING** tall and pretty, about a half mile out from shore where the water is deep enough to hold her bulk. There is strength running through her lines and curves: solid, gleaming wood, outfitted to withstand boots stomping and cannons firing. I imagine her proud, stately, stern, eager to carve her way through the long and treacherous stretches of the Atlantic and fulfill her duty, delivering her cargo safely and on time.

I envision the dhows with their loads of chained people rowing to her side. The first African is loaded in her hold, and then the second, third, 100th, 400th, crammed into a space far too small. The fear, suffering,

misery seeping into her sides, staining her floors, spreading slowly into the very heart of her. I can feel her growing sense of discomfort over the days at sea as she travels down the Mozambique Channel and around the curve of South Africa.

In the wee morning hours of December 27, 1794, I picture the crew dropping anchor in the cold, treacherous, shark-infested waters of the Cape of Good Hope, planning to restock. Her relief at this break to reorient herself around this bastardization of her purpose, her beginning to wonder how she will endure another six weeks, another two months—a crossing of almost 4,000 miles to Rio de Janeiro—with this as her burden to bear. But before the anchor can find purchase, the wind picks up and begins to toss her around. She is made to withstand. She is strong. But the cape is fierce in its need for chaos and destruction. It wants to claim her.

She slams hard against a reef—once, twice, three times—and her hull is breached.

She hears the cries of crew and cargo alike. She feels them scrambling on her deck, boots slamming to yells of “*Abandonai o navio! Abandonai o navio!*” She watches as they drop life rafts into the water and row them back and forth to shore: crew first, then the Africans in the cargo hold. She tries to hold steady, to give them the time they need. Her job, she remembers, is to deliver her cargo safely and on time. She keeps her nose up, fighting the cape, but she can feel the life snuffed out inside her, the bodies bumping against her sides.

The crew all make it to shore safely, but they save only half the Africans.

So many people gone. It breaks her.

The Cape of Good Hope claims her greedily. It takes maybe three hours for her to sink, for her nose to dip below the surface of the water on a diagonal trajectory to the ocean floor.

The cold of the water takes her breath away.

She sinks in slow motion.

Sand around her swirls violently. Startled fish dart away, disturbed by vibrations of a muffled boom.

Then silence. Then settling.

Then all returning to normal.

A day passes.

Her disintegration is slow.  
The current tears cloth from sails and sweeps pots and pans across her edges.

She tried her best. Or did she, she wonders? Was the burden of the misery too much to bear? Did she give up too soon? Maybe more of the bodies in her hold would have made it if she could have held out longer. But to what end? To more suffering? To more misery?

It's not her job to think of such things.

She only regrets that she didn't fulfill her duty.

A month passes.

Bacteria and worms chew through her beautiful wooden deck beams. They nibble at flesh that nourishes them for a long while.

The currents twirl her broken body this way and that in an intimate dance.

Schools of fish glide past, asking, "What is this? How did it get here?" A year goes by.

The waters have taken her regret—her misery, her pain, her sadness. It doesn't matter anymore.

Kelp forests hide piles of ballast bricks with curtains of silky leaves.

Copper fastenings and sheathings rust.

A century passes.

Two hundred fifty tons of vessel, now fractured, in pieces, scattered across the ocean floor, encrusted in coral.

Bones picked clean, serving as doorways and decoration.

Two hundred years gone.

Her story fading to black.

Facsimiles of memory encased in rock and time.

Generations of sea creatures living on this fossil invisible to the untrained eye have made it home.

**I PAY HOMAGE IN MY** mind to spoken word artist Alyea Pierce, who has imagined bits of this sinking before. Then I turn to Kamau. He and I have been standing there quietly for a long moment. I know the *São José Paquete d'África* pulls hard on his heart; it's the first slave ship he ever

dived. He was also the one who found the shackles that helped positively identify her. He has touched wood that was once part of her.

How did it feel?

He crouches down in the doorway to tell his tale, and I follow.

“It was like I was hearing the shouts of the lost,” he says. “It was like I could hear the screams and sense the pain and suffering that people must have gone through. The agony of being on a sinking vessel in shackles, unable to save yourself, then the ship breaking up and you falling into the sea.”

“What was it like to dive there?” I ask.

“Well, we had three teams of two divers. We could stay down for about 45 minutes to an hour, and working conditions were just crazy. The water temperature was about 45°F. So not only was it very cold, but we also had a 10- to 15-foot surge—the water current moving back and forth strongly. We were getting slammed against the rocks. And every time the water surged, it stirred up sand on the bottom. Plus, we were diving in a kelp forest. So it was very hard to see.

“We had gotten some magnetometer hits earlier and thought a lot of the material from the wreck had gotten caught between a few groupings of boulders that were buried in the sand on the seafloor. I was using a hydraulic dredge to help clear away the sand and sediment. And so I would dredge here, then the current would throw me the other way, and I would come back and dredge some more in the same place.

“My dive buddy, Kemeiloe, pointed out an abalone shell lying near some boulders. I started dredging near the shell. Then I saw something. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I knew it was something unique or human-made because of the shape. It was encrusted, but it looked like a loop and then another loop. It turned out those were shackles. Then I sort of broke away from the group and swam right between the two boulders. And I saw this big wooden piece about four or five feet long. We knew that the *São José* was carrying some timbers, but this looked like it might have been a piece of the ship’s hull. It was really jammed in there between the boulders; you couldn’t just pull it out. I remember swimming over and looking at it and saying to myself, Wow, this has to be some ancient material for sure. So I reached out and grabbed it. And again, this might sound a little weird, or whatever. But when I touched it, I could feel the vibration, the energy, the

pain, the suffering, the horror. It's like I closed my eyes and could audibly hear the agony. The pain was almost too much to bear."

His eyes are moist. It's the first time I've seen a crack in his stern demeanor.

"You know, we wear masks in scuba diving, and sometimes they get fogged up from condensation. But this time it was from tears. I just couldn't, couldn't hold it back. And so I opened up my mask, let water in and washed the tears out."

"Why do you do this work, Kamau?" I ask gently.

He starts to speak, but his voice catches with emotion. He holds up his hand and takes a moment to recenter.

Kamau is all angles and edges on the outside: towering, with corded, ropy muscles and an Afro. He favors baseball caps with tufts of his Afro poking out on each side and sunglasses over his sharp nose. But he is also sensitive and squishy on the inside. And at 67, he's aging; I notice that he shakes a little—a tiny wobble of his head and hands—when he's talking. And then there's that soft voice. Even today, as we sit together alone at the edge of this place, the wind threatens to snatch his voice away. I still have to lean in to hear him.

The contradiction of hard and soft at play with each other.

How do you really know someone? How do you begin to understand the eddies and flows of someone's life—the big decisions and the small ones that lead to this path and not that one? The ones that culminate in pivotal moments intersecting?

Kamau has already told me a bit of his origin story. He grew up in South Carolina with 11 brothers and sisters. He says they were dirt poor. His father struggled with alcoholism. He provided financially but was emotionally distant and prone to bouts of physical abuse. His mother, who was a domestic worker, bore the burden of raising all the kids and keeping them together as a family.

Kamau's coming of age was in the 1950s and early 1960s, when Dwight Eisenhower was president, Richard Nixon was vice president, and the Korean War had just begun. This was also the decade when Emmett Till was murdered; when Rosa Parks declined to give up her seat on a bus and sparked the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott; when *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools, was

decided; when the Little Rock Nine were escorted by the National Guard into an Arkansas school amid jeers and cruelty. His formative years happened in the midst of Jim Crow, just as some White folks were collectively waking up to racial injustice.

He became a man in the late 1960s and early '70s, a time when President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., were assassinated; when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law; when a new consciousness around Black Power was emerging; when 25,000 unarmed citizens marched for Black voting rights in Selma, Alabama, and faced attacks from law enforcement officers who sprayed them with tear gas. It was also an incredible time of firsts: Shirley Chisholm became the first Black woman elected to Congress and the first Black person to campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination; Thurgood Marshall, the first African American to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court; Arthur Ashe, the first Black person to win the men's singles title at Wimbledon. And the miniseries *Roots* became one of the highest-rated shows in TV history—the first to show viewers the impact of enslavement on American society.

Black was becoming beautiful, stylish, hip, and enterprising in the 1970s. Motown and disco music were changing the landscape of American sound. Hip-hop was born in the South Bronx. *Essence* magazine, which showcased Black women with big Afros and big lips as unapologetically beautiful, and *Black Enterprise* magazine, which highlighted Black entrepreneurs and business minds, both launched.

As this cultural moment was unfolding, Kamau—who had joined the military right out of high school in rural South Carolina—took advantage of the GI Bill and enrolled in a local technical college to pursue his talent for drawing and math. He received an associate's degree with honors in engineering technology and was awarded a full scholarship to Howard University. He wore his Afro big around D.C. but cut it once the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recruited him. And there, he rose steadily up the ranks, eventually leading prominent hydropower projects around the country.

Kamau embodied the times. He even changed his birth name to Kamau Beyete Anum Sadiki. Kamau, he told me, is a Kikuyu name from the people of Kenya that means “quiet warrior”; Beyete is a Xhosa name from South Africa that means “someone who exists between God and humanity”; and

Anum and Sadiki are Kiswahili names that mean the “fifth born” and “trustworthy and faithful,” respectively.

But he hasn’t answered my question. Why did he choose to do this work if it hurts so much?

Instead of answering, he starts another story. He tells me that he met the esteemed grandfather of Black scuba diving, Doc Jones, randomly at an airport.

“I was coming back to D.C. from one of my trips in early 2006, and I had a layover in Dallas Fort Worth International Airport. I had just read Michael Cottman’s *Spirit Dive*, about finding the *Henrietta Marie* slave ship. As I waited at the gate, I saw this elderly gentleman napping. He had on a jacket with all these patches. I moved a bit closer and saw a patch for the *Henrietta Marie* on his shoulder. And I wondered if it was the same ship.

“I wasn’t about to bother him. He was in a deep nod, you know, resting well. But he eventually came out of his slumber. And so I said, ‘Excuse me, sir, but I just read a book about the *Henrietta Marie*. And you have a patch with the same name, and I was wondering if that was the same ship.’ And that was the beginning of our incredible story.”

They started talking. Kamau says he was mesmerized by Doc’s account of his quest, with other divers from the National Association of Black Scuba Divers, to place a plaque at the *Henrietta Marie* wreck site. Then, Doc invited Kamau to join the UAS club in D.C. And he did. After a year or so of diving, Jay, who was also a part of UAS, invited Kamau to join DWP with him. And he did.

“I don’t think any of this happened randomly. All these steps led me to DWP. I am supposed to be doing this. It sparks something in me. Diving these wrecks, touching the artifacts, helps me imagine slavery in a personal way.

“So why do I do this, you ask? I do this because we have to get past the shame and the silence that has been around this issue of the Transatlantic Slave Trade for so long. We have to do this work. *I have to do this work. We have to lean into the pain if we are ever going to heal ourselves.*”

He sighs, and we lapse into a companionable silence until it’s time to go.

I look back out over the water and decide then that I will go to the *São José* site in South Africa. I'll dive it and see all of this with my own eyes.

**I GO BACK TO MY** hotel, and as I'm falling asleep, I think about the Makua people's decision to not push for the right to inhabit Stone Town again. And because my mind is loose in the tween times of dusk and dawn, I suddenly realize that Stone Town is a ghost town. Literally—there are invisible energies hanging over the place. I think of the 200 years of suffering and anguish that have never been fully acknowledged or atoned for. Because all that energy had to go somewhere, it settled into the buildings, steeped into the mortar and the stone.

And I realize the Makua are perhaps wiser than us all.

Maybe they can't move into those buildings and build innovation labs as if nothing happened there. And maybe they also can't tear them down in anger and dismissal.

John Mbiti, a Kenyan many considered the dean of African theologians (he passed away in 2019), observed the crucial melding of visible and invisible in African traditional beliefs—the belief in a mystical, hidden, spiritual power that governs the universe. Maybe this deeply held philosophy can't be fully explained to Westerners. And maybe this power, which also focuses on honoring the ancestors and acknowledging their role among the living, works in its own way and its own time. So you make room for it, and you allow things to unfold as they will. Because sometimes, things are happening that you can't know but that you can trust in.

That means you live where life is happening—where, yes, it's crowded and things are in disrepair, but where you can look after each other, keep each other close, and allow the anguish of the trade to exist in your cellular memory.

That means you leave Stone Town empty, full of foreigners staying at expensive guesthouses. You know those beautiful buildings are tombs of memory, and there is a reckoning due. You know you can't move on until the ancestors have been acknowledged and somehow honored.

The Makua in Macuti Town, then, are perhaps guards that stand watching, waiting, holding the space for transformation to occur.

**I EAT LUNCH BY MYSELF** at a local restaurant in Stone Town. And as I am about to leave, I look out the window and see him in silhouette at the far end of the street.

Sly Eyes.

Even from a distance, I see his dusty knees, ashy in the cracks, his brown pants with the rip, and the worn gray shirt that looks so out of place on this cobbled street surrounded by colorful buildings.

I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I sneak out of the restaurant while his attention is elsewhere. Then I literally paste my back against a crumbling brick wall and inch forward until I'm out of his sight line. I feel like a spy in a fugitive film who is trying to shake her attackers. I peek around the corner. All clear.

Whew.

I'm ridiculous.

I know it.

I stand straight, brush off my clothes, and head back to the hotel.

I make it one block. And he appears. He found me somehow.

We're alone on the empty street. He approaches me. I feel cornered.

"Buy my painting, Ms. Tara." I remember I told him my name. And he speaks it, to my chagrin, as he comes closer.

Dinho said to not give these kids anything.

I shake my head, heat rising on my cheeks, and turn away from him.

"Please, Ms. Tara." He steps in front of me and shoves the painting under my nose. I look down. It's not something he's created himself. He's selling a watercolor illustration of the dock and the water from another artist.

I wonder where he got it.

"Please."

There is a whine in his voice.

Gisela said it's complicated.

But Dinho said we're encouraging bad behavior and that we shouldn't do it.

I look beyond the painting and start walking again, shaking my head no. Sly Eyes lets me walk away this time. He doesn't follow anymore.

I turn back before the next corner and see him standing in the middle of the street with the painting hanging loose between his fingers, looking down at the sidewalk.

He looks so defeated.

My shoulders droop, and I wonder what I'm doing.

**EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, WE** travel to Mossuril, a district of Nampula Province, which is about an hour away. Fourteen of us are packed in the vehicles for the journey. We're headed to the house of Señor Evano Nhogache, the highest-ranking Makua leader in the area.

It's a return journey of sorts.

I heard the beginning of the story from Dr. Lonnie Bunch III, the founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) and the current secretary of the Smithsonian, a few weeks ago, before I left for Mozambique. Lonnie is impressive as the first Black head of all Smithsonian museums in D.C.

He was composed, grandfatherly, and open with his emotions. He told me the story of why the *São José* has become such a symbol for the Makua community, and why he's excited about the possibilities for generational and cross-cultural healing.

I think of that encounter now as we drive to Mossuril. Local songs pipe from the tiny radio in the car, and the others nap or stare out the windows silently. It's a good time to remember.

Lonnie and I met on Zoom: he in his home study and me in a rented office in downtown D.C. He insisted that I call him by his first name.

"In some ways, going to Mozambique was the culmination of years of study," he began. "So when we learned the *São José* ship cargo hold had been filled with the Makua people from Mozambique, our team decided to go back to that community to tell them what happened to their ancestors.

“I felt an immense obligation to go to Mozambique; while I have spent a lot of time in Africa, I’d never been there. The Island of Mozambique immediately made me think about the contrast between the beauty around me and the reality of slavery there. What it would be like to be shackled—to look ahead of you and see the beauty of the islands, but recognize that your life has changed dramatically and that you can’t see what’s behind you.

“We had a whole day of celebrations planned: music, dancing, food, speeches. I met with the chieftain of the Makua people, Señor Evano Nhogache. He is an ancestor, but he was also a member of the resistance to Portuguese colonialism during the Mozambican Civil War and a soccer player in his youth. So he was the spokesperson that day for a number of different ethnic and geographic communities in the region.

“What was clear as we talked was that this occasion meant as much to them as it did to me. I met a woman about 35 years old who told me that she and her family remember every day that her ancestor was lost on the *São José*. That taught me that this kind of work was as much about today and tomorrow as it was about yesterday.

“When I was asked to come and stand next to Señor Nhogache, he said his ancestors have asked—no, begged—that I do them a favor. He held out a beautiful cowrie shell-encrusted vessel: just gleaming whiteness. I took it, and when I opened it, I saw that he had put soil in it. I remember being confused; what were his ancestors asking of me?

“Then he said that the soil in the vessel came from the last place people on the African continent had stood before being boarded on ships in that area. His ancestors, Señor Nhogache said, were asking that when I go back to the site of the ship in South Africa, that I sprinkle the soil over the side of the wreck—so that for the first time since 1794 his people who lost their lives can sleep in their own land and finally rest in peace.”

I was transfixed. “What did you say?”

“I lost it. I was crying and trying not to drop the vessel. Then Señor Nhogache called over a group of us, who surrounded him in a circle. He pointed to all the local leaders. ‘These are the faces of people who have been left behind. The people who were taken from us had enormous anguish—not just about what was happening to them on that wretched ship,

but also what happened to their families. What happened to their homes. What happened to their leaders. To those left behind.

“When you deliver this soil, I want you to let them know that we’ve survived, that we’ve thrived, that our leaders are strong.””

I felt myself tearing up.

“I think that this work of rehumanizing history is helping us understand our connections to the past, but also to each other, whether we’re African or African American, White or Black, diver or historian. These connections are the ones that we have to forge, because this is the way we build community—internationally, nationally, and locally.”

“Is that why your museum tells the story of DWP so profoundly?”

“Diving With a Purpose is teaching new generations something that most Black folks don’t do, but are marrying it with a way to understand themselves by uncovering history. They allow us to honor those that didn’t make it. They allow us to almost touch sacred spaces that are not just spaces of death, but spaces of memory. And as long as we find those spaces—as long as we dive for these ships—those people whose names we’ll never know: They’re not lost. They’re remembered.

“Good history is about good storytelling. Because it reduces to human scale. It gives people an interaction with the past. It gives it life.”

I sat in the rented office space for an hour after I hung up with Lonnie, and I cried. His experience had touched and healed something in me. Lonnie, the SWP team, and DWP were showing me an approach to history that wasn’t centered in the horror of what happened. Instead, they were acknowledging the pain but moving beyond it, interpreting one of the most traumatic parts of history through a new lens, with a loving perspective, and with the possibility of healing deep wounds. It made me believe that if the *São José* could impact Lonnie, maybe sharing his story and other stories of slave shipwrecks could do the same for others.

Remembering Lonnie’s words, I feel so thankful that I am in Mozambique now.

**WE DRIVE NOW INTO THE** rural area of Nampula Province to Señor Nhogache’s house, passing people at roadside stands selling plastic

grocery bags of roasted cashews for less than U.S. \$2; clucking chickens and skinny dogs roaming through small clusters of traditionally built homes; miles and miles of barely touched land and forests.

We stop in the bush to see the route that captive Africans in shackles and chains—from other parts of Mozambique and surrounding countries—likely walked on the forced march across the country to Ilha. The team has also been excavating here. It's hot, and the bushes are tangled with overgrown paths that are exhausting to pick through. But we see the remnants of several buildings that likely served as way stations in the late 1700s. Chafim spots a tiny piece of crockery and touches it with his toe. This is clearly a place full of stories, but probably only archaeologists and historians have the eyes and patience to uncover them.

We get back in the jeeps.

Señor Nhogache's house sits on a few acres of land. It's a humble white building; chickens cluck around the yard, which is surrounded by dozens of cashew, mango, and ash trees. Quiet and soft-spoken, with big brown eyes, Señor Nhogache is five foot seven and probably around 70 years of age. He wears a red button-down collared shirt that says "From here to infinity," along with a white-and-black-striped taqiya or kufi, a skull cap that Muslim men wear.

My head is covered too, to be respectful.

We sit in a circle around him.

Señor Nhogache speaks in Portuguese while Steve and Yolanda translate. Cameras flash. Videos whirl. The SWP team updates him on the latest news of the wreck. They share pictures of the exhibits and a few artifacts in the NMAAHC and the Iziko Museums in South Africa. He, in turn, shows us the book he has written and asks that it also be placed in the NMAAHC alongside the artifacts.

Soon, we leave for the slow drive back to Ilha.

I fall asleep in the back seat, dreaming of swimming through a kelp forest and touching a piece of the *São José*.

**I HAVEN'T YET TALKED TO** Ibrahima, an archaeologist from Senegal. He arrived a few days later than the rest of us and has been busy in

discussions with others. But I noticed him when he first checked into the hotel. I was headed back to my room after breakfast when I saw this stylish man in a white *agbada*—a long flowing robe with pants underneath—beige leather shoes, a leather shoulder bag, a long beige scarf, and sunglasses. His chic aesthetic stood out sharply against all the T-shirts and cargo pants. His skin was dark—almost a bluish black—and beautiful, especially when contrasted with his teeth, which flashed brilliantly whenever he smiled. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and had a roundish face with chubby cheeks.

Ibrahima Thiaw (pronounced Chow) lives in Senegal and is considered one of the foremost archaeology scholars on the continent. He directs the archaeology department at Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar). He has three master's degrees: one in history from the Université Cheikh Anta Diop, one in ethnology from the University of Paris, and one in anthropology from Rice University in the United States, along with a Ph.D. He has held a Fulbright and a U.S. National Science Foundation grant, served as president of the PanAfrican Archaeological Association (PAA), and carried out research in Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sierra Leone.

Finally, we get a chance to talk. We walk together from our hotel to Villa Sands, which has become the de facto meeting spot for the group, and we sit on egg-shaped chairs one bright sunny afternoon.

I don't know why—maybe it's the inkling of kindness in his face and a sense that he has already wrestled with the kinds of questions I'm now seeking answers for—but I immediately begin to confess.

"I guess this sounds really naive, but I came here expecting to find a sense of home," I say. "But I don't feel welcome or at home. I feel so confused."

Ibrahima blows out a breath, and then he smiles ruefully. "Yeah, it's not easy, eh?"

He continues, "I don't know that African Americans like you will ever find home in Africa. I actually don't think Africa is your home geographically."

"What???" I stammer.

"Too much has happened, quite frankly, and you are too removed from this place."

He looks down at his hands.

“Yes. If you are coming to Africa, and if you expect to see it the way it was—which most people do—you will find that Africa isn’t there anymore. The motherland never was static; it continued to change and evolve culturally. So we have to be able to move beyond those old expectations of Africa and develop new conversations about the challenges of the present and the possibilities for the future.”

I frown. “Do you think then that we, across the diaspora, are actually connected to those of you on the continent?” I ask.

He looks up, “You mean, do I believe in Pan-Africanism?”

I nod.

“Well, yes. But I think maybe it’s time to define a new kind of Pan-Africanism that could be common to all of us. And in order to do that, we have to actually develop those commonalities.” He pauses. “Maybe Africa is best experienced by those in the diaspora as a moral home, rather than a geographical home. You could pick up things—values, knowledge, know-how—that everyone can work at promoting and maintaining. And then we can imagine new futures together.”

“This is not what I expected you to say.” I shake my head.

Ibrahima laughs. “Don’t worry. This is good. It’s where we’re headed. The only danger is thinking of a rigid and fixed Africa. It would be wrong to imagine it as culturally fixed and unchanged since the Transatlantic Slave Trade.”

Was that what I was doing?

“And you know, this is not just about African Americans or other Africans in the diaspora, but also about a number of Africans who have been displaced within the continent as a result of the Atlantic slave trade. Their belonging to home was also disrupted. So within the African continent, they formed diasporic communities where they tried to rebuild their lives. And there is a tension between the home of exile, where they didn’t choose to go, and the mother country for which there is still some emotional connectedness.” He thinks for a second. “But again, I think that there are new possibilities for imagining the present and the future as a dynamic group in a well-connected world for all of us that are African-descended.”

We settle into silence for a moment.

“You sound optimistic.”

He laughs. “Yes! I think identity is a matter of empowerment. We should not let other people define for us who we are. But we should choose who we want to be, or who we want to become. That is the opportunity before us.”

He leans closer. “That’s why I think this work of diving for slave shipwrecks—us approaching the past from the material angle—is so fresh. It helps us find irrefutable evidence, tell unknown and untold stories about one of the darkest moments of human history. That can make a huge difference in the way we understand that history—and perhaps, it can give us a way of really reaching our conscience and perhaps, even our humanity.”

“Oh,” I say.

“I’ve got to go to a meeting at the museum now, but you should come to Senegal and meet my students there before you go back to the United States.”

Ibrahima leaves.

I stay seated, feeling a light breeze and the weight of his words settling on my skin. I want to let them flow through me and ease the tension that has arisen around my heart.

I close my eyes. I take three deep breaths.

And suddenly, Sly Eyes appears in my mind: He’s standing in front of me. I see his life unfolding: his first cries out of his mother’s womb, then him toddling on weak, chubby legs, him laughing as he races along the beach with friends, sitting cross-legged on the floor with a plate of *matapa* and *pão* (stew and bread), fingers greasy from scooping the food with his hand. I see him older now, taller, stronger, watching with big eyes as his friends approach strangers at hotels and get things, and him beginning to feel a want. I see him talking to Elliot and hearing about his connection to Kamau and desiring such a connection for himself...

I imagine him as me. What if those were my chubby legs? My big eyes? My fingers slick with grease? I would be him. He would be me. I would be seeing just as he is.

Only arrogance makes me think his life, his perspective, should somehow be different. To close the distance between us, I must acknowledge the hierarchy and privilege I bring as an American, someone who can be a global traveler, as a National Geographic grantee, even as an

adult who has had time for reflection, though I don't always feel these privileges in my life. I judged him just the way that people often judge little Black boys in the United States, not seeing them as kids but as grown people with grown emotions and violent intentions.

Oh Lord.

I must approach all this from a place of compassion.

And then it all leaves me suddenly with a whoosh—the anger, arrogance, disappointment, my own domination. If I'm committed to the world's transformation, I have to first transform myself. This work can't happen outside of me; it has to start within.

We offer a gift to others when we can meet them with compassion. But first, we must offer that gift to ourselves.

I rename him Brown Eyes.

**IT'S THE LAST DAY; WE'RE** headed out. Our bags are all packed and in the jeeps.

Yesterday was graduation day for the divers. Gisela and Marcus arranged a lovely party at their beautiful art gallery, down the street from Villa Sands. Dancers danced, musicians played, and we ate delicious food.

As Jay called out names, trainees came up one by one to receive their certificates from Kamau and Dinho. It reminded me of my graduation day from DWP. The divers all looked so accomplished and proud of themselves. Yolanda and Gisela danced together; the divers whooped and hollered. I think we all felt a sense of achievement.

Today, I step outside. None of the boys are here yet, but I know they'll come.

I don't consciously decide, but my feet take me north. I head uptown, just a few minutes away. In the store on the corner, I spend my last coins of Mozambican metical currency buying sweets and fruits and chips and nuts. I gather a big bagful of stuff and head back to the hotel.

The boys have begun gathering.

They run in and around the cars. They call out names.

I look for Brown Eyes.

He's not there.

I wait.

The jeeps are loading.

The team is getting in. One jeep heads off.

The other is about to leave. And mine is only waiting for me.

I look again.

He doesn't show.

I sigh.

And I hand the bag of goodies to two boys I've not seen before, but who are standing closest to me.

They whoop and holler at their get.

I climb in the car and we drive off.

I look behind me for a glimpse of him. Maybe he was running late. But he never shows.

I sigh again, filled with regret.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

I watch the waves crash into each other from my perch on a bench on the Sea Point Promenade in Cape Town, South Africa. I'm only a few feet away from the chest-high stone barrier wall that keeps the ocean in check. Thank goodness. The water is a soapy foam of frenzied blue and green forces. Some waves scramble up the ocean side of the wall but without enough velocity to reach me; they sink back down for another go. Others race up the wall more vigorously and actually jump it, almost reaching my feet. They withdraw quickly before making contact, though, like they know they shouldn't be there.

Droplets from these close encounters spray my face.

It's a sunny summer day, but the water feels startlingly cold. I hear it comes from the Benguela Current, which originates in the Antarctic and is 40 to 50°F in the summer. This is the Cape of Good Hope after all—originally named the Cape of Storms in 1488 by a Portuguese explorer named Bartolomeu Dias, according to some accounts, who tried to establish a trade route by sea following the trade winds from Europe around the southern tip of Africa to India. And he did it. The route would become crucial to the Portuguese, and eventually the Dutch and French, finally giving Europeans a way to bypass the trails and trading posts and markets that formed the land-based Silk Road to India and China. With this new route, they could pocket more profit, because they would no longer have to pay taxes to lords in the Middle East and North Africa as goods passed through their lands. The same accounts say the cape was later renamed the Cape of Good Hope by John II of Portugal, who rejoiced in Dias's success. But not everyone rejoiced. The route brought not only spices and fabrics

from China and India to Portugal, but also enslaved and indentured workers from places like Malaysia, Indonesia, and India, who were forced to work for no pay in Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion, and South Africa.

On this warm day in late December, I stand steadfast in the midst of the cape's fierceness and narrow my eyes with resolve—because these are also the waters that hold the wreck of the *São José Paquete d'África*—well, technically, the waters in the next neighborhood of Clifton hold her. But I'm only a five-minute drive, maybe a 15-minute walk, from where she went down, just around the huge corestone boulder that juts into the sea and serves as a barrier between the neighborhoods. And there, only about 160 feet or so from the shore of Clifton's Third Beach, lie her bones and the bones of those 212 people who died in her hold in the middle of the night 224 years ago.

I said I'd come to see with my own eyes. And I am here. I made it. I traveled by jeep from Ilha back to Nampula, then by plane to Johannesburg, then on an hour-long flight to Cape Town.

When I step out of the airport and into the taxi that takes me along the waterfront, I breathe easy in this place. Something about Cape Town relaxes my soul.

With its dramatic cliffs and mountain ranges framing the sea and its winding uphill streets hiding pretty bungalow houses surrounded by lush greenery, the city is lovely. It reminds me of San Francisco or maybe Lisbon—maybe even a less busy Rio de Janeiro. I'm staying at my former colleague and friend Elli's house in the posh neighborhood of Sea Point while she travels. Her house is beautiful—spotlessly clean, white walls, Shaker cabinets, modern appliances, minimalist decorations, a big rainfall showerhead in the primary bath with heated, pebbled floors. I want to hop in to shower off my travel grime. But before I can unpack my bags, I feel the pull. I grab an apple from her built-in fridge and walk out of the house, about a mile down the steep curving hill onto the Sea Point Promenade. It's a three-mile jogger's paradise that leads to a glitzy waterfront shopping plaza on one end and the edge of Clifton on the other.

While Sea Point is posh and trendy, Clifton is exclusive and wealthy—the most expensive neighborhood in all of South Africa. It sits on a small strip of land between the Atlantic Ocean and the Lion's Head and Table Mountain ranges. Victoria Road forms the northern boundary and reaches

all the way to the community's southernmost point. Nettleton Road is on the eastern boundary, and the Atlantic Ocean on the west.

The bungalows and luxury apartments that start at U.S. \$1 million are all nestled on the cliff, with sweeping views of the Atlantic Ocean and direct access to a cove of four pure white, quartzite sand beaches that have not only been rated as top in the world but are also recognized for their environmental sustainability. They are open to the public, although they were accessible only to White people during the time of apartheid. The strongest surf at First Beach diminishes as it travels to Fourth Beach, where it's the weakest. First draws a mixed crowd of locals and surfers, Second attracts students, Fourth is the most populated and glamorous.

Third Beach, the smallest of them all, is known as a hot spot for gay culture. And some of its sunbathers, surfers, snorkelers, and free divers may have no idea that a slave shipwreck lies underneath the surface.

I sit at the edge, listening to the violence of all that clashing and thinking of what it must have felt like two centuries ago to be submerged in these angry waters with no idea of what was going on around you, giving up your last breath in panic or in surrender or perhaps even in gratitude.

My heart aches for the Makua who lost their lives that night.

**THE NEXT MORNING, AFTER A** good night's sleep, I reach out to Paul and Steve at SWP for a contact in Cape Town around the *São José* wreck to plan my dive to the site. I imagine myself, like Kamau, touching pieces of it, and wonder if I will feel similar emotions.

Paul refers me to Jaco Boshoff, the archaeologist and principal investigator of the *São José* site, and a co-founder, with Steve and Dave, of SWP. Paul tells me I most likely won't be able to dive the wreck. They have no official mission at this time, he says, and even though it's not far from shore, I wouldn't be able to find anything underwater without a guide familiar with the site.

But I really want to dive.

I contact Kamau for ideas. He shuts me down too, reminding me that I'm probably not experienced enough to handle the surges. He says they are so strong because the wreck is in shallow water, only about 50 feet or so.

I decide not to fight the wisdom of the group. I'm sorely disappointed, but I'm also just grateful to be here. At least I can visit the museum where pieces of the ship are on display. And I can sit with the person who originally found her.

So the next day, I set up a meeting with Jaco at the Iziko Museums, where he works. Iziko is similar to the Smithsonian Institution, which has some 20 museums scattered around Washington, D.C., and other locations. Iziko operates 11 national museums in Cape Town that focus on natural history, social history, and art. One is the Slave Lodge; it used to be the Old Supreme Court Building, but today houses the artifacts of the *São José* and tells the long history of slavery in South Africa.

A lot of people, including many South Africans, don't think about slavery as the root of apartheid. Apartheid seems a big enough, old enough, and devastating enough beast on its own. But when the Dutch came to the cape in 1652, they realized they didn't have enough workers to build this place; it was too expensive to import immigrant labor, so they leaned into the practice of slave labor. They found it difficult to enslave the Indigenous population to do the work, so they imported captive Africans already imprisoned in barracoons from other parts of the continent, along with people from India and Malaysia. And though the local population was never technically enslaved, they too became subject to the rules and disparities of enslavement, treated no better than those forced to work for no pay and under inhumane conditions. The trade route Dias discovered that had opened Asia to Europe would now allow the Dutch to codify the gnarled, wide-reaching roots of a system of inequality that would eventually be called apartheid.

Jaco meets me outside the museum. He's an Afrikaner descended from Dutch settlers to the cape who were the architects of this system. He's big, about six four, thick, with a bit of a tummy, lots of grayish facial hair, and a ruddy complexion. We enter the museum and walk together around the exhibits.

I see cannonballs, copper fastenings, wood from the *São José*. I see photographs of the excavation, renderings of the ship, and videos of the divers. I see a tall cylindrical exhibit with a list of the names of those lost and enslaved, alongside their countries of origin. The cylinder seems to

stretch to the ceiling and its names seem to go on forever...Keloeloe, Oemar, Malli, Salim, Indabo, Coetoe, Rimera, Athija, Indabo...

We finish our tour and Jaco takes me to his lab to show me more of the artifacts that are still being sorted. They look like big lumps of rock and sit in plastic tubs with a high-pH solution to reverse the effects of oxidation. I never would have recognized these lumps as anything important underwater. My respect for the diving team increases.

We move into his office, a small, cluttered space. He sits in front of his desk in a wheeled chair; I sit before him in a folding chair with my recorder and microphone.

Jaco tells me he'd always known about the shipwreck that would eventually prove to be the *São José*—but because treasure hunters had initially identified it as a Dutch ship from 1656, he hadn't considered it.

"I had a set of archival documents that first I consulted when I started looking for the *São José*," he begins. "Those documents mentioned a landmark near Camps Bay, which is the suburb next to Clifton. So we kept looking all around Camps Bay, but couldn't find anything. Then I came across more documents, which included the accounts of the sailors and the captain of the *São José*. But they mentioned a different landmark: Lion's Head. If you go to any of Clifton's four beaches, the profile of Lion's Head will be visible right overhead. But if you stand at Camps Bay's Beach, you cannot see the mountain."

"When I found the documents that gave a blow-by-blow account, I swore out loud in the archives. Which was a problem. People looked at me like I was weird," he laughs. "I exclaimed, 'Oh shit! We're looking in the wrong place!'"

Back in Florida during the DWP training, I remember Ayana telling me how crucial it is to consult the archives before a search. I don't think I really understood its relevance until now.

"The archives are critical. Absolutely," Jaco continues. "I mean, this was mainly a court case. The wreck was a big loss for the owners of the vessel, obviously. So the captain and the crew made a deposition to a lawyer. But then it went a little bit further because there was also a court case between the captain and some of the crew members; he didn't want to pay, and they were suing him. That court case gave us information that we couldn't get anywhere else—for example, that the surviving slaves were

sold in the cape, how many were sold, how much they were sold for. Unfortunately, we don't know who they were sold to; that's still information we're looking for. But the archives began to point us in the right direction."

As it turned out, the treasure hunter's ship was located almost exactly where the archives said the *São José* should be. The treasure hunter offered to take Jaco and his team around the site. Jaco says that as they dove it over time, they found copper fasteners, copper sheathing, iron guns—all materials that dated to the 1770s and 1780s, a time frame consistent with the *São José*. Eventually, they discovered Mozambican hardwood, a very scarce, very rare type of lumber that comes from the mainland, about 37 miles away from Ilha de Moçambique.

"That was the smoking gun," Jaco says.

"And then we found a bit of the ship's timber, which was identified as African blackwood, or *mpingo* in Swahili. *Mpingo* only grows in Africa. So we knew that this wreckage couldn't be a Dutch ship. Then we found shackles and the ballast balls.

"My next step was to determine what happened to the Dutch ship; we had to account for it in order to rule it out. We went searching and found that around the time the wreck went missing, bits of debris had washed up on Robben Island that fit the time period."

Robben Island was the place where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years.

"So we think she's probably lying around there. There's no way that the ship could have drifted all the way from Robben to Clifton, more than eight miles away; the wind, the waves, the swell were against it. But we think the treasure hunters identified it as Dutch because they had to state a name in order to obtain a permit. And this was the only known wreck that didn't have a location."

He clasps his hands. "So we were as close to an identification as you could get—almost as good as finding a bell with her name on it. This was it, I thought. This was it."

"How did it feel?" I ask.

"I was so pleased because that's what you want. And seldom does it happen like that. And then Steve found the manifest from the ship in the Portuguese archives, which had all the stuff she had on her when she left

Portugal and matched the stuff we were finding, so we had independent confirmation.”

Jaco tells me that Doc Jones was the first DWP member to dive the site. “He is such a good diver. What a class act,” he shakes his head and smiles. All divers helped to canvas and orient the site, which was challenging because of its geography. Again, I feel better about not being able to dive.

“The stuff you bring up is mostly covered in sand and that’s a big, big problem,” Jaco continues. “And then the wreck is scattered all over; we’ve probably only found 10 percent of it now. And a lot of it is conglomerated, concreted onto rocks. Plus, we’ve got artifacts entrapped in these narrow gullies. But I think we have done quite a bit of good work.”

“How do you choose what to bring up and what to leave below?” I ask.

“Well, we are not in the policy of bringing up a lot of stuff. But now we are at the stage where we’ve got a good handle on the site, so we’ve planned a targeted excavation.”

I wonder how this work has changed his thinking as an Afrikaner brought up in society to think of Whiteness in one way and Blackness in another.

“I...” He pauses and adjusts his glasses. “Look, it’s changed me quite a bit. Stuff I didn’t know opened up the windows to a past I didn’t know existed. I was always interested in shipwrecks as a maritime archaeologist, but not so much in slavery. But as my knowledge of it increased, I realized that if your family has been here for more than 200 years, you’re bound to have some slave blood. I probably have descendants myself.”

He shakes his head. “There is no such thing as this myth we have believed in of a pure race. That’s crap. I mean, it just doesn’t exist.”

I ask how his friends and family view his work.

“Look, there’s no issue with my wife and my son. But obviously, I’ve got family members, cousins, these idiots that live up in the country, and they probably have a problem with it. But I don’t really care. I want to prove that we need to look at history from a different point of view if we really want to understand the root of our political problems. I do presentations, and people say, ‘Well, we didn’t know that, that slavery was so pervasive, that it was everywhere, that Cape Town was built on the backs of slaves.’ I want to help change that.”

Did he ever expect the work to go this far?

“Oh, no! I spoke to Steve yesterday, and he said he just thought we were going to dive on shipwrecks the whole time! We never thought of this ever becoming so big—all the media attention, the impact. Now, I have a staff I have to look after most of the time. But I am glad.

“I am proud to be a part of this work.”

**LATER THAT EVENING, AFTER CLIMBING** back up the hill to Elli’s house and stopping at least twice to ease my aching thighs, I take a quick shower and squeeze into my skinny red pants (Mozambican food has thickened me up), knot up a white T-shirt, and take an Uber to Clifton. I have been invited to spend an evening with Albie Sachs, a White, Jewish, former South African Constitutional Court justice who is a revered anti-apartheid activist. In my mind, he’s South Africa’s equivalent of former associate justice of the Supreme Court Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

A narrow flight of stairs runs between Victoria Road and Third Beach and leads to Albie’s house. His home is quirky and warm; Albie and his wife, Vanessa, an architect who helped design this house and who is descended from enslaved Malaysians, host regular gatherings for eclectic groups of family and friends who just happen to be in town, as well as memorial ceremonies for enslaved Africans who died in shipwrecks. Well, at least they hosted one such ceremony for the Slave Wrecks Project to honor those who perished on the *São José*.

You see, Albie’s house overlooks the wreck site of the *São José*. From his balcony, down the rocky slopes, directly beyond a palm tree, maybe 300 or 400 feet away from shore, you can see two boulders poking out of the water. Underneath lie the scattered remains of the doomed ship.

I smell the sea from the balcony. I hear the buzz of neighbors chatting in other bungalows nearby and the laughter of children as they play below in the cold waters. I watch the sun as it begins its slow trajectory home after a long day’s work. I chat with a motley crew of people who are activists, reporters, social innovators, and enthusiastic swimmers, nibbling on Vanessa’s freshly made pumpkin cakes and sipping tonic water. I marvel at the ordinariness of all this against the backdrop of a heart-wrenching tragedy.

It's, ironically, December 27, the 224th anniversary of the wreck. Paul, who arranged for me to connect with Albie, tells me this when I share the date of the party. I didn't make the connection on my own.

Albie and I step away from the festivities and into a quiet room downstairs, his son's. A messy bed dominates the space, sports equipment is littered across the floor, and big windows overlook the sea outside.

Albie is a hero in South Africa. As a member of the African National Congress, he spent years defending mostly Black South Africans accused of crimes under the apartheid regime but had to flee the country to Mozambique after credible death threats were made to his life. His tormentors found him, though, and while he was in exile, they placed a car bomb in his vehicle. He was blinded in one eye and lost most of an arm.

I can't even imagine the pain he must have faced during those times. But he kept doing the work that needed to be done. And when Nelson Mandela became president, he appointed Albie to post-apartheid South Africa's highest court, where he once again proved his commitment to change and progress. He wrote a landmark decision that struck down legal discrimination based on sexual orientation. It was revolutionary legislation, particularly in 2005—a time when same-sex marriages were not allowed in most countries around the world.

Thoughtful and measured in his speech, Albie is a joy to converse with. I tell him that he reminds me of Dr. Maya Angelou. And of course, he tells me that when he received a Lincoln Medal from then president Barack Obama at the annual Ford's Theatre's gala, Maya was a part of the ceremony. He says he got to know her a bit and is delighted by my comparison. I imagine his beautiful energy and hers for one brief moment—connecting, expanding, and inspiring all that it touches. I feel honored to be in his presence and touched by his openness and kindness.

Plus, Albie understands the tragedy of the *São José* wreck on a personal level. He grew up on Clifton Beach.

"It happened in our paradise," he says. He wears loose orange pants and a striped-yellow button-down, long-sleeved shirt. One eye is sightless and cloudy, and his nub of an arm moves like an unruly child in his sleeve as he talks.

"Sir Francis Drake circumnavigated the world. He stopped at Cape Town and described it as the fairest cape he'd ever seen. So we are the

fairest cape. And I feel the irony—that the fairest cape was also the unfairest cape. I'm looking out there, and it's just so beautiful. You see the waves coming in and the beaches nearby. Everything is so tranquil. We're so safe in our homes looking out. It's a kind of a paradise, where I am. But in that paradise, there was hell."

He tells me about the day of the ceremony in 2015—the day the SWP team decided to hold their own ceremony and invite people from all over the country, along with the media, to honor Señor Nhogache's request to Lonnie.

"It was raining on that day. So it meant everybody would look bedraggled if we celebrated on the beach. So we had the ceremony in our house, and it was very special. We had a crowd of people, many with American accents. Lonnie Bunch was there—very gracious, gregarious, friendly, humble. And then there was somebody from the Mozambican Embassy—diplomatic, very grave. Somebody from the Brazilian Embassy, a youngish woman. People from Cape Town who had been involved in the diving.

"And then, for the first time, I met a Black scuba diver. It was beautifully, wonderfully incongruous. We have seas all around us in South Africa. We have lots of divers in South Africa. But I'd never seen a Black scuba diver before. And somehow we were all interacting with each other.

"My living room is fairly large, but we were on top of each other. And a number of presentations were made. People were speaking with such feeling and with scientific knowledge and information. But it was presented not as dry data, but rather as a recalling of something that would bring us all together. It was like poetry. It was emotional for me. I lived in Mozambique for 11 years; I was blown up, almost killed there. But Mozambicans saved my life. And the captured prisoners came from Mozambique. It was a very special kind of connection for me in that regard.

"But this has relevance to all of us in South Africa. The 200 or so who survived—they were human beings, and they became part of our community. And it's a community that itself was enslaved at that stage. Afterward, it was freed from the formal bondage of slavery but oppressed by racist laws, by apartheid, by segregation.

"This tragic, terrible event in human history symbolizes the whole of the slave trade and all that oppression. When I say it's important, it's

important in the sense that the people shouldn't have to be told." He pauses. "For me, this ceremony was like liberating our beach."

His words stir my imagination. And I picture how the ceremony might have gone three years ago in 2015.

**THREE CHOSEN REPRESENTATIVES—YARA, A** Makua youth from Mozambique; Tara, not me, but an archaeologist from Cape Town; and Kamau, representing the United States—donned thick scuba suits and hooded jackets and walked together in the water surrounding Third Beach. The water on this day—gray, foamy, agitated, surging—was frigid at only 45°F.

They had planned to slip under the waves with masks and tanks, but strong southwesterly winds and 10-foot swells registered their protest. At first, they stood there looking out into the agitation, taking a moment to gather their courage. Then, as one, they began to move: Kamau with his NABS jacket, now full of as many patches as Doc Jones's, and hands enfolded around the cowrie shell—encrusted vessel that Señor Nhogache gifted to Lonnie; and Tara and Yara with their hair slicked back in ponytails. All solemn. All trembling.

They plodded out to the site, walking until their ankles were submerged, then their knees, thighs, almost to the waists of Tara and Yara, who at similar heights barely came to Kamau's shoulder. They linked arms to steady themselves—not only from the large waves trying to sweep them off their feet, but also from the unexpected onslaught of emotions.

They arrived and stood for a moment in silence. Then Kamau opened the vessel. And Yara went first. She grabbed a handful of the soil and began distributing it. Then Tara. Finally, Kamau. All three took turns and distributed the soil until they reached the bottom. Then Kamau upturned the vessel for the last of the soil, and the brown earth flowed almost like a sheet of bright raindrops in a storm against the gray of the ocean. It scattered away and disappeared in the foamy waters.

And then they stood again, together in embrace, virtually strangers in life but united in this moment. Camera crews on the beach clicked away.

Video cameras rolled. Some guests standing on Albie's balcony prayed. Lonnie watched silently.

And then as one, they composed themselves and turned to go. They made their way slowly back to shore, arms still linked. And they trudged out of the water, onto the sand, mud caked on their wet suits, their backs to the water.

Until a reporter cried incredulously, "Look!"

They turned. And they saw. The southwest winds had died. The sea had calmed and gentled itself. A cloud—maybe the cloud that escorted me to Mozambique years later—moved aside and made space for the sun to cast a soft light over the wreck site.

There was peace in the air.

Maybe the ancestors heard. Or maybe the wind patterns were always meant to shift on that day at that particular time. But either way, something transformed. Something resolved for Kamau, for Yara, for Tara, for Lonnie.

For Albie.

For all the people watching on that beach.

For me, years later.

**THE WAVES STILL CRASH AGAINST** the surf along Clifton with velocity and vigor. Albie and I have moved to the balcony now. Porch lights along the cliff glitter like strings of lights on a Christmas tree; noise from the party and neighborhood still surrounds us. I have asked to snap Albie's picture in front of the *São José* wreck site. He stands at the edge closest to the location. Framed behind him, the palm tree on shore and two boulders jutting from the water are visible markers of what lies below. I'm just a few feet away. But suddenly Albie holds up his hand, leans close, and says quietly, "I can't smile in front of this."

The rest of the house goes stage dark and only Albie and I—and the wreck site—stand in the spotlight.

I straighten up a bit too, facing his unsmiling face, which shines like a beacon in the night, and inhale softly. I agree.

So Albie, an 87-year-old White, Jewish, South African luminary, and me, an astrology-loving, Buddhist-leaning, Black girl writer from the Dirty

South, stand in silence amid the noise of the party, in our own private ritual, our own ceremony on Third Beach. Together, we pay homage to the Makua ancestors 224 years after they died and three years after the SWP ceremony. We are united in a commitment to see the humanity of a group of people we have wordlessly agreed will again be remembered on this day.

I feel full.

**BEFORE I LEFT ALBIE'S HOUSE**, I met Mike, a young, friendly Christian pastor from Pretoria. We exchanged numbers and he invited me to his church for their annual New Year's Eve service. I was already planning to be in Johannesburg, and Pretoria is only about an hour from there. So I decided to take him up on his invitation.

Now, in Johannesburg, the airport taxi driver winds along highways with graffitied bridges, in and out of bumper-to-bumper traffic, past industrial buildings and massive apartment blocks—so much urban decay and sprawl. So different from the loveliness of Cape Town. No sea in sight.

Johannesburg, or Joburg, or Jozi, is South Africa's largest and wealthiest city, as well as its chief economic hub. Most major South African companies and banks keep their head offices there. The city is also a major economic hub for all of Africa and is one of the 100 largest urban areas in the world with a population of more than 14 million. The city has a frenetic and exciting energy that reminds me of New York City or London or São Paulo. People come here to make things happen.

I've traveled to Jozi twice before. The first trip was for *Essence* magazine, where I worked as co-lifestyle editor. On that trip, I moved through the highest echelons of South African political society, doing things such as dining with Winnie Mandela at her house in Soweto, a township of the city that was once racially demarcated for Black people only. Although her legacy is controversial and complicated, we as a Black women's magazine felt obligated to help tell her story. We were a small team, accompanied around town by Peter Magubane, an award-winning photographer who snapped some of the most famous pictures of the Soweto uprising and helped alert the world to the horrors of apartheid. Winnie was gracious and invited her grandchildren to dine with us too.

We met and photographed Adelaide Tambo and Albertina Sisulu, the activist wives of Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu, who along with Nelson Mandela, founded the African National Congress Youth League. We were also invited to Mahlamba Ndlopfu, or Libertas, the official chief residence of the president of South Africa for an event. I chatted with former U.S. ambassador Andrew Young, gushing to him that we were both from Atlanta. And although we didn't meet him personally, I saw Nelson Mandela, who had just been elected as president, waving from a veranda not far away. I imagined just for a second that his wave was personally directed at me.

I was a 25-year-old kid then, bum-rushing through the experience, following the lead of senior editors on staff who determined our route and interview schedule and who knew much more than I did about the magnitude of the moment. I didn't understand the dynamics at play; I just believed the rhetoric that a Black government would fix everything in South Africa—that this country would become the shining example of how to heal a fractured nation and reconcile the trauma of a racist past.

My second trip, four years later, opened my eyes in a different way. I traveled with a fellow staff member after we'd been laid off from our magazine jobs. Together, we felt the undercurrents of class and racial tensions from a less rarefied and more personal space.

My team member, Jayce, was a photo editor, and I was the writer. We had been traveling and working on a freelance story about Brazil when we happened to meet a group of journalists in Salvador headed to South Africa on a press tour. We decided to reach out to the airline to see if we could tag along too. Because...why not? We were unemployed but still eager to see the world. The airline said yes and offered us two seats with the group. The only caveats: The flight left the next day, and we would have to find our own accommodations and fund the rest of the trip on our own. We didn't have much money, but we were young and plucky and fearless.

On the plane, we met a South African businessman who we chatted up for the entire flight. When he heard that we didn't have a place to stay yet, he invited us to crash with him.

It was a different time in the 1990s. The ethos of traveling back then was that you leaned into the adventure. You followed leads from fellow travelers you met along the way. You hoofed it to cheap hostels with your backpack and no reservations and crammed into shared bunk rooms. You

traveled for weeks on end with people whose last names you didn't know. No smartphones. No laptop computers. No Wi-Fi. You tried to be smart, but mainly you just followed your nose and went with the flow.

Everything felt possible back then—especially in South Africa, because Mandela was president. So, of course we said yes.

My spidey sense prickled a little when we got to the man's home. Although he had traveled in business class and ushered us into a Mercedes in the parking lot, he lived in what we'd think of as government-sponsored housing projects, in the hood. It was a jolting contrast from the way he had presented himself. Jayce felt it too and whispered to me in the back of the car that he had a knife and wasn't afraid to use it if he must.

The apartment was largely unfurnished, with a couple mattresses on the floor of a spare room where we would stay. Another guy—a refugee from Angola looking for work—was staying on the couch in the living room. He spent most of his time curled up on the sofa sleeping, watching TV, or in the kitchen cooking. I think the prejudices he faced as a foreigner trying to make his way here were probably too much. People from Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and other countries regularly made their way to South Africa to escape poverty, war, and inequality, and look for better opportunities. But some South Africans thought they brought crime and took away jobs from citizens—a familiar story all over the world. Anger toward migrants simmered beneath the surface, ready to boil over.

The place turned out to be safe enough, though; we had some spirited and eye-opening discussions about the disparities we observed, and our hosts were both kind to me and Jayce. But I didn't want to take advantage. So I spent my days at an internet café looking for other accommodations. We ended up moving after a few nights to a guesthouse in the heart of the city's party area. And there we hung out, meeting students, other 20-somethings, laughing, exchanging, debating, and dancing all night and into the morning.

It felt like a whirlwind of fun.

Until it wasn't.

We were out at some club. I'm not the greatest dancer in the world, but I love to get on a dance floor and let go as the music runs through my body. Dancing gives me life. Jayce was holding court at the bar and attracting his usual crowd of admirers. People, especially men, find him quite attractive.

A guy in the club, probably in his mid to late 20s, saw me dancing and joined me. He gleaned that I was a foreigner and welcomed me with a loud voice. When the music ended, he bought us drinks at the bar—a ginger ale for me and a beer for Jayce—and invited us to join his friends at a table in the outside courtyard. He told us that he was from Soweto, the same township where Winnie Mandela had lived, and that we must come visit—that along its streets beats the heart of South Africa. He described what it was like growing up there, and what it was like during apartheid. Soweto was the center of the student-led protests against the government’s plan to impose the Afrikaans language in schools for Black students. Students took to the streets; hundreds died and thousands were injured in the uprising and its aftermath. Some of the most searing images of the struggle—many of them taken by Peter Magubane—come from this movement. Its aftermath strengthened the case for international boycotts and furthered the political shifts in the country that finally led to Mandela’s liberation.

The guy said he loved us Americans and invited us to drink up. But as the cocktails flowed, his welcoming words soon turned to jeers and anger.

He sat at the table, his legs planted wide and his arms sharply gesticulating. I was closest to him, on his right. Jayce was across the table from us.

He looked at me and said, “Fucking Americans” under his breath. He looked across at Jayce and said, “Fuck you” a bit louder.

I stilled, ginger ale pausing on its way to my mouth.

Then in a louder voice, he exclaimed to both of us. “It’s because of you we died—your CIA gave money to the government. You funded them!”

Spittle flew from his mouth and landed on the table between us. I watched it quiver, suddenly afraid to look into his eyes. I realized we were in a courtyard with no exits to the street, nobody else really knew where we were, and we had no one to call if things went sideways. Jayce had his knife, but would he really use it? He talked tough, but Jayce also color-coordinated his outfits, had a corner office before we were downsized, and liked to dine at fine restaurants. And anyway, what is a knife to a gun? I remembered the scale of violence and death that had blanketed the country during apartheid. South Africa became a police state. And Black life had little to no value. Guns were everywhere, and murders were commonplace.

He repeated himself, looking between us both, “Fuck America. Fuck you.”

The frustration and anger that seethed off him was deep, and it seemed to catch among the others who were casually watching. The courtyard was silent. Waiting.

But I was a Black...American, I thought with a frown, so far removed from the decision-makers in the White House, way down the ladder of those lobbying and secretly helping to fund foreign policy. How could he include me in his vitriol? Didn’t he know we were comrades in the struggle? Black Americans weren’t complicit in apartheid. Were we?

I didn’t know what to do. I wondered if I was going to die there that night.

Everything stayed tense for a few more moments. But then suddenly, the guy laughed—a laugh that didn’t quite make it to his eyes. But that unfroze the space.

“What am I saying? My friends, no. Forgive me. It’s late. Please, have another drink. On me.”

I took that as our cue to politely decline and leave.

I hadn’t been back since. That was more than 20 years ago.

Now, as the taxi winds its way through a maze of wide streets with leafy, purple jacaranda trees, I realize that back then, I didn’t question the privilege I wore as an American when I traveled abroad. That man didn’t see me as a sister coming home, as part of a family fighting the same fight. I was American to him. Just as I was to Brown Eyes.

Although I don’t often feel that privilege at home, the United States is the largest economy in the world, a global superpower economically, militarily, and geopolitically. It has enormous power in the world. Power that I wear, even if it hangs off me like an ill-fitting coat.

Jayce and I had traveled to South Africa for free, on a whim, and we breezed through South African immigration. That guy in the club would not have had the same opportunity to travel to the United States. If an airline offered him a free flight, it likely would have taken him months to get a visa, and even then, once he arrived in the United States, he might have been held up in immigration. Although he paid for our drinks that night, Jayce and I—even in our unemployed states, receiving unemployment insurance from the government in the wake of our layoff—probably made

more money in a few months than he did in a year. And we entered into the place blindly and recklessly, not considering our privilege, just trying to have fun.

Jayce and I never talked about it.

I look at the pretty flowers of the trees framing houses hidden behind barbed-wire gates, electric fences, and eight-foot-high hedges, many with guard bunkers staffed with actual armed guards. These fortifications also existed in Cape Town. A country where people are still deeply in fear of one another, still divided by racist beliefs inculcated in schools and churches; a society marked, as a result, by inequality with high unemployment and a mass of people just trying to survive.

This time, I decide to stay in the neighborhood of Melville, a bohemian area of the city that came highly recommended as the “it” place to stay. But instead of feeling the artsy, trendy vibe, I feel anxious in the face of these excessive security measures.

The taxi leaves and I stand on the leafy street with my bags. I ring the bell and am buzzed into the side gate, which opens onto a manicured oasis of flowers and plants surrounding a modern house with glass windows and a big deck. A cute two-story cottage that will be mine for the next few days sits off to the side. A Black male gardener tends the yard, and a Black female housekeeper beats rugs on the side of the house. They nod and smile at me blankly, their eyes quickly sliding away. Then the White woman owner greets me.

I let myself into the place, which has a tiny kitchen, an upstairs bedroom and study, and two balconies with a 360-degree view that looks like it includes the entirety of Jozi. I can see far into the distance. As I stand there looking out, I realize that I still don’t know how to navigate this place as a Black American in Africa.

**I SPEND THE NEXT TWO** days traveling around Jozi, feeling more and more disconnected and unsure.

I befriend a Black artist born in Jozi. We sit and chat in his gallery for more than an hour and find we have lots in common. He invites me to dinner with his friends. I’m excited, thinking I’ve made a new friend, until I

show up at his gallery the next day and realize it's a fundraising dinner, and I am the one he thinks has funds. He wants me to buy his paintings and help him with his dream of showing his artwork in the United States.

I think of Brown Eyes.

I buy three small paintings.

I meet a waiter from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He tells me between courses that he feels sorry for Black Americans. He says he watches the news every day and sees how we are all under attack by the police. There is so much violence, and we all have guns. He says, "It's a shame," with a shake of his head and a suck of his teeth, and that he would never want to visit or live in the United States. The irony. He'd just fled a civil war in his country that killed some six million people. And he escaped that violence by moving to a country still in the aftermath of apartheid. He doesn't see the similarities in our struggles.

I dine with a friend of a friend who is of the Zulu ethnic group—which thinks of itself as one of the strongest and most powerful in all of Africa—and watch as he berates an older waiter who is Khoisan, a broad term for the first inhabitants of South Africa, known as a friendly, peaceable people. He calls over the manager because the waiter got our order wrong. I'm so embarrassed as the smiling elderly waiter, probably in his 70s, probably on tired feet, and probably with a failing memory, is chastised by another Black man at a predominantly White country club.

Class. Age. Ethnic group. Gender. These are the undercurrents. These are some of the complexities of Blackness across and inside borders, although Ibrahima would argue that none of these issues are natural divisions for Black folks. I am not so sure. But I realize I've been looking at Africa from the lens of a European from the 17th century, flattening Africa and its people into one thing, as well as looking at it from the lens of an old-school Pan-Africanist, seeing us as one people, despite our differences.

I wonder if both perspectives do us a disservice.

And then I go to a church service to which Mike, the pastor from Albie's event, had invited me—and I meet Anna.

I take a taxi to Pretoria around 10:30 p.m. on New Year's Eve. Pretoria is a separate city, about 30 miles from Johannesburg. It was the home seat of apartheid and is now the administrative seat of the government, the place where Mahlamba Ndlopfu, the president's official residence, is located.

We arrive at an area that looks like a business district, replete with older, squat, blocky buildings. Mike meets me at the door of one of them, takes me up some back stairs, and opens a door into a big, windowless room. It looks like the overflow room of my mother's church, with linoleum floor tiles and folding chairs positioned in front of a stage with instruments. About 500 people are there, milling around, seated in chairs, standing with their backs against the wall. Families with small children in tow. Young people. Older people. All Black. All waiting.

People are smiling, greeting each other with laughter. People have plates of food from a buffet table in the back: *umleqwa* (a Xhosa-style chicken stew), *pap* (boiled cornmeal with the consistency of mashed potatoes), and rice.

It smells good. I smile because it really reminds me of my mother's church, Hillside, in Atlanta. But there, the table would be filled with baked chicken, collard greens, macaroni and cheese, and biscuits.

I am taken aback by the sense of community and happiness here. A spirit of love infuses the atmosphere; it's like a scent in the air. I don't know why, but I didn't expect Jesus to be so prominent in South Africa. Or maybe I should say, I didn't expect to find such unabashed love for him here. I know missionaries came to South Africa as early as the 1500s to spread the Christian faith and that some 80 percent of South Africans now identify as Christian. But still.

Mike introduces me around and people greet me. Eventually, I settle near the front into one of the chairs next to Mike and the service begins.

Musicians—a drummer, keyboard player, and a choir—appear on the stage. The choir members are dressed in white robes with blue sashes; they move back and forth from the front two rows to the stage, accompanying the preacher, who breaks every so often to allow their singing to uplift the room.

The sounds—the rat-a-tat of drumsticks, choral music from the keyboard. Black bodies moving in rhythm, singing in harmony, praising in tones that tug at my heart. The preacher preaching in a familiar, singsongy, shouty way.

The similarities here to the praise style of Black churches at home astonish me, although they shouldn't. African people have always called on their ancestors through music and movement. Many came from places

where their mother tongues were tonal and ideas were conveyed through inflections, rhythms, and, occasionally, clicks. When they were dragged to the Americas in chains, they brought this way of expression with them.

But what's so unique and noteworthy about this expression is that enslaved people from different cultures in the United States merged it all into something new. They used sound and rhythm to chant, sing, and shout about their conditions, to communicate with one another in the fields, and to express their pain and sorrow. This expression grew into a kind of call-and-response style—a precursor to the preaching style in Black churches—and developed into what became known as gospel music. Gospel songs became a kind of cultural preservation—a way to tell the world about what you've gone through and to express hope and faith in change to come. And this new form of expression—fashioned particularly by Black Americans around the world—then spread back to Africa, where its inhabitants recognized it and pulled it close.

Sounds and rhythms that started in Africa, coalesced and transformed in the United States by enslaved people and their descendants, and then sent back home to bring comfort to future generations. Powerful.

Soon, it's 1:00 a.m. And nothing looks like it's going to stop anytime soon.

Now, it's 2:00 a.m. The choir is still jamming on the stage. Going hard. Sweat rolls down the preacher's face as he calls on the Lord in ecstatic tones. The musicians move in concert with one another. They are doing popular dance moves: a little shoulder shrug and roll and some winding it down to the ground.

It's 3:00 a.m. Kids not older than 10 or 11 in jeans, with braids swinging and brown skin glistening, are dancing the latest dances in front of the stage. They are not tired. There is joy and abandon and love in this room. I've never seen anything like it.

It's 4:00 a.m. I fall asleep. Head on my knees, despite all the bright eyes and fevered smiles around me. I wonder how much longer this will go on. I'm outdone.

It's 5:00 a.m. I wake to a nudge. Mike is smiling at me and offering his hand. People are milling around the aisles and there is music still coming from the stage, though it's muted. The service is over.

Finally.

People are beginning to clear out.

Mike asks me where I live. I tell him Jozi and that I need to arrange for a taxi to take me to my place. He tells me not to worry and that his friend Nico is headed back to Jozi and is willing to make a side trip to take me home. He calls Nico over and tells him what I'm doing here in South Africa. Nico regards me with interest, says yes, no problem, and brings me over to meet his sisters, Anna and Esther, who will ride with us.

They're an attractive family. Anna and Esther are dressed in black sheath dresses and blazers and have carefully groomed nails. Esther has braids, and Anna, a long, straight hairstyle. Both have artfully made-up faces. Nico wears a suit with skinny pants and a skinny tie. They are affectionate with each other, joking around. They don't seem tired at all.

I trudge to the car, feet like lead, eyes tired, yawning. Nico offers me the front passenger seat; Anna and Esther squeeze in the back.

I'm so tired I feel like I could fall asleep immediately, but I want to be polite. So I rally and try to be a good conversationalist. I ask them questions about their backgrounds as we pull onto the streets.

Nico says they're from the Democratic Republic of the Congo originally and have been here since 2006. Interesting to find a family like my waiter in Jozi who fled the unrest there and sought opportunity here. Nico is the oldest at 31, Anna is in the middle at 27, and Esther is the youngest at 24. They have five additional siblings at home.

Nico asks if I enjoyed the service.

I tell him that I did. It was wonderful to experience such fellowship on New Year's Eve. But I had never been to a service that lasted that long. I was amazed at the energy of all the folks.

Anna perks up in the back and asks, "What is your church like at home?"

I tell her I don't have a church.

She pauses and asks, "Well, where do you worship?"

I say, "I don't worship."

"Are you Christian?" she asks.

"No," I say.

"What is your religion, then?"

"I'm not very religious. I respect Christianity, but I wouldn't say I'm a Christian. I think of myself more as spiritual."

I can tell my answer does not land well. And I am so tired. I decide to go for vagueness, because how do you answer that question in the early morning in a car with strangers who are giving you a ride home and who clearly believe in God in a particular way?

“I guess I draw a bit from Christianity, but also a bit from Buddhism, even a bit from Islam and other religions. I believe that all the faiths have something to teach us.”

“That doesn’t sound very concrete.”

I smile, although I feel my face heating. I don’t think I can explain it to her, and I don’t really want to try—not in this car, in this moment, in my headspace.

So I just say, “I like to think I’m open to it all.”

“Hmmmm...what is that saying? ‘If you don’t stand for something, you will fall for anything.’”

The other two have fallen silent in the car. Somehow the conversation has gotten adversarial.

I am silent too.

Perhaps Anna senses the tension, because she softens, just a bit. “I’m just wondering how you can know who you are if you don’t choose something. I mean, I know exactly who I am because I have chosen to find comfort in Jesus. And that belief keeps me steady. It seems to me like you are searching. But you have to choose. Or else you will be lost.”

This young woman who is half my age is grilling me and judging me, and I’m allowing it. I haven’t shut her down. Not because I think she’s right; I’m comfortable with my spiritual journey. But I’m on this quest around belonging now, and in some ways I guess I envy her certainty. Some people are solid in their sense of knowing. Some people are on a straight and clear path.

I sigh inwardly.

I decide to change the focus to keep the peace and put us on more neutral ground.

I ask, “Are all your people from the DRC?”

She says, “Originally, they came from Uganda in the 1500s. Then they mixed with the Congolese and then the Kenyans.”

I ask, “Do you think being able to trace your roots back so far helps you feel grounded in knowing who you are?”

“Yes, absolutely. I know my family. I know where my ancestors are from. And that does ground me.”

I shouldn’t ask because the conversation might once again get contentious, but I’m curious about what someone who is not a brilliantly recognized scholar like Ibrahima—someone who is a young, contemporary African—thinks about African Americans finding home here in Africa. So I ask.

And I hear this strand of...what is it?...pity, I think...in her voice. “I’ve watched so many videos of Black Americans struggling with their identity. Things were taken from you guys. You have really lost culture. You have lost a certain part of you. It’s like there is a void in you. A void that wants to be replaced by a sense of belonging. But that belonging: Is it linked necessarily to Africa? I don’t believe so.”

I don’t challenge her about her perception of our lost culture; after all, we just came from her church, which celebrates the gospel that Black Americans created and that she now finds comfort in. And when we got in the car, Beyoncé was playing on the radio. Black American culture exists all around her. But I understand what she means about us not feeling a sense of belonging in the United States.

Anna continues, “I would describe an African American as almost like a child that has been adopted and is looking for their family. It’s almost like they are looking for a ghost family, and they are struggling to find the real truth behind it.”

This is hard to hear.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, we arrive at their house, where Nico plans to drop off Anna and Esther first and then take me to my place. We have no time for more of this conversation.

Anna gets out and then leans back into the car and says, “It was nice meeting you. I don’t often get to talk to Black Americans.”

She touches my shoulder as she rocks back on her feet. “I hope you find whatever it is you are looking for out there.”

She waves goodbye and runs off into the house with her sister.

Nico and I banter with light conversation for another 10 minutes until we get to my place. I thank him and head straight to the rooftop deck where I sit in quiet contemplation and watch the sun rise.

As the sky gradually lightens, I think about how an economic downturn throughout Europe in the 1500s—shrinking markets and dismal economic forecasts—led to the Transatlantic Slave Trade...

How the Transatlantic Slave Trade, selling and enslaving Africans and those indigenous to the Americas and Southeast Asia for profit, led to a justification for systemic racism...

How systemic racism, building systems and policies that create inequitable opportunities and outcomes for people based on race, led to colonialism...

How colonialism, the creation of settlements in distant territories by a country intending to exploit the place economically, led to imperialism...

How imperialism, the expansion of the ideology of a country into an empire that operates around the world with a sense of superiority and dominates culturally, economically, and politically, led to a little Black girl from Atlanta sitting on a rooftop in Johannesburg feeling a certain way: overwhelmed...tired...sad...powerless to change centuries-old narratives of capitalism, which undergird it all, and race so deeply entrenched that even the people most affected don't realize it.

Maybe some might reorder this logic. And that's OK. But this makes sense to me right now.

As orange and yellow streaks spread across the sky, I breathe deeply and square my shoulders. I think about what Anna said about how knowing where her ancestors came from made her feel grounded. I have been searching for wrecks and narrative threads that are collective and general—not anything connected to my family.

Maybe it's time to get more personal.

Maybe it's time to follow my actual DNA trail.

I already know from DNA testing I did a few years ago that the top percentage of my DNA comes from Benin and Togo. I hear those percentages will likely change as more people are tested and the DNA pool expands. But right now, according to the test, 33 percent of my DNA is said to come from this region. Although Senegal, where 3 percent of my DNA comes from, was supposed to be the next stop on my itinerary, I decide a side trip to Benin and Togo is necessary first.

I remember that Bishop Jack told me to stay open and allow myself to be guided by intuitive nudges along the way.

I feel like I need to walk in a place that, according to the evidence, my ancestors most likely walked.

I head downstairs and book a ticket to Togo.

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# CHAPTER EIGHT

I feel myself fading into nothingness amid the noise and hawkers and frenzy of motorbikes surrounding our jeep as we drive down the clogged streets of Lomé, Togo. As dust cakes my skin, flits into my eyes, paints me the same color as the background, I disappear into the similarities.

I see my nose in her nose, my eyes in his eyes, my walk in their walk, even my Afro style in their Afro style. I see my cousin Troy in the boy with the curly hair. My niece Amani in the woman with the sharp cheekbones. My uncle George in the elderly gentleman with the gap-toothed smile. My mother in the woman with reddish brown skin.

I always thought my family looked the way they looked because of all the mixing over the centuries—some wanted, most not. An inheritance of the Welsh, English, Irish, and Indigenous ancestries that show up in our DNA profiles.

But maybe although these traits followed various winding paths around the world, they really all originated from Africa a long time ago.

And perhaps mine specifically originated from the region of Benin and Togo.

**SANDWICCHED BETWEEN ENGLISH-SPEAKING GHANA**  
and Nigeria, Benin and Togo sit at the center of West Africa's so-called "Slave Coast," an area that stretched along the coast of West Africa from Senegal in the north to Equatorial Guinea in the south. Today, Benin and Togo are small slivers of francophone countries, boasting a combined population of only about 23 million people. Ghana, in contrast, has about 34

million people alone, and Nigeria, more than 228 million. Back then, Benin and Togo were two of the top suppliers of enslaved people to the “New World.” Many Africans in the Americas can trace their genetic footprint to these countries.

I want to witness. I want to walk the slave trail that captives were forced to walk, stand in the barracoons that held them prisoner and prevented them from escaping, experience their Door of No Return. I want to look at the palaces of the Dahomey kings, who were known as notorious slave traders, touch the Tree of Forgetfulness that captive Africans were forced to walk around, and see the statue of the famous and ruthless female warriors called the Agoji. I plan to see the historic town of Ganvié, which is full of houses built on a lake to prevent capture by slave traders, and visit Togoville, the first settled town in the area.

I want to imagine an ancestor of mine in this place and connect to their stories.

But I only have seven days. Really five, because the first day centers around arrival and the last day on departure.

A lot to do in a short amount of time.

**I'VE BEEN IN A CAR** for five days now with Adaze, my driver. A short, cheery, Beninese guy, he's a husband and a father who's been a tour guide here for several years.

We first meet outside the airport, where he waits for me with my name on a big sign. His eyes light up when I introduce myself; he flashes an endearing, gap-toothed smile. “Ooh, I have never given a tour to a Black American before!” he says, clasping his hands.

I tell him I've never booked a tour with a guide before.

We beam at each other.

I'd thought about making this trek on my own, like I normally do when I visit new places. But because I wanted to cover so much specific ground in a short amount of time, and because they speak French in both countries and I don't, I felt it would be best to have help. So I decided to book a private tour with an ecotourism company and lean into a new kind of travel experience.

It starts off very well. Not only am I paired with Adaze, but when I arrive at the Lomé airport, the immigration officer welcomes me in a way I always imagined I'd be welcomed in Africa: as a sister coming home. He looks at my passport first, then at me with his head angled to the side. "You are from the United States?"

I nod nervously, wondering if he expects a bribe. I'd heard West African immigration officials were notorious.

"Is this your first time in Togo?"

I nod again, even more nervous.

"You have never been here before?"

I shake my head, my heart beating faster.

But then he stands up from his chair and opens his arms. "Welcome, my sister! We are so glad you have come home!" Then, he waves me through immigration. I'm so pleased. I push away any thoughts that his flattery might be practiced and aimed at loosening my tourist dollar.

My delight continues as Adaze drives; he clearly knows his way around the back roads and dusty alleys of Benin and Togo, which are connected culturally and locals seem to flow back and forth between. He carries a fanny pack full of West African CFA franc notes for bribing security guards, policemen, and border control officers, performing a sleight of hand I can barely detect while keeping up a running commentary. And he charms shopkeepers, restaurateurs, and hotel owners alike with more jokes and outlandish tales.

He is also discreet, leaving me to eat lunch or dinner on my own but remaining readily available whenever I need him or have questions.

I'm thankful to have him with me.

And...worried that, because I'm his first Black American client, our relationship should somehow be better than those he's had with my White counterparts. I'm no longer naive enough to think that we will become friends, as I'd thought with the South African painter. After all, Adaze's job depends on my dollars and my good opinion of him. But I don't know if our shared skin color and my efforts to understand the slave trade here mean that he will be looking out for me as a descendant and a sister coming home. Or maybe I should be the one looking out for him as a Black person and as a sister who understands poverty and recognizes that my American

dollars might help make a difference for him. To tell the truth, I'm a bit on edge, and the tension of both scenarios is front of mind.

But we still talk incessantly as we travel. Adaze shares snippets about his life here, his work, kids, dreams—he wants to start an import/export business collecting clothes for those in need in the north—and the history of these two countries. As we head down a sparse road not far from Cotonou, the largest city in Benin and its de facto administrative capital, I ask about people I've seen who look so familiar to me. "Who are they?" I ask.

"In Benin, the major groups are the Fon, who make up the Kingdom of Dahomey, and the Yoruba, who are my clan," he explains. "Then there are about 40 other smaller tribes. In Togo, you have around 30 main groups. But the biggest group in Togo is the Ewe."

And although I don't ask, he spells the last word for me.

"E-W-E," he says, and then pronounces the name slowly. It sounds like "E-way."

I freeze for a moment and then scramble for my phone with shaking hands. It's as if lightning has crackled from his mouth and shot across to my fingers.

Adaze doesn't see my reaction. He's still talking and watching the road.

I click on the Notes app and scroll until I get to November 5, 2018, the morning I'd woken in my mother's house feeling like a word had been whispered in my ear.

And there it was: the word I'd written down.

*Eeway*. I'd written it the way it sounded in my head.

*Ee-way*.

*Ewe*.

I stare, unseeing for a moment.

I'd never heard that word before. Or had I? I rack my memory. Well, I do recognize "ewe" when it's written. It means female sheep and is pronounced "you." But a word that sounds like *ee-way*—I don't think so. And if I had, I would never have connected it to a group of people living in Togo.

How...?

What does this mean?

Did the ancestors guide my steps here?

But...I hadn't even consciously planned to travel here before I left the United States. My ancestors couldn't have foreseen that I would meet all those people in South Africa, be affected the way I was, and then decide to come to Benin and Togo.

Or could they?

I think again about Bishop Jack's prophetic words to stay open and follow any nudges.

I shiver just a little and interrupt Adaze, who is talking about another group. I ask him to share more info about the Ewe.

He says that the Ewe people are located throughout Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria, and speak the Ewe language. They have been in this area for centuries, since at least as early as the 13th century. And they flourished economically by cotton and rice farming, as well as producing and exporting palm oil and copra (the dried flesh of a coconut from which coconut oil is extracted). The Ewe were also victims as well as perpetrators of slavery; they themselves were sold by neighboring groups, and they sold their war captives to Europeans. Eventually, Europeans targeted their territory, along with much of the continent of Africa, in what is known as the Scramble for Africa—that period between the late 1800s and early 1900s when Europeans decided to claim the continent for themselves. The Ewe were split apart as a group.

A common governing ethos at the time was *divide et impera* or “divide and conquer,” which means to split the opposition so that it cannot come together as a collective. So the Ewe were fragmented into chiefdoms called *dukowo* (small clan-like collections of villages). Uncrossable borders were created, and their movement was restricted.

I already knew some of this history generally.

For instance, I knew that as early as the 1400s, Europeans had begun to establish small trading posts along the West African coast; ivory, rubber, palm oil, cocoa, gold, timber, diamonds, tea, and tin were in high demand. With limited competition, cheap labor, and an abundance of raw materials, Africa was a dream market.

By the 1870s, Europeans controlled only about 10 percent of the African continent, with their holdings concentrated mainly along the coasts. Many European nations were growing their navies, so they also built bases along the coasts to fuel and maintain their new ships, protect sea routes and

communication lines, and transport cargo—which included captive Africans—to the Americas.

At first, these European traders didn't go inland, as they suffered high mortality rates from tropical diseases like malaria. But by the early 1880s, with more local knowledge and success under their belts and increasing demand for gold, timber, and rubber, they took their chances and began to penetrate inland. In Central Africa, in particular, expeditions were dispatched to coerce traditional rulers into signing treaties to obtain resource-rich land using force, deceit, fraud, and bribery.

I'd also read about the Berlin Conference, which in 1884 legitimized this takeover of Africa. The chancellor of Germany invited representatives of 14 nations (Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Turkey, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden-Norway, and the United States) to work out a joint policy of trade on the African continent.

By the end of the conference, seven of the countries—Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Belgium—were granted land. And those seven countries took it upon themselves to divide up Africa among themselves.

No African leaders were invited or consulted.

The audacity of it still amazes me.

By 1914, less than 40 years later, Europeans controlled 90 percent of the continent. Only Ethiopia and Liberia remained independent.

I knew these facts. But I knew them from a distance and didn't understand the full impact until now. Experts estimate that some 40 to 45 percent of African people were partitioned into these separate territories. With a population of close to 100 million people at the time, that means the continent had close to 40 million people who were displaced or separated from their kinsmen or ancestral lands.

The Ewe were split under German, English, and French rule; had to learn to speak different languages; and were no longer allowed to move freely and socialize with one another across these new borders. Adaze says that much of the underdevelopment and instability in Africa now is a result of these borders, which still exist today.

I do the numbers in my head.

So slavery not only impacted the 12.5 million Africans who were forcibly taken to the Americas, but also close to 40 million Africans who were directly affected through both enslavement and displacement. And this does not include those who were taken, centuries before, during the Trans-Saharan trade, when Arab traders enslaved millions more Black Africans.

I put my head in my hands and close my eyes at the realization that I am descended from a people who have been conquered again and again, and in ways I'm just beginning to understand.

**ADAZE AND I STOP IN** Togoville, located on Lac Togo between Lomé and the Benin border in what was once called Togoland (which in the 1800s included both Ghana and Togo). Togoville was once the colonial capital of the area.

Portugal was the first foreign power to arrive, settle in, and build a fort. But soon the Germans came, planning to make Togoland their model colony in Africa. In 1884, they signed a treaty with King Mlapa III and renamed the territory German Togoland. Because oil palms grew near the coast, they decided to focus on agricultural development, introducing cacao and cotton, and instituting a plantation system, with Africans laboring to harvest the crops. They also established a judicial and administrative system that would serve their needs and solidify them as the main power in the region.

But in the 1920s, the French and British invaded German Togoland and defeated the Germans. The two winners divided it up: Two-thirds became French Togoland; the remainder in the west became British Togoland.

In 1957, British Togoland was annexed to an independent Ghana. And in 1960, French Togoland became the independent Togolese Republic, often shortened today to just Togo. The French also owned the land bordering Togo to the east. That area gained full independence from France in 1960 as well and became the Republic of Dahomey. It was renamed Benin in 1975.

To cross Lac Togo from the mainland into Togoville, you need a boat. The crossing takes 20 minutes, and the boats hold about 15 people seated across six or seven rows; the boats run once or twice an hour. An oarsman stands in the back and uses only a long pole and his arms to propel the boat forward.

When Adaze and I walk up to the launch site, right across from a small sandy beach, we encounter three White German tourists: two young women and an older man. They're a part of a Christian study abroad group and are excited to cross.

Twenty other local people, primarily women, also wait to cross. I later learn that most are likely from nearby towns, on a pilgrimage to the Cathédrale Notre Dame du Lac Togo to deepen their Catholic faith.

Adaze gets me preferential seating on the boat, and the guide for the German tourists does the same. When the time comes for us to board, both guides insist that we foreigners board first.

The Germans and their guide get on, but I shake my head no; I don't want to jump the line. But Adaze tells me we must go now. He says it's OK.

I see some disgruntled faces in the crowd. Not everyone agrees that we should get preferential treatment. It isn't OK.

But Adaze keeps gesturing at me to come on. He's already on the boat; the Germans are already on the boat. The locals are all in line, waiting for me to board. I hesitate for a few minutes, thinking I might make a stand. But I know I'm only holding things up. So I give in and am helped to the front, where I sit near the Germans and Adaze.

The locals' line shuffles forward after us. We all settle in for the 20-minute crossing.

It's silent in the boat as we push out from the shallow water. But as soon as we're on the way, the most extraordinary thing happens.

The women raise their voices quietly but in concert in a low-level muttered chanting and humming. There is no idle chatter or gossiping, no casual remarks. Instead, the locals bow their heads or close their eyes and allow these sounds to fill the air. I make out the word "Maria" occasionally, but that's all. This happens over and over for the entire length of the crossing.

Later, Adaze tells me that the women were faithful pilgrims praying to the Virgin Mary, calling on her spirit to deepen their connection with her. But they were also praying to the water spirits for protection, because most could not swim and were likely afraid of water.

Although I'm not Catholic and can swim, the sound of their voices humming quietly over the waves soothes something in me. I feel protected too, like something good is being called forth to usher us forward.

Of course, in this setting I can't help pondering the soundscape on those ships with my ancestors crossing the Atlantic. Did it sound like this?

Written records from logbooks, insurance papers, sales documents, and published journals offer accounts of the sounds of captives as discordant chanting, singing, murmurs, cries, shrieks, and groans, often dismissed as incomprehensible noise. Captive Africans would have been chosen from different ethnic groups with different languages, specifically to make communication among them difficult. So the sailors would assume this “noise” had no meaning.

But research from Danielle Skeehan of Sam Houston State University in *The Appendix* invites us to consider those incomprehensible sounds as a mode of communication—an ingenious and undetectable act of resistance. Skeehan suggests that the Africans used their voices, their bodies—feet stomping, hands slapping thighs—and even the ship itself, which was often hollow and amplified percussive sounds beyond the cargo holds—to communicate with one another to coordinate revolts en masse.

According to Slavery and Remembrance, a project of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and UNESCO’s Slave Route Project, approximately one ship in 10 experienced some form of coordinated resistance. That means that if approximately 36,000 voyages carried on average 400 people each, close to 1.5 million Africans might have used this method of protest. It’s likely none of their captors would have recognized this ingenuity and cultural connection to sound, believing their captives were unintelligent creatures.

I imagine that back then, those sounds also conveyed comfort—especially for the children and women aboard, considering the rapes and sexual abuse and the regular violence inflicted on all.

Skeehan notes in her work that “because few firsthand narratives of the Middle Passage written or dictated by New World Africans survived, the experiences of men and women traversing the Atlantic has been understood as largely unrepresentable. For these reasons we inevitably turn to the records of their captors, and these records seem to only confirm the unrepresentable nature of enslaved voices and experiences...”

This means that the archives don’t—can’t, by their very nature—represent the largely unvoiced experiences of the people considered cargo on those ships. I think of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s indelible

observations about the danger of only one perspective—particularly a perspective rooted in the justification of violence and dehumanization.

How could we ever expect White narrators of the time—even the well-intentioned ones—to begin to understand the internal and collective experiences of those captives? And yet, many of our mainstream history books would have us believe that the remembrances and writings of this past are complete, that we have talked about this history enough and should move on.

All of us involved in this work—the divers, historians, archaeologists, storytellers, activists, and all the others around the world and throughout time—have raised our hands. We have said we will not wait for others to prioritize our perspectives. It's time for some juicy, messy, complicated truth telling.

It's time for us to talk back.

**ADAZE AND I DRIVE ON** to Ganvié, a historic town in the middle of Lake Nokoué in Benin, not far from Cotonou and about two and a half hours from Togoville. Ganvié, the largest floating village on the continent, is known as the “Venice of Africa” in homage to that other floating city in Italy. Or maybe Venice should be known as the “Ganvié of Europe.”

The Ganvié wharf perches on cement pillars with a long cement wall that runs alongside it. Wooden stairs lead down to a flotilla of wooden boats full of mainly White and European tourists or fishermen and townspeople with wares to sell. Dockworkers and hawkers sell fish, women in colorful wrap skirts peddle baskets and snacks, and families arrive to trade or gossip. It's a crowded, busy, noisy place.

We get into a bright blue wooden boat with wooden slats and a piece of orange fabric overhead to provide shade from the sun. Long green benches line each side so that passengers can sit. Adaze and I are the only people on the boat, along with the boat operator.

Adaze sits on one side, and I sit on the other. We set off, cruising slowly on top of gray, brackish water lined with tall reeds, hiding the town from view. It takes about 10 minutes to motor out to the middle of the lake, where I can finally see the town in its fullness.

Clusters of simple wooden houses on stilts sit smack in the middle of the water. Around them, people are piloting canoes with oars. Many wear straw hats to keep the sun off their faces as they go about their daily activities.

These people, I learn from Adaze, are part of a group called the Tofinu, whose ancestors fled their homes in the 17th century. They moved here to escape Fon slavers from the Dahomey Kingdom. Settling along the coasts of Benin, they became known as “watermen.”

The Tofinu gravitated here because they had aquatic skills, and because they knew that the Fons’ religious beliefs around water would prevent pursuit on the lake. They decided to create a new home for themselves, miles from shore—a haven as long as they never returned to dry land. Over the years, they built structures using biodegradable materials and employed an aquaculture that honored this environment and helped it flourish. They named the village Ganvié, which means “we survived.”

The village grew into the town that exists today with some 3,000 buildings, including a post office, bank, hospital, church, school, and mosque—all floating on water. More than 30,000 residents live in these wooden huts of water-resistant, red ebony wood on stilts. The walls of the homes are made with bamboo and palm fronds, and the roofs are thatched.

By bringing soil from the mainland, residents also built small artificial islands over time to link two or more houses or to serve as places for children to play, because the water is only about six feet deep. Residents instituted a design for artificial reefs to help sustain aquatic life and break the influx of currents from the Atlantic Ocean, and they developed a system to farm fish in pens. And instead of walking or biking to a neighbor’s house, villagers use their dugout canoes to get around. At all times of the day, boats move up and down these “water streets”; the houses are designed with terraces facing the water streets, which allows for social connection and transparency across the village.

This floating village has thrived for around four centuries. But today, residents face a new set of challenges, including a lack of proper sewage and waste management systems as the town grows beyond what its original creators likely imagined. And as the local fishing economy competes with an inflated economy generated from tourism revenue, poverty is on the rise.

Tourism revenue from people like me.

And I feel it. Mainly like a voyeur and a parasite coming to ogle the lives of the poor people here. We pass houses with open doors and windows; I see a woman doing laundry, a group of kids playing together on the floor, someone sitting on a couch. They have no separation between tourism and daily life.

Our boat meanders up and down the water streets, and I keep my eyes down after a while, feeling like we should not be peering so openly into the everyday lives of citizens, some of whom have probably normalized this kind of performative behavior for the dollars and euros we provide.

The trip ends at a big, mustard yellow building that's a combination hotel, store, and restaurant. Other tourists pick out wooden masks and watercolor paintings from piles of cheap wares, eating chicken and fries or ice cream at the wooden tables and buying fresh fruit from women or children who row up to their tables.

This place shares a lot in common with its Italian counterpart. I'd visited Venice, walked around the ancient city, taken gondolas to restaurants, and felt the sway of bridges and buildings in the water's currents. That city, which also depends on tourism, is overrun by thousands of visitors crowding its squares and narrow walkways. This is the impact of a planet with more than eight billion people; no place is sacred anymore. Like Ganvié, Venice also faces a declining economy, due in large part to the high percentage of the city's revenue reliant on tourism dollars. Although tourism is a central part of the economy, people in Venice—unlike those in Ganvié—are still able to live their private lives away from peering eyes.

Here in Ganvié, tourists and residents have an unacknowledged agreement that it's somehow OK for visitors to think of the town as a living museum and for its residents to be seen as exhibits.

When I lived in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, I noticed the hop-on/hop-off buses that suddenly began offering tours of the area. How strange and surreal it was to see tourists riding on the open top level of the bus down 125th Street, snapping pictures of those of us on our way to work. No one asked us permission to snap those photos; permission was explicit—a continued legacy of racial voyeurism and scientific racism from the time of the slave trade.

It reminds me of the Hottentot Venus, a clear example of this kind of racial voyeurism. She was a Khoekhoe woman named Sarah (or Saartiji)

Baartman, brought to Europe from South Africa in 1810 and displayed to paying crowds in Britain and France because her body type was more voluptuous than the average English or French White woman. She was exhibited naked or with small coverings in a cage in Piccadilly, sometimes with a collar around her neck. She died in 1815 at the age of 26. Her body, brain, and genitals were pickled for public exhibition and remained on display in Paris until 2002, when they were finally returned to South Africa for a traditional burial.

And she wasn't the only one. In 1906, the director of the New York Zoological Society had Ota Benga, an Mbuti from the Congo, on display in the Bronx Zoo alongside apes and other animals. He was placed in a cage with an orangutan and labeled the "missing link" between beast and European man. He died by suicide in 1916.

Human zoos or ethnological expositions or "negro villages," as they were called, were popular public exhibits during the 19th and 20th centuries. They could be found in Hamburg, Barcelona, London, Paris, Milan, and New York. At the Paris World's Fair in 1889, 400 Indigenous people from Africa, the Americas, and Asia were displayed nude or seminude in cages as the main attractions and were viewed by more than 28 million people.

P.T. Barnum, deemed the Greatest Showman on Earth, made his debut by purchasing the right to rent an older enslaved woman named Joice Heth; he toured her around Philadelphia as the 161-year-old former nurse of George Washington. When she died in 1836, he hosted a live autopsy in a New York saloon where 1,500 spectators paid 50 cents each to see her sliced open. Then, when he became the proprietor of the American Museum, he continued with such exhibits. The "What Is It?" exhibition from Africa featured a "man monkey"—in reality, a poor African American man named William Henry Johnson who was descended from enslaved parents. Barnum would dress him in furry suits, and Johnson would rattle the cage and screech at passersby. *The Greatest Showman*, the movie about Barnum's life that starred actor Hugh Jackman, portrays none of these parts of his past.

Is this trip in Ganvié really any different? Maybe residents have a tacit agreement to participate, just as some of the people previously mentioned who "chose" to participate as spectacles. But is there really a choice in this

complex, mainly invisible system that sometimes makes people who are not White believe they must exploit themselves to survive?

I think not.

I leave feeling a film of shame all over.

**ADAZE TAKES ME BACK TO** my hotel. On our way, we come across a beach with several lines of people spread out and pulling on long fishing nets. About 25 people per line stand single file next to a long, black rope net they are pulling from the sea.

Adaze pulls over on the side of the road, and we walk across the sand to see up close a line containing a combination of young and older people.

As we watch, Adaze takes out his camera and encourages me to get in line and pull with them too.

“Oh, no, they’re in the middle of a task. I don’t want to interfere,” I say. “It would be weird for me to just hop on the line.”

Adaze dismisses my objection with a frown and a wave of his hands. “No, no, no. It’s OK. Go and get in there.”

We are near a group of young teenage boys who are holding the rope and staring at us. I feel a bit unsure, but I’m curious about the weight and feel of the rope. I wonder how much strength it takes to pull and why they need so many people for this work. I wonder if my ancestors participated in such work and what it would have felt like to be a part of it.

I hesitate again.

But Adaze says, “It will be OK. Go. I will take your picture.”

So I pick up the rope at the very end of the line a few feet away from the boys. Adaze snaps pictures of me as everyone on the line starts staring. Then, one middle-aged woman steps out of the line and comes closer to us. She is sucking her teeth, gesturing wildly to me and Adaze and speaking in a loud voice.

Adaze keeps smiling and taking pictures of me.

I don’t know what she’s saying, but I feel awkward. I think I should let go of the rope and that we should leave.

But Adaze sucks his teeth back at her.

She gets in his face, still gesturing wildly.

By this time, I have let go of the rope and started backing away.

“Let’s go, Adaze,” I say.

We leave. And the woman stands there looking after us, muttering.

When we get to the car, I ask Adaze what she said. He says that she said I should pay. If I wanted to be on the line or if I wanted to take pictures, I should pay something.

“Oh, Adaze,” I say.

He says, “Oh, no, you should not have paid at all. Don’t worry.”

But I think about it as we drive to the hotel. I didn’t have cash on me anyway, but should I have expected this? Had I projected my romanticized notions of Africa onto Adaze? Had he inadvertently picked them up from my bat signals and tried to deliver a memorable scene for my photo album?

I look out the window as we drive along the beach and see more lines of fisherpeople. It’s funny: I realize I still want to be a part of it somehow.

**LATER THAT EVENING DURING DINNER** at the hotel, I meet Gabriel, the hotel’s White, French manager.

Gabriel’s hotel is a modest place situated directly on the beach. It’s not a quiet, swimming beach; you can hear the strength of the waves as they pound the shore.

I sit at a wooden table in a colorful courtyard with a small pool and tropical flowers all around, listening to the sounds of the waves. Gabriel sits alone at the table next to mine with his laptop out and a glass of wine. A West African couple eats dinner at a table on the far side of us, paying us no attention. Gabriel strikes up a conversation with me as my dishes arrive. Turns out, he’s 52 years old, born in France, has been living in West Africa for more than 20 years, and has a Beninese girlfriend. I tell him about my travels and my work and how I had decided to come to the region to look into my DNA results.

Then he asks me an odd question. “Do you know how big Africa is?”

I frown and nod.

“Do you really?” he asked.

“Yes,” I say, nodding again.

He shakes his head and says, “I mean, the true size of this continent?”

This time I just look at him with a raised eyebrow.

“I don’t believe you do,” he says.

My eyebrow goes even higher, and I resist rolling my eyes.

He pulls up a map of Africa on his laptop. This map has countries from around the world superimposed within Africa’s borders. The continental United States fits into West Africa alone, and China, India, Japan, and all of Europe combined almost fill in the rest.

I knew that Africa was this big. But I get what he was trying to say. And I have never seen a map with the contrast laid out so starkly. Maps like the popular Mercator projection portray the United States and western Europe as being almost as big as Africa—but on this map by German software designer Kai Krause, they are not even close. Western Europe, in particular, looks like a fly on an elephant’s back.

Krause’s map, the Gall-Peters map, and others like it, which classrooms in places like Boston are slowly adopting, show the true size of Africa and the other continents.

I lean back in my seat. We sit in silence a few moments. Then I ask, “Why did you feel like you needed to show this map to me?”

Gabriel is a tall, thin, pale man with long fingers. He puts his elbows on the table, steeplest those long fingers together, and puts his chin on top. His skin seems to glow in the dusk of evening as he answers in his thick French accent. “People come to Africa with a lot of ideas, a lot of imaginations. Sometimes, it’s more like Africa is an idea than an actual place. People think all Africans are poor or not well educated. Very few people come here with an attitude of ‘let’s just wait and see.’”

I wait for more.

“When you study a map, normally it is wrong because the world is not flat like it is on paper. So when you look at the center, the size there is always bigger. And Europe or the U.S. is always in the center of international maps.

“So you don’t see the real size of Africa. Some people come here and say, ‘I want to see all of West Africa.’ OK. I say, ‘You want to see all the big cities in West Africa in one visit? Do it. You are Flash Gordon or something?’” He laughs.

“The point is that this is a big continent and it’s all different. We are not the same people. OK. Some people say, well, everyone is Black. But is a

Russian like an Italian or a Mexican? I don't think so."

Of course, I think, and again resist rolling my eyes. I don't want to interrupt his flow. I try to humble myself and ignore the mansplaining, because he clearly wants to communicate something he feels is important.

"Then there is language. English between Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa and a lot of other countries. French, the rest, and some places Spanish and Portuguese. We are not one thing."

I notice the way I am not included in his "we." But he's right. It's complicated. Africa has 54 distinct countries now, including wildly diverse nations like Senegal, with its bright fabrics and mbalax traditional music; Namibia, with its mighty sand dunes, gravel plains, coastal deserts, and burgeoning film industry; and Ethiopia, with its rock-hewn churches carved out of red volcanic tuff and Judaism influences.

Africa also has more than 3,000 ethnicities, and somewhere around 2,000 languages.

In contrast, Europe has only 87 ethnicities and 24 official languages.

And we have not even broached the realities of all those who are not Black, but live on this continent. Gabriel, for instance, or the estimated five million other White people who have either immigrated or whose ancestors helped colonize the continent. Or the almost three million people of the Indian diaspora who live here, some of whom are also descendants of enslaved people, particularly in South Africa. In addition, some 200 million Arab people—who range in skin color and identify as Middle Eastern—also call this continent home, particularly in the north.

"So what do you think might change if people really looked at Africa and saw all of this complexity?" I ask.

"The real question," he responds, "is whether Africa is important enough for the rest of the world to look." He shrugs and makes a pshaw sound with his mouth.

"I still don't understand why you are saying all of this to me," I reply, a bit bewildered at the intensity of the conversation on this quiet night. "Why tell me these things?"

"Because you are a person of communication, of words. It's important to bring another light to this place. The United States uses old books, films, media to talk about Africa. But the city of today in West Africa is not the

city of before. It's very important to see what is present so we can understand where we are coming from and where we're going."

Hmmm...almost exactly Ibrahima's words.

We exchange a few more pleasantries, then I excuse myself for bed.

I feel so tired as I crawl beneath my mosquito net, overwhelmed by the magnitude of it all—a burden no less than the history of a world transformed by the Transatlantic Slave Trade, racism, colonialism, and imperialism settling around my shoulders.

**I DECIDE IT'S IMPORTANT TO** save my visits to Benin's cities—Abomey, the seat of power for the Dahomey ethnic group, and Ouidah, the slave-trading capital—for last. These are places that my ancestors likely walked.

Adaze and I drive first to Abomey, about two hours from Ganvié, to the royal palaces of the Dahomey kings who once ruled Benin. Today, it's a UNESCO World Heritage site, mainly for people on the heritage tourism trail. People like me come from all over the world to see this warren of crumbly, empty, earthen structures built by the Fon between the 17th and 19th centuries. The compound, which is surrounded by a six-mile mud wall, consists of 10 palaces built by 12 kings who succeeded each other to the throne from 1625 to 1900. Back then, a five-foot-deep ditch filled with prickly acacia also protected the inhabitants from invaders. Within the walls are villages separated by large fields, a marketplace, and barracks for the army.

Each palace is built around three courtyards—outer, inner, and private. The palaces of King Gezo, the ninth and most celebrated of all the kings, who ruled from 1818 to 1858, and his son, King Glélé, the 10th ruler, who reigned from 1858 to 1889, now house the Historical Museum of Abomey.

It's a quiet day when we arrive. Another tourist group, all White Europeans, cluster under a tree as a tour guide speaks to them in rolling French tones. Other guides lounge on benches alongside the wall, waiting for more groups or individual tourists to show. It's slim pickings. They all snap to attention when Adaze approaches. He engages the English-speaking guide, and we set off.

I learn much about the Dahomey Kingdom as we walk the grounds and through the buildings. Art pieces in nooks, statues in rooms, preserved gravesites, and images painted on walls all tell the story of the group.

The Dahomey Kingdom was one of the fiercest regional powers of the time. Its economy centered on conquering neighboring nations and trading human beings to Europeans in exchange for goods like rifles, gunpowder, fabrics, tobacco, pipes, and alcohol. They were a sophisticated power with a centralized administration, taxation system, and an organized military of more than 10,000 warriors. These warriors—including the now celebrated fierce women warriors known as the Agoji—drilled with strict discipline and precision, and as a result, were feared around the region. In long-range combat they used European flintlock muskets and imported steel swords. At close range they preferred cutlasses.

With all that might, though, the Dahomey still weren't the biggest or fiercest in the area. That title went to the Oyo Empire, which competed with the Dahomey and Ashanti Kingdoms around trafficking humans into the Transatlantic Slave Trade with the Europeans. The Dahomey tried to conquer the Oyo in the 1700s, but failed and assumed a tributary relationship with them. Experts estimate that the Dahomey would send some \$14 million (in today's U.S. terms) in revenue to the Oyo annually—income mainly derived from selling captives to Europeans.

When King Gezo ascended the throne in 1818, he made it his priority to throw off this tributary yoke to the Oyo. In 1827, he succeeded; using sound military strategies, his army defeated the Oyo and became the powerhouse in the region. But it wasn't easy. The slave trade had been made illegal by the British government in 1807, and the British had begun putting pressure on King Gezo to end the trade. But Gezo refused. He said that because the entire region had become dependent on slave trading, ending it abruptly would destabilize his kingdom and lead to anarchy.

Quietly, Gezo did put some restrictions on the slave trade by the Dahomey. No longer would they be able to sell other Dahomey into slavery; only war captives could be sold to the Europeans. And he proposed a gradual end to the slave trade with an eventual expansion of the palm oil trade.

But Gezo was pragmatic above all. "The slave trade has been the ruling principle of my people," he told the British, according to the BBC. "It is the

source of their glory and wealth. Their songs celebrate their victories and the mother lulls the child to sleep with notes of triumph over an enemy reduced to slavery.”

King Gezo’s people and Europeans of the time considered him a great leader—a monarch who made the Dahomey powerful and generated substantial wealth for them. He also stood against the British attempts to convert his people to Christianity and helped maintain their traditional religion, known as vodun, which was birthed in Dahomey and is still practiced today throughout West Africa and in the Americas, most notably in Haiti and Brazil.

Gezo died in 1858, but not before seeing his son Glélé ascend the throne that same year. Glélé carried on his father’s ambitions, with continued involvement in the slave trade. He also leaned further into the production of palm oil, which relied heavily on enslaved labor and a plantation economy structure. War captives who were not intended to be sold to Europeans remained as enslaved people in Dahomey; they worked on royal plantations that supplied food for the army and royal court, cared for the fields of oil palms, and became “messengers to the ancestors”—in other words, sacrificial victims in ceremonies and tributes.

Previously in Dahomey, enslaved war captives had been treated as members of the slaveholders’ families who could attain free status after a generation or so. But as the plantation economy grew, it became more common for enslaved people to be abused and mistreated and kept enslaved.

I had no idea about the plantations run by African empires or the human sacrifices of enslaved people. That was news.

I learned another thing too. The Dahomey sent at least five embassies to Portugal and Brazil during the years of 1750, 1795, 1805, 1811, and 1818 with the goal of negotiating the terms of the slave trade. The purpose was to strengthen relations with the Portuguese colonial authorities and slave buyers residing in Brazilian territory, ensuring that they maintained an interest in purchasing captive people supplied by the Dahomey rather than rival kingdoms. These missions created an official correspondence between the kings of Dahomey and the kings of Portugal, and gifts were exchanged between them. The Portuguese crown paid for the travel and

accommodation expenses of Dahomey's ambassadors, who traveled between Lisbon and Salvador, Bahia.

Hearing that they visited Brazil as we stand inside this palace stuns me. This means they knew what was happening to those captured and sent to the Americas. I had thought maybe they didn't know the fates of all the people taken away since the practice of enslavement had initially been so different in Africa.

But they knew. And maybe they even learned as they began to practice their own more brutal form of enslavement too.

Throughout this place were symbols of reverence and commemoration: a celebration and mourning of this culture and powerful kingdom that had been defeated and lost. But I can only think of the people who suffered, whose disintegrated bones perhaps lie under this soil.

I knew that the idea of Africans selling Africans was a flat version of history—one that sees all Black people as the same, another concept that comes from a European colonizer's perspective.

Still, learning about all of this makes me feel so sad and small in this place.

It still feels like betrayal, and I have to get away.

I say "enough" to Adaze. And we leave.

On the drive to the hotel, I'm silent in the car.

Adaze senses my mood: "What we can do about the slavery now?" he asks quietly. "Nothing. The past is past. Everyone says we must forgive. Yes, yes. We can forgive. But I say, what is most important is that we cannot forget. We must try to not forget. That is all we can do."

He lapses into silence for the rest of the ride.

**WE DRIVE THROUGH THE CENTER** of the town of Ouidah bright and early the next morning, about two hours south of Abomey. I see vestiges of the Portuguese, Germans, British, and French everywhere: pastel-colored shuttered buildings made of stone and brick with arches, columns, verandas, and wrought-iron balconies overlooking shaded squares, just like their colonial counterparts in Europe. I also see structures from the natural materials of the area: mud, palm fronds, corrugated tin. All

the buildings are neat, albeit a bit crumbly, and all the reddish desert sand streets are swept clean, albeit a bit dusty.

It's quiet, with very few people out. The place seems to have an old, lingering heaviness.

Ouidah feels forgotten this morning, like an abandoned town.

We park and walk to La Place Chacha, where captives were auctioned off. It's marked by a large statue of an Agoji warrior in blue clothing with her cutlass hanging from her belt, placed there in the 1980s. Looming above is an enormous tree, dating back to those days when captives were sold in its shade in exchange for goods. After the transaction was completed, the captives would be taken to an ironworker's forge across the street, branded with the buyer's mark, and shackled in chains.

I notice the contradiction of power and subjugation in this place. The statue idolizing the warriors who captured the people to be enslaved is next to the tree under which they were sold.

The plaza, where all of this took place, is named after an influential Brazilian slave trader, Francisco Félix de Souza, who helped Gezo ascend the throne and whose house stands adjacent. He was known as the *chacha* of the king, a bastardization of the Portuguese phrase “*ja ja*,” which he used to say and which means “to do something right away.” He became rich off the slave trade. His palatial home is adjacent to this plaza of commemoration and is used today as a holiday retreat by his descendants, several of whom have served in some of the highest-ranking offices in Benin, including a government minister, archbishop of Cotonou, and first lady.

Such contradictions.

We walk to the barracoons, the outdoor stockades where captives were kept chained to the wall, sometimes for months on end. We tour the three fortresses of the French, English, and Portuguese that had been preserved and were being renovated. One fort now houses a history museum; in it, an exhibit stops me cold. It's an actual corncob pipe in a glass case, preserved, the note said, because it was used as currency to purchase one African male.

After we finish seeing the sights in town, we get back in the car and drive along the Route des Esclaves (slave route), a Beninese government and UNESCO project, which leads to the sea and features stops and markers along the way. I had initially thought of walking this route; it's not

so far, about two and a half miles. I'd wanted to walk in the footsteps of my ancestors. But it's so hot, at least 100°F. I feel like I'm going to melt, and all my energy and resolve evaporate away. I just feel so tired here; it all seems so pointless. I could easily imagine the estimated one million people trafficked from this place, walking this road in pain: hungry, naked, hot, fearful, shuffling, and clanking in the heat to the beach. I get it.

So we drive.

The next stop on the route is the Tree of Forgetfulness. Captives were made to walk around a tree—seven times for women, nine times for men—to forget their identity, culture, history, and to become a blank canvas for their enslavers. A ritual initiated by a king of the Dahomey; we don't know which one. Its purpose also may have been to prevent the spirits of deceased captives from returning and seeking revenge against the royalty of Dahomey.

The actual tree from the 17th century is no longer there, but a marker and a newer baby tree indicate the spot.

So there I walk...

Adaze and the guide stand off to the side, quietly gossiping and exchanging news while I circle.

When I finish, we get back in the car and drive a mile or so to the village of Zomachi and the Memorial Zomachi, which is marked with a bas-relief depicting the story of the route; it also has a large house on its grounds, built in 1992. The house represents the place where captives were held in stone cells called *zomai* (or dark rooms), meaning “where light does not go.” Captives were kept here for days, weeks, sometimes months on end for insubordination; they were given bread and water once a day. The goal was to expunge any rebellious thoughts, disorient them, make them docile for the long journey across the ocean. Those thought to be troublemakers were chained and made to stay in the same position with a metal bit in their mouths.

I'm astonished at the intentionality of the process.

We drive on, about a half mile farther into the village to an area where chickens parade, kids play, and villagers go about their daily duties. Here is the Memorial of Memory, or the Wall of Lamentations. Those who did not survive the dark rooms, or who looked like they would not survive the journey, were thrown into a communal grave: a deep pit in the ground.

Here, the dead and still living were thrown away together with no ceremony. The spot is marked by a rectangular monument with an abstract image in brown to represent the captives, red to represent their blood, and black to represent their chains.

Only a few meters away is the Tree of Return. Captives would walk around this tree three times, believing that if they died outside of Africa, the ritual would help their souls to anchor here so they could return to their homeland.

The actual tree from those times is still there; it must hold so many memories. It is encircled with a stone bench and a marker containing its story. I wonder if villagers eat their lunches here, gossip under the tree, pluck the fruit from its leaves for an afternoon snack.

I decide to walk around this tree too.

Adaze and the guide are off again talking near the car. Some villagers stand nearby watching me, seemingly in amusement. I wonder how many Black Americans have done this—probably quite a few. I hear laughter from the villagers, who are gesturing with their hands. Perhaps it has nothing to do with me. Or perhaps it has everything. But I don't care. I feel compelled to walk.

When I finish, we drive to the final stop on the route, the Door of No Return. This is the stretch of beach where the captives would have taken their last steps on this land. In the middle, Beninese artists in 1995 built an enormous concrete and bronze arch, marking the walk my ancestors might have taken to one of the waiting pirogues. The big ships were too heavy to come so close to shore, so captives had to be ferried out in smaller boats to open water where slave ships waited.

On the top of the arch are two carved reliefs showing captive people walking, chained, in single-file lines. On one side, they walk away from their homeland with a tree in the background to represent the land they are leaving; on the other, they walk toward the sea with a ship waiting in the distance. Framing the arch on either side are oxidized bronze figures in chains, along with a freestanding cement Egungun, a traditional figure that recalls departed ancestors.

I can't even imagine...and yet, I can.

I stand there for a while, feeling increasingly tired and more and more depressed. I'm on that beach alone. Adaze and the guide stay near the car

on the road; no other visitors have come to the site yet. I feel like I need to stand there and witness. But really, I just want to leave.

I'd had tunnel vision getting to the Door and experiencing all these things my African ancestors may have experienced. But now, I notice the signs of construction around the site and on the beach. I remember hearing that Ouidah would be getting a makeover with a U.S. \$50 million investment from the World Bank. They're building something called the Marina Project, a vast memorial and tourist complex that will feature a hotel spa, a life-size replica of a slave ship, memorial gardens, a craft market, and an arena for vodun performances. They also plan to shore up the Door of No Return, renovate the fortress in town, and remake the barracoons, where captive Africans were kept before being auctioned off.

A slavery amusement park, some might say.

Benin hopes to market itself as a major destination for Afro-descendant tourists. Heritage tourism is what it's called—on one level, the commodification of history to bolster a growing economy, and on another, an attempt at education and remembrance. A fine balancing act to maintain.

In Benin, tourism counts for only 2.6 percent of the country's gross domestic product. Tourism revenues were U.S. \$197 million in 2014—far below the country's potential, according to government officials, because they think its heritage is so singular.

The project will create more than 150,000 jobs for locals, support the growth of micro, small, and medium-size enterprises, and reinvest profits into other sectors to help growth, boost the economy, and reduce poverty.

All this on the backs of people like me trying so hard to connect to their ancestors and history.

I had been excited about my reception by the immigration officer who welcomed me so warmly at the airport. But the tiny voice that I had squashed in my mind back then flares up now. How am I supposed to feel if I think that West Africa is cashing in on tourists like me? If I think it sees this devastating history as a moneymaking opportunity?

I had wanted to visit the Dahomey palaces, to walk the slave trail here, to imagine what it would have been like to march shackled from the barracoon to the slave market to be sold, then on to the dark rooms to the beach and forced on the boats.

I did lean into this idea of heritage tourism. Heritage tourism exists around the world, including in the U.S., and can be informative.

But as I stand here alone on the beach, I feel angry and disappointed in the Dahomey, in Benin, in West Africa, in humanity. And yes, yes, I know that it's all very complex—that Benin's history doesn't start or end with the slave trade, and that it has a right to represent its past in the way it deems best. After all, who owns the past? I realize Benin has been a leader in West Africa for getting some of its sacred art and cultural artifacts returned, and that this project is also about an investment in and a celebration of its culture.

The truth is, there are so many nuances and contradictions here that some of us have to spend years diving for slave ships, talking to people, reading books, reeducating ourselves to understand even a bit of it. And even then, our understanding is not perfect.

Plus, the Dahomey were humans. And humans have been horrible to one another throughout our existence on this planet. This incessant—or is it inherent?—need for power, control, dominance that exists on the big, macro level, but also among neighbors, in families, in our own individual souls, is nothing new.

All I wanted on this trip was to feel connected and embraced in this place of my ancestors, though, to make being a childless, partnerless, 48-year-old Black girl from the Dirty South who doesn't have a permanent home anywhere in the world feel OK.

But all I feel is weariness and exhaustion.

All I really want to do is weep.

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# CHAPTER NINE

I've been in Senegal in Karima's house for a week already, laid up in the bedroom on the second floor, trying to recover from my experience in Benin and Togo. My main visitor is Rocky, who noses in through the door, paws clicking on the floor, tail wagging like thunder. Sometimes, Ismael, who is six and unafraid of adults (including sick ones on the mend), accompanies her. He likes to show me his superhero toys and Lego creations.

I arrived at the airport in Dakar so tired, both physically and emotionally. When Karima met me at baggage claim, she clasped me tightly in a hug and I didn't want to let go. She felt like a safe harbor from confusion and unfriendliness. As we walked to the car, arms around each other, I felt my body give in. All the tension I'd been holding at bay came crashing down.

I didn't pay much attention to my surroundings as we drove through the noise of Dakar traffic to Karima's house. Instead, I lay on the back seat with my eyes closed, finding refuge in her continuous chatter and updates about her husband and four kids. When we got to her house, she showed me to my room, and I promptly crawled into bed and went to sleep. I woke up the next morning with a runny nose, red eyes, and a headache.

So I slept for a week, allowing my body to come back into alignment with itself. And for the last two days or so, as I begin feeling gradually better, I start eating the delicious food of Karima's cook, Maria. Her yassa fish, rice and plantains, and salads help bring sense back to my body.

Karima and I met as students back in the 1990s at Mount Holyoke College, a women's college in a small town in Massachusetts; I was a junior

and she was a freshman. Back then, with her box braids swinging and her baggy jeans, cropped tops, and flannel button-downs, she always seemed ready for a party, flashing her dimples with a quick laugh, flirting with all the cute guys, having sordid, jaw-dropping, scandalous affairs. We've been through so many lifetimes together: as students getting down on the dance floor at parties around Pioneer Valley, as professionals in New York City, as writers and creative partners, and as grown women trying to make sense of the world.

Although Karima is from Harlem, she moved to Senegal, the home of her soul, more than 20 years ago. Her mother's people used to actually run the country. Her great-aunt was the country's first woman prime minister, and she comes from a long line of Islamic cleric judges, high in power, who trace their roots here to the 1400s.

Now, she runs a museum—the first ever children's museum in all of West Africa—as well as two preschools in Dakar. And she writes part-time. She has become well respected in the region for her visionary work around children's education. Through it all, she has remained a ball of sunshine, joy, and goodwill in my mind—always my friend, someone I can come to when I feel adrift.

I fall back to sleep.

When I wake again, she is home and has brought me a plate. She sits cross-legged on the bed, and we eat Marie's good food together and catch up. Karima's daughter, Soukeyna, chose to go to Mount Holyoke too and is graduating soon. We are so proud. Her son Momo is off to the African Leadership University in Mauritius. Her son Edou has begun surfing. Ismael, the youngest, is growing fast. And her husband, Michael, who teaches NBA basketball recruits, is becoming a respected student and teacher of Islam. When we're done eating and catching up, we place our plates to the side and lean back on pillows resting against the headboard.

I wonder if Karima can help me make sense of all I've experienced. I decide to ask.

"All right," I say, turning to face her. "I'm struggling here on the continent. I feel angry, overwhelmed, and disappointed." I tell her about my travels through Mozambique, South Africa, Benin and Togo. About Brown Eyes. About Anna. About Ganvié. About walking the slave route and

learning more of the history of the Dahomey kings. About not feeling welcome.

She takes a deep breath. “Many years ago, when I was doing leadership training, I realized that questions take you in the direction you want to go,” she says.

She interlaces her fingers behind her head and leans back against the pillow. “And so I started to use questions very purposefully. But I hear you asking questions that aren’t really questions, like ‘Why don’t they accept me?’ ‘What is wrong with Africa?’ ‘With Africans?’ These are actually critiques veiled as questions.”

She smiles at the frown on my face and shrugs. “You’re not the only one to do this, by the way,” she says. “A lot of African Americans who come here to visit do the same thing. When they arrive, there’s a sense of, ‘Hey, I’m hurt. I’ve been rejected by the U.S., and I’m looking for the opposite of rejection.’ So I think the questions are really coming from this fear—this fear of rejection.”

My eyebrow raises and my lips pucker to the side.

“But...” She holds up a hand before I can interrupt. “What I think you—and those other folks—are really trying to ask is, How do I get close to this continent? How do I feel it and truly connect with it? And I think that’s a much more powerful question. It is not judgmental. It is not limiting. And it gives space for ideas to arise.”

Hmmm.

“And girl, you know I might not say this to some of the others, but I will say it to you because I hold you to a higher standard. I think that’s the nature of our relationship. There have been plenty of times when you’ve been really rigorous with me, and so now I’m being rigorous with you. I feel like the question *you* are really trying to uncover is part of your spiritual journey—and if you lean into it, I think you can make this a much more joyful process of discovery.”

“What I was just experiencing as you were talking was this longing,” I say. “I think this longing is such a unique thing for African Americans, you know? Where is home for us? Where do we belong in this world? I’m thinking about those two words: ‘African’ and ‘American.’ What do they mean? How do they butt up against each other?”

My voice catches. “What’s present in my heart right now is such a longing to belong somewhere.”

Karima reaches over and puts her hand on my shoulder.

“You know, I came across this quote the other day, Tara, that I think seizes on all that you are feeling. Someone—I’m not sure who—said: ‘To be African American is to be African without any memory and American without any privilege.’”

Damn.

Even though African Americans do have a kind of privilege, as I have come to realize on this journey. Just not at home and only over other brown and Black people in other parts of the world. What kind of privilege is that?

Damn again.

Karima’s hand moves down to clasp mine.

“You and I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. And we were supposed to be the post-civil rights children, right? We were supposed to get the dream of the U.S. We were the ambition, the culmination of all that our ancestors fought and died for. Look at us: We went to damn Mount Holyoke, a predominantly White college. We got jobs, we’re smart, and we’re cute.”

Karima winks at me.

“But the thing that we know now is how fake that’s been, and just how it hasn’t answered much.

“I’ve been doing a lot of personal work around trauma-involved responses. People don’t really talk about the slave trade as trauma, you know? But I’ve been learning so much from new research on how Holocaust survivors have passed down the genetics of trauma to their grandchildren. I’ve been reading about people who have lived through these crazy war scenarios in Vietnam or Cambodia or even Korea—these parents who have come to the U.S. and who have assimilated and been successful. But in their children, there still exists the remnants of their trauma. And I say, well damn us. How many generations of trauma have we lived through? Are we still living through? Because it wasn’t just 400 years of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery. It was Jim Crow right after slavery. It was mass incarceration. It was the crack era in the 1980s. I mean, we could go on and on. Every damn 10 years, there has been something out for us. It never stopped. And it’s never been fully acknowledged.”

“Girl. It all feels enormously sad and painful when you put it like that,” I say, blowing out a breath. “I don’t know what we can do to alleviate so much trauma. It just seems so big, you know? I don’t know how we can find our place in all of this.”

“I’m thinking out loud here,” she says slowly. “But maybe first, we have to acknowledge that we are a displaced people. We are. So we lean into it.”

She stands up and walks around the bed.

“Then maybe we imagine ourselves a little like turtles.”

I laugh a little in confusion. “What?”

“I’m serious, Tara. You know how turtles carry their homes with them? I feel like that’s what we have to do. Your particular home, Tara, might be here on this continent. Or it might be in the Caribbean. Or it might be in Paris. Or it might be a combination of all those places.

“Or...maybe it is not a geographical place at all. Like, for you, Tara? I think it might be, I don’t know, how do you feel when you get on a dance floor? I know how much you like to dance. Girl, that might be where you belong! Or how do you feel with a community of really brilliant cultural workers or artists from around the world? Or with a group of fierce African feminists? You may find your corner of the universe in a place that makes you feel spiritually and emotionally safe. And then, that’s where you belong.”

She stops pacing, kneels at the edge of the bed, and leans closer. “The thing that I want us to get to as Black people is that being Black and African is not going to be tied necessarily to this either/or paradigm that was set up by somebody else. That is somebody else’s narrative for you.”

She stretches her hands overhead and then clasps them behind her neck. “Whether it’s a colonial narrative or a racist narrative, or whether it’s a narrative we read in the history books, it’s still somebody else’s story about you. And I think that, on some level, that’s where we have to go. We have to ask, How can we get out of telling these stories about ourselves created by other people? How do we define ourselves? I think it’s all leading to us defining for ourselves what it means to be globally Black today.”

“I remember Ibrahima Thiaw saying something just like this—that maybe Africa cannot be a geographical home for African Americans and

that we have to self-define anew,” I say, thinking back to my conversation with him in Mozambique.

“Ibrahima Thiaw. Girrrrl, that’s one brilliant man. I love his mind. And I know a lot of people don’t mind the way he looks, either!” We laugh out loud.

Ibrahima and Karima have worked together around the preservation of Gorée Island.

“Do you really think there is no place here on the continent that could be home for us?” I ask more seriously.

“That’s a complicated question,” Karima answers. “The reason I like Ibrahima’s mind so much is that he works to bring us the material proof of how complex slavery was here in Africa.”

“Yeah, I began to understand a little of what he’s doing when we spoke, but I’m still struggling. It *is* complicated.” I blow out my breath again and shake my head.

She sighs too.

“Africans as a whole have to reckon with their role in the slave trade and with slavery,” Karima says. “You know, my mother is dealing with the fact that her family had people who were essentially slaves. She’s dealing with the karma of that. Like so many others. But we also have to reckon with the legacy of colonialism and with whoever the hell is governing and oppressing us here now. Until then, I don’t think Africa can be a real home to the people who live here.”

She looks a bit sad.

“When I think about all these young migrants who are taking boats and risking their lives and running into modern-day slavery in northern Africa, in Libya, or being turned away or dying in the Mediterranean for better opportunity, it’s because this place is not a home for them. It’s not permitting growth. Or, Tara—if you think about the numbers of queer, lesbian, or homosexual Africans who may not have a place here, the number of women who are abused or raped, the amount of wars and conflicts—you can see that Africa is not a home yet for itself.”

I feel her getting mad.

“Africa has been so destroyed psychologically in the world, in terms of its image, in terms of its history. And so it’s hard for us to say, ‘Yeah, we can have a home here for anybody else,’ until we can say, ‘Yeah, this place

is a human rights space, this is a place where all human beings can come and live decent lives.””

I shrug. “That’s a hard litmus test, Karima. I almost hear you asking for a utopia. Where in the world is there a place where those things are not happening? Where is there a place in the world where there *isn’t* oppression and nonacceptance of certain groups? I think what I’m trying to ask is, How do we reconcile the disconnection between who we are as African Americans and who Africans are? Is there even a real connection anymore?”

Karima pauses, considering. “Yes, I think there is something there. Something about our shared culture of resistance. We don’t always hear about the many people who resisted. But they did, and we did too. There is also something about the music—the certain amount of beats that you nod your head to instinctively here and there.”

We both nod our heads and shake our shoulders like we’re dancing, and we laugh.

“I think we also have to embrace all these complex identities that are emerging. Like I am American with a Senegalese mother, but my father is from St. Lucia with roots in Trinidad. And I chose to come back to live and work in Senegal. I hold the Caribbean, the U.S., and Africa close. I think of Momo, who grew up in the U.S. and Senegal and went to college in Mauritius. Maybe he will live in Senegal long enough and decide he wants to run for the Senate. Or save me, president, one day. He would have seen all those beautiful Black businesses investing in their economies in the States, but he also would have lived here, making friends and building community all over the continent.”

Now, I feel the excitement emanating as she stands back up. “What if that is our future, Tara?! This melding of our diasporic cultures to transform how we understand the world? I don’t know...But you understand what I’m saying, right? This is the potential impact, in my mind, of global Blackness.”

The tension in my body is dissipating. I feel myself relaxing for the first time in more than a month: the power of a soul sister talk. I stretch out on the bed.

“And here’s the thing—just because you didn’t feel it in Benin doesn’t mean there isn’t a place for you on the continent if you choose. To go back

to your earlier question: That's the beauty of 54 countries. You have the right to be able to visit each one and say, 'You know, I feel myself here, even if I don't genetically come from this place.'

"But I have a feeling that again, for you, Tara, your sense of belonging will not be based on your DNA."

"I hear you." And I really do. I stand up. "It sounds like you have a real vision, my friend. You have not been sitting around just eating Marie's yassa fish. You have been actually thinking and doing work over here!"

I wink at her now, and she laughs.

"Yeah, girl, I'm really imagining a global Africa, not just a continental Africa located on this landmass here, but a Caribbean Africa, a U.S. Africa, a global Africa where we have young people who are changemakers and visionaries and builders and architects. And because they've been gifted and graced by their communities, by their ecosystems, by their environments, by their schooling, they are empowered to change the world with their passion, their creativity, and their power."

OK!

"I know you will find your place, my sista," she says while squeezing my hand. "Whether it's somewhere you can dig your toes in or a place that you mainly feel in your heart."

I squeeze back.

She stands back up and does a little two-step. "But I really think it might be on a dance floor in South Africa!"

We laugh again.

**KARIMA GOES OFF TO A** work event, And I push my still achy body up off the bed and head out the front door.

Because she lives only a few blocks from the beach, I decide getting some fresh air and smelling the sea just might take me all the way from 85 percent to 100 percent.

Karima lives in Yoff, a neighborhood of middle-class Senegalese families. Big, two-story houses with balconies and courtyards line the streets. Many of the houses are half-finished, with rubble in front of them but no construction crews or equipment in sight. It's like someone thought

to build a house, got bored midway through, abandoned the project, then started again a few houses down.

Most of the occupied houses are behind barriers like the ones in South Africa, but these gates seem less foreboding. No barbed wire or security officers on patrol. The fences are made of cement and seem to be designed to keep out the dust and grime of the streets, rather than would-be thieves and murderers.

I zigzag through the blocks until finally I glimpse her, bluish gray underneath whitecaps rolling in the foreground and deep blue extending out into the distance. I step out onto the long stretch of white sand in front of her and breathe deeply. I feel so happy to see her. She's gentler here—not calm exactly, but not frenzied and angry like in Cape Town.

Yemayá.

Funny, I did not name her at all in Mozambique or Cape Town or on the lakes in Togoville or Ganvié. But here, I feel her presence strongly. I also feel Oshun. Olokun. Mami Wata. Abena. All water deities baked into African cultures for millennia.

Here in Dakar, I marvel that I'm in this place, on this beach. And that I hear her voice again.

I flop down in the sand, wrap my arms around my knees, and feel the sun on my face, restoring me. No one pays me any mind.

I feel like I disappear here, but I don't feel like I meld. I don't see myself in the locals, as I did in Togo. These beautiful people, with their brown skin set off against brightly colored fabrics, framed by hijabs and flowing robes, or enhanced with eyeliner and eye shadow, or with their buff and fit bodies, don't quite speak to me in the same way. Here, I feel separate, like a kernel in the soup that won't dissolve.

The facial features in Senegal don't remind me of the faces in my family. And something about the land—the half-finished construction everywhere, the noise and frenzy—sets me on edge. It's a jagged scrape against my nerves. My soul does not settle here.

Even though Yemayá speaks to me here, this is not my home. Not like it is for Karima.

I think Yemayá is speaking to me now, because she's calling me on. It's time to leave, she whispers over the sand. She quietly reminds me that this is a global journey, that I've learned what I need to learn from Africa for

now and that I must visit other places. I feel the tug to head on to the Caribbean and Latin America. I've been invited to Costa Rica to witness the documentation of a slave ship there. And Ayana and Justin invited me to St. Croix.

I close my eyes and acknowledge the rightness of this urge. But I decide as I sit here that before I leave the continent and head west, I'll go back to South Africa, to the AfroPunk music festival in Johannesburg. Something about South Africa does speak to me.

Maybe it's because apartheid and Jim Crow are so similar. I know Afrikaners came to the American South to learn about Jim Crow and to incorporate its lessons into apartheid. Its brand of racism feels familiar and, in a weird way, comfortable. But maybe it's also something about the energy of the place. Something about the music. I don't know. I just know I want to indulge my urge to go back there.

I walk back to Karima's and book a ticket to Joburg and then on to Costa Rica.

## **BUT BEFORE I LEAVE SENEGAL,** I make one visit and one call.

I take a taxi to the Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar.

Ibrahima—in white linen caftan and scarf and tan leather shoes—meets me in front of his archaeology lab, which is a separate extension building that looks like a prefabricated trailer next to all the modern buildings surrounding it.

As in South Africa, I've arrived also in Dakar during a time when the team is not diving for the wreck. It's winter, they say; the water is too cold to dive. Ibrahima has instead arranged for me to speak to his Ph.D. students, who are training to become maritime archaeologists. They're in their 20s and early 30s: bright, accomplished, smart. I'll interview and photograph them later.

For now, as we sit in his cluttered office, I tell Ibrahima about my trip to Benin and Togo, and how angry I felt after learning more about the Dahomey Kingdom's role in the slave trade.

"We have a lot of reckoning to do around the slave trade and slavery here in West Africa," he says. "At first, back in the 16th and 17th centuries,

slavery wasn't prescriptive. Anyone could become a slave, including the king. Being a slave was more of a political position than a station in life. But at some point the system changed, and we started to see slaves almost like their own caste."

He goes on to tell me that the caste system in West Africa evolved around the 13th century from the mind of revered leader Sundiata Keita, who was the first king of the Mali Empire. He was also the great-uncle of King Mansa Mūsā, who is considered the wealthiest man in all history. Academics and others believe that Sundiata's life may have inspired Disney's *The Lion King* story; he too overcame personal and external challenges to become the savior of his people.

Ibrahima says Sundiata called together this big meeting of all the ethnic groups and clans and introduced the idea of a hierarchy that took root and solidified. In the Western African caste system, clerics and kings stood at the top of the pyramid; farmers and warriors right beneath them; fishermen on the third layer; artisans on the fourth layer; blacksmiths and griots on the fifth; and enslaved people at the bottom. These enslaved people worked in domestic households, served in armies, made goods as craftspeople, performed at the royal court, acted as traders. Their servitude took many forms.

Slavery was a malleable and ever changing institution. And people everywhere practiced it: the Greeks, Romans, Aztec, Chinese, East Indians, Vikings, Polish, Russians, Koreans, Japanese, Maya, First Nations of Canada...and on and on. This practice has been a constant of the human race for over 10,000 years.

Some people would sell themselves into slavery because they needed food and shelter. Others worked off debts or tried to avoid imperial taxation by becoming enslaved. Some served as temple slaves to honor their gods. In other cases, the state used slavery to create a local workforce or in law enforcement as a punishment for a crime. But often, enslavement was a tool of war that helped dominate and control the "other."

And it was always up for debate.

"We don't talk about it so much anymore," says Ibrahima. "But we did once. I'll give you an example. One of the most renowned clerics in the 17th century in Timbuktu was Ahmed Baba. You probably heard his name."

I have. Ahmed Baba was a Berber from Mali and known as one of the greatest intellectuals of the 16th and 17th centuries. He was an Islamic scholar who wrote more than 40 books and was considered the great Mujaddid (reviver of religion). The only public library in Timbuktu—the Ahmed Baba Institute, which stores more than 18,000 texts—is named after him.

Ibrahima continues, “Ahmed was Black, but also a Muslim cleric who was captured by the Moroccans. But since he was a Muslim, he could not be enslaved, and so they made him a political prisoner. In his writings later and over the years, he advocated for the abolishment of slavery. But not for everyone. He thought different groups of people were proper for enslavement while some others weren’t.”

Baba argued that Muslims should not be enslaved, but non-Muslims should, based on his interpretations of Islamic law.

“Beyond his arguments, which we shall put to the side, this means that prior to the legitimization of the enslavement of Black Africans, western African societies were debating these issues. I think that’s a very compelling story. It makes the discussion of this issue much more complex than we usually think.”

Interesting. It wasn’t until the 16th century that the idea of chattel slavery emerged. Chattel means personal property: complete and total control and ownership. Europeans built a system where enslaved people—particularly Africans—became chattel and could never escape their enslavement. And they created philosophical, religious, and pseudoscientific beliefs to justify it.

“I say again that we must choose who we want to be in the future,” Ibrahima says, “But we must do it with our eyes wide open, having learned from the past. We must decide if we are a static or an evolving diaspora, and start the conversation from that new place.”

I leave Ibrahima with my thoughts racing.

**AFTER MY CONVERSATION WITH IBRAHIMA** and the interview and photo shoot with his students, I go back to Karima’s house and pull up Mike’s number. Mike is the pastor who invited me to the church

service in Pretoria. I decide I must call Anna. Her words still gnaw at me: this idea of a ghost family.

He gives me her number and we set up a Zoom call.

Maybe our conversation has been on her mind too, because as soon as she joins the call, straight off she says, “I am glad you reached out.”

And then she says this: “Even though I don’t understand all that you go through, a huge part of my heart breaks for you because I know that you are also part of me. And if I could, I would help. But just know that you’re in my mind in a way, and I know your struggle. It’s our struggle too. I’m sorry that you have to go through that...it’s really unfair.”

She takes a breath and says, “And I’m sorry I was so harsh with you in the car.

“Sometimes this thought comes in my head,” she continues. “Maybe we as Black people are stronger than we think. Maybe we are all so much stronger than what we think. And that’s why they want to keep us thinking that we are ‘less than’—because if we do live up to the potential of what has been put within us, we will be more than what they could ever imagine —what we could ever imagine. Together, we would accomplish more than what we could ever think we can. I just want you to know that I believe in us.

“And,” she says. “I believe in you.”

Until she said it, I didn’t know how much I needed to hear this. How much I needed someone who was born on the continent...just one person to speak to me on a soul level...to say out loud that I see you...I feel you...I understand your pain, and I hold you in my heart. To show compassion, because I have/we have felt so lost at times.

Her words are like a balm.

# CHAPTER TEN

I go to South Africa, to Jozi, to AfroPunk.

A light in a gray place.

I need to dance. Find joy in the midst of all the confusion. And do it in a place that forces you to think outside of the box.

AfroPunk.

A bold, revolutionary, alternative festival—a celebration of Black music, Black style, and Black culture on the edge.

We're talking purple hair. Glitter. Silver space boots. Tattoos. Piercings on surprising body parts.

People that make you stare. Music that makes your heart thud and your head nod.

A vibe of camaraderie with people from all over the African diaspora that makes you step out in the rain and mud and reach for the sky as you dance along to DJs spinning the latest South African house tunes.

We're talking communion.

We're talking musical styles from the Xhosa, Zulu...

...from Chicagoans, New Yorkers, Black Brits...

...from the Dirty South, y'all.

Moonchild Sanelly, YoungstaCPT, DJ Black Coffee...Doc Jones, Lonnie, Albie, Kamau, Ken, Ibrahima, Anna, Jaco, Señor Nhogache, Karima...and all the others. Morphing in front of me, taking a hazy shape not yet in focus.

Global Blackness.

Self-definition not based on a location or on who others say you are, but on who you say you are in your own unfettered imagination.

And maybe using music as the foundation. As that baseline. As that through line.

I feel it.

There, under the stars.

I dance alone. I dance with others. I dance with Yemayá, even though I'm far from the sea.

I let myself unfurl and grow bigger until I feel like I encompass the whole field and all the others who are dancing too.

Karima's words ring: *How do you feel when you get on a dance floor in South Africa? Girl, that might be where you belong!*

I stomp my feet.

I swag the right, surf the left, work the middle till it hurts just a little.

I collapse in the mud, rain pouring down around me, water on my cheeks, my eyes closed.

I don't know if it all makes complete sense yet. But I know something is finally rising up inside of me, rather than pulling me down.

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• PART THREE •

# **Ascent**

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# CHAPTER ELEVEN

I fly from Atlanta to San José, the capital city of Costa Rica, then take a tiny prop plane with just five seats to Limón, the biggest city on the southern Caribbean side of the country. I hear the whir of the propellers, which look like you could reach out and twirl them with your fingers, and I see the back of the pilot's head only a few seats in front of me.

It's unnerving.

We fly below the clouds, closer to land than I've ever been on a plane, over giant clusters of trees and lush ribbons of land. I can make out the details of livestock and people on the ground. If I waved to them, they would see me and wave back.

We also fly toward history, toward a rare story of survival.

I pull out my notebook to review my notes in the 30 minutes we'll be airborne. I want to remind myself of the details of this incredible story I learned in whispers and fragments about two slave ships that wrecked in the waters off the coast of the town of Cahuita, just 40 minutes from Limón.

## THIS STORY BEGINS IN DENMARK in December 1708.

On a cold, windy, gray day, the *Christianus Quintus V* and the *Fredericus Quartus IV*—ships belonging to the crown-operated Danish West Indies–Guinea Company—left Copenhagen for Ghana, West Africa. They likely eased steadily from Nyhavn, the town's waterfront, where dozens of ships docked to unload goods, sailors shouted to one another across the wharf, and prostitutes made propositions for easy cash. Their

final destination was St. Thomas, then Denmark's premier colony in the Caribbean.

The *Christianus*, 118 feet in length and 26 feet in width, was named after the Danish king Christian V, who ruled Denmark and Norway from 1670 to 1699. It set sail carrying 2,400 brass manillas (horseshoe-shaped bracelets then used for currency in West Africa), ballast bricks, cloth, metal, weapons, and building materials to repair and enlarge Danish forts abroad. The *Fredericus*, 144 feet in length, was named after King Frederick IV, who reigned after his father from 1699 to 1730. It carried 30 chests of sheets, eight chests of guns, two casks of knives, 522 bars of Norwegian iron, 648 bars of Swedish iron, 19 cases of gifts and curios, and four chests of blue paper to pack the sugar that would accompany them on the return voyage. It also held 25,000 pounds of hard bread, 3,000 pounds of soft bread, and 22 pounds of salted pork. The vessels were armed with 24 cannons each and had a combined crew of 60.

The ships traveled in tandem out into Kattegat Bay, around the northern tip of Denmark, and down past the Netherlands and Belgium through the North Sea. They crossed the English Channel and skirted France and Portugal, past Morocco to the Canary Islands, where the ships safely caught easterly winds to sub-Saharan Africa.

After a restocking stop on one of the islands of Cape Verde, they landed in what is now Accra, Ghana, at Fort Christiansborg in March 1709. The fort stood tall on the coast: a cluster of white buildings on a hill overlooking the water and surrounded by an impressive brick wall. Two flags—colored red to represent war and with white crosses in the middle as symbols of Christianity and peace—flew above to welcome sailors with a comforting symbol of home. The fort was positioned strategically in the middle of the Slave Coast, from Senegal in the north to Equatorial Guinea in the south. The coast had become the biggest market in the world to buy human beings.

Because both ships had made this run before, the crew thought this would be a routine journey. None could have suspected that a year later, the ships would end up in Costa Rica on the ocean floor.

The first indication of problems to come happened in June 1709, just three months after arrival, when the captain of the *Christianus* died in a fire accident on a dinghy. His successor died of fever not long after. The next captain, still in his early 20s, was a sailor who had been raised on the water

since the age of 10 but had never commanded a vessel; he was eager and strong-willed enough to have wrestled the top position away from the other sailors, but he was an inexperienced leader.

Initially, the new captain followed the lead of his predecessors. Both crews had already been up and down the coast trying to outbid their competitors for grain, corn, and palm oil that would serve as food on the next leg of the journey. Hundreds of competing ships must have been docked along the coast at dozens of ports, with small rowboats carrying crews to shore and back, exchanging their manillas for ivory and gold. This was a particularly slow process for the *Fredericus*, *Christianus*, and other ships nearby because they also faced local fighting along the coast of Ghana.

You see, the Ashanti Kingdom had begun expanding explosively in the area. Between 1701 and 1717, Osei Tutu, who would become king, and his priest, Okomfo Anokye, evolved the group from independent chiefdoms scattered across the region into one of the strongest kingdoms that Africa would ever know. Osei Tutu would create a constitution, centralize the military, nationalize the gold mines, and make gold dust the circulating currency. The Ashanti became famous for their wood carvings, furniture, and brightly colored woven cloth called “kente.”

But gold was their major claim to fame. The dense jungles of Ghana were full of gold mines that Tutu took over; soon, the country became known as the Gold Coast and the Ashanti, the “Lords of Gold.” They were just as wealthy, if not more so, as the Dahomey; even peasants wore gold dust as ornamentation on their daily clothing and other possessions. At its peak in the late 1700s, the Ashanti Empire contained more than four million people and controlled hundreds of miles of West African coastline and dense jungle.

But in the summer of 1709, when the *Fredericus* and *Christianus* idled off the coast of Ghana, Tutu was still consolidating his power. Although he had seized the gold mines, he was trying to secure the slave trade routes along Cape Coast and on to Elmina Castle. Tutu’s army busily fought insurgents in the south, policed roads in the east, and established new settlements in the region to strengthen control. The fighting was intense.

For their part, the captains of the *Christianus* and the *Fredericus* struggled to navigate this terrain. It wasn’t until three months after the death

of the original captain of the *Christianus*, in early September, that the first allotment of 24 captives on the *Fredericus* were loaded at the Dutch fortress of Abandze, located about two hours south of Accra.

The *Christianus* had been constructed with four rooms belowdecks: one for material goods and three for human cargo (one for men, one for women and girls, and one for boys). The platforms or benches the Danish built in those three rooms protruded eight feet from the side of the vessel, with no headroom to sit up. Captives would be packed close together, their skin so close that it could rub off with friction from the ship's movement. Above deck, they built a temporary structure above the cargo hold for captives to get fresh air. Records show that this area, and others like it, were often built so that the Africans could be exercised, but also beaten, forced to entertain the sailors, and sexually exploited.

I imagine that soon after being boarded on the *Fredericus*, the 24 captives in the cargo hold devised an escape plan for the next time they would be brought on deck. That day, as one, they twisted and twirled, using feet, hands, fists, and teeth to fight, to get free. They tried to shatter their shackles. They tried to jump overboard and swim for home. But the Danish crew had guns.

Boom! A puff of smoke appeared in the air. Boom! A bullet hit a brown body as it jumped. The effort was quashed quickly, and the lead dissenter punished brutally: The crew cut off his hands, decapitated him, and hung his body from the rigging over the next few days to prevent further attempts at mutiny.

Perhaps this firm display of power made the captains feel mighty and more secure. They couldn't know that the seeds had been planted, that this would not be the last rebellion the ship would face—or that it would come from a surprising source.

For the rest of September, the *Christianus* went on to purchase 323 more men, women, and children, many bought from the slave port in Ouidah in Benin and then transported by pirogue to the ship; the *Fredericus* eventually purchased a total of 450 men, women, and children. The ships both had room for more cargo, but as fighting on the ground with Tutu's forces continued to intensify, the competition for captives and supplies among the other European powers became too strong, and the captains

feared more onboard rebellions. Although they hadn't finished stocking food supplies or exchanging all their goods, they decided it was time to go.

They left together on September 24, 1709, almost six months after arriving. They took the southern route down to Guinea and across to the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe to catch the northwesterly winds back up to the Caribbean.

I imagine the Atlantic Ocean then—all the pirates, privateers, imperialists, and colonizers in their massive, 100,000-ton wooden vessels, with masts and sails more than 70 feet high. These tall ships, as they were called, from France, Germany, England, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands, and what were then the British colonies in the Americas, moving like ants over time, one behind the other, connecting the four continents in ways that can never be undone.

The *Christianus* and the *Fredericus* followed the established route from Africa to the Caribbean. But they would not have smooth sailing: They encountered rough seas and came up against inexperienced leadership and poor navigation.

As a result, the ships missed their usual stops for fresh water and food supplies on São Tomé and then again on Prince Island, located northeast of Trinidad. They attempted to sail for Barbados, but more navigation errors and dense fog caused them to sail past it. By this time, they had been at sea for three months without restocking; food had been rationed for the crews and was likely nonexistent for the Africans in the cargo hold. Tempers flared, bellies panged, and the crews didn't know where they were.

They eventually landed on Santa Catalina Island, a Spanish fort 300 miles away from St. Thomas and about 125 miles east of Nicaragua. The crews despaired and huddled together to hatch a new plan. The captains decided not to try for St. Thomas again; instead, they would sail for Portobelo, Panama, where they could sell some of the remaining captives and use the money to acquire supplies.

Fifty-five Africans on the *Christianus* and 80 on the *Fredericus* had died on this journey so far, maybe with iron collars around their necks and shackles around their feet, hopefully their last breaths taken before the sharks who followed the ships could do their work.

On February 14, 1710, after four months on the water and more than a year since leaving Denmark, the two ships approached the land they

thought was Panama. But they encountered another heavy storm, and it pushed them back out to sea. A few weeks later, they spotted land they believed to be Punto Caretto in Nicaragua. Relief billowed in waves from the crews, but so did anger and desperation. They anchored in the bay. Eventually, to their dismay, they discovered they were at Punta Cahuita on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica, 600 miles north of Panama and now 500 miles away from St. Thomas.

The crews had had enough. They confronted the captains, demanding an extra month's pay and that the captive Africans be released so the last bit of food could be divided solely among the crews. When the captains denied their request, the crews threatened mutiny. The captains eventually agreed to release the captive Africans ashore to keep the peace. But it was too late; the crews were no longer satisfied with the captains' concessions. Roaring with righteous indignation, they broke open chests to divide the ships' gold and ivory among themselves. Then they set the *Fredericus Quartus IV* on fire, using a pile of refuse, tar, and pitch. They cut the anchor cable of the *Christianus Quintus V* and let the vessel drift to the reef, watching as it broke in the surf and sunk below the surface.

The now combined crews rowed to shore and hired a nearby English barge to transport them to Panama to be hired out again. They took 22 of the captive Africans with them. The captains, tails tucked between their legs, made their way back to Denmark to face court trials. And the two ships came to a justified end.

Meanwhile, the newly freed Africans, 616 people, stumbled through the water, still shackled, bare feet scraping on rocks, half-running, falling, crawling to shore and into the nearby forest away from the crackling flames and their Danish captors. They ran dazed, determined, mumbling praise to their gods, not knowing where they were going, just thankful for this chance to get as far away as possible.

Records show that about 100 of the Africans freed that day were later recaptured and sold into slavery. Colonists who ran nearby plantations took some of them to Cartago, the colonial capital, for questioning, then sold them at local auctions into slavery. The rest were captured by members of the Miskito Indigenous group on shore and presumably taken to the English protectorate on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua.

The other 516 disappeared into the hills, into oral history and myth.

One legend says that hidden in the trees along the beach that day were members of the Bribrí ethnic group, the main Indigenous group of the area. According to the story, the Bribrí dove into the bay and dragged the captives out of the waves, over the sand, and back into the dense protective rainforest, hiding them away from their captors. Over the years, they say, these Bribrí and those Africans intermixed and became one people—the ancestors of some who live in the towns of Cahuita and Puerto Viejo today.

Many members of the communities say Punta Cahuita has a magical aura. They describe bright lights on the sea on starless nights when no vessels are on the surface, the water moving around like a blender, and music coming from underneath the waves at night. They describe a window opening under the sea to reveal the ribs of a large ship, replete with great walls of chains, rings, and shackles. Some people believe this is just the light of fishermen doing their work. But others say the lights are spirits of those who left treasures on the bottom of the ocean and who come once in a while to remind us of what happened so many centuries ago.

**I TUCK AWAY MY NOTES** when the pilot indicates we are descending. But the richness and possibility of this story stay with me. Perhaps some of the locals are descendants of those who were originally on the boat and will have stories. Perhaps the captives on the boat who were bought in Ouidah could even be related to me. Maybe Ewe tribal members from Benin, who I have decided are ancestors somehow connected to me, are even on these shores. Maybe blood and DNA that I share climb these mountains and swim these seas.

We land on a strip of concrete outside of a small one-story building. I pick up my bag from the tarmac and walk through a metal detector inside and out to a small parking lot.

And there waiting for me near her little white jeep is María Suárez Toro. María is the co-founder of Centro Comunitario de Buceo Embajadores y Embajadoras del Mar, a local nonprofit supporting teen and young adult scuba divers between the ages of 14 and 19. The organization trains them as stewards of the Costa Rican Caribbean Sea, with lessons in underwater archaeology mapping and coral reef restoration. María has also written

several children's books starring a character called Tona Ina ("sea light" in Yoruba) about the lights at the bottom of the sea.

Ken introduced me to María several months ago when I was in Senegal. Since 2014, her teens have been diving and helping archaeologists document what they believe are the *Christianus* and *Fredericus* wreck sites. Ken wants DWP to have a satellite division in Costa Rica, and he wants María's group to be its organizers and administrators. Ken thinks he can help the local kids learn DWP mapping techniques to support their work to document the ships.

María and I had chatted briefly over WhatsApp.

"Ta-rra," she'd said. (It sounded like how Boon-Mee pronounced "Thatta," but with a rolled *r*.) "Come to Costa Rica! Please!"

When I'd asked her why, she'd replied: "*Mira*—Look—people call us recreational divers here in Costa Rica. And we are. We are re-creating diving. We are re-creating the way that kids relate to the ocean. We are re-creating the history of Costa Rica. We are re-creational. You must come and see!"

Damn.

She was right—I did have to go.

And now I finally meet her. María is shorter than me, squatter, with thicker thighs and a handful of short black hair shot through with streaks of gray. She wears a printed caftan and leggings, and looks to be of Spanish or European descent. She's full of taut, intense, and yet quiet energy that infects me. If I didn't already know that she will soon celebrate her 72nd birthday, I would have guessed she was much younger—maybe in her late 50s.

We hop in her car and sweep down the road to Puerto Viejo, another small town right past Cahuita, and María's home.

I hang my head out of her jeep as we head south down Ruta Nacional Primaria 36. I feel the wind on my cheek. I hear howler monkeys hooting in the trees. I smell the salt from the Caribbean Sea.

And I exhale.

I knew I needed to come here: first, because of the opportunity to witness a new type of archaeology emerging—one with the community at the center and young people in the lead.

Second, because Karima and Ibrahima's words—"globally Black"—still wash over me. I haven't identified what started rising inside me on that dance floor in South Africa. All I know is that this isn't just about Africa. And because my ancestors were forcibly distributed around the world—particularly to these shores south of the United States—it means that Latin America and the Caribbean are a part of my history too.

But I also came because, some 15 years earlier, I had visited these shores and fell in love with this place. This is my second time driving down the main road on Costa Rica's southeastern coast; back then, I'd spent most of my time in Puerto Viejo. It soothed something in my spirit that I didn't even know needed attention.

It also left questions.

Perhaps this would be the perfect time to find answers to questions of the past and those bubbling in the present.

I don't quite want to admit it out loud yet, but I also wonder if this is the place where I will feel the sense of belonging that I didn't feel in Africa and don't feel in the United States...if this is the place I might want to call home.

**LATER, I FEEL GRITTY IN** María's almost tree house. It's not really a tree house but is located up in the hills: a one-story house on pillars, built from scratch with local wood and the help of her neighbors. It's surrounded by trees, tall plants, and greenery and runs on rainwater and solar energy. I sit on María's deck as the sun goes down, eating fried plantains like the ones I ate at Karima's house. But these are covered in a delicious, soft white pungent cheese. Although I'm here to discover stories of this community searching for their history in the depths of the sea, I realize I must pay homage to the area first.

I take a deep breath because my heart is so full of the towns of Cahuita and Puerto Viejo. They sit in a straight line from each other, only about a 20-minute drive apart, with much daily traffic back and forth between the two.

Both places are deeply connected. Cahuita town is tiny, only about a mile and a half from one end to the other, with a smattering of shops and

restaurants. It's a point of entry to Cahuita National Park, where the ships went down, and has a population of about 8,000. Puerto Viejo, on the other hand, though also a small town, pulsates with much more energy. It's about eight miles from end to end, and according to the local chamber of commerce, counts about 30,000 people from 54 different nationalities as residents.

Both places brim with locals too: Afros (that's what they call Black people here), Bribri, European descendants, and mestizos—a mixture of any of the three—who often coexist fluidly, speaking Spanish, English, and/or Creole patois.

As we drove through Puerto Viejo earlier, I saw that the place had matured since I was last here. More people. More businesses. It looked hipper, cooler, with its bars, gluten-free bakeries, and new restaurants along the main road serving up delicious dishes of rice and beans with coconut milk, grilled fish with jerk sauce, and *mariscos* soup full of delicacies from the sea. On one side of the main road were surfers, protected coral reefs, swimmers, snorkelers, and fishermen; farmers, livestock, and thick jungle canopies lined the other side.

I didn't expect the magic to grab me again so quickly, but it does. It wraps me once again in its arms and nestles me close to its bosom.

This place still calls my name.

María has organized a dinner for tomorrow evening so that I can meet the teen divers and their parents. But for now, we sit on her beautiful deck and we talk. I sit cross-legged on the floor while she sits on a bench in front of me. I look up at her as she tells her story, and it feels apropos.

María is Puerto Rican, but she's been in Costa Rica for close to 50 years. I ask her how she came to live here.

"I married a Costa Rican. We were living in San José in the middle of the mountains. But I'm an ocean girl. One night I woke him up at three in the morning, and I said, 'If I don't see the ocean today, I'm going to divorce you.'"

"You didn't!" I say.

She smiles. "I did. And I meant it!"

I grin at her audacity.

"And he believed me because...Well, *mira*, I don't threaten. I just advise people what is coming," she says, grinning back.

“So he said, ‘OK, get everything ready, and we’re going.’ We left and got to Cahuita National Park that night. And we had to put up a tent because it was so late and nothing else was open. I sat up that night waiting for the sun to come out. And when I saw it—the exuberance I felt! That was 48 years ago. If you think this is a paradise now, imagine it then. You had the monkeys hollering, you had an amazing reef that you could see from the shoreline. You could watch the fish jumping, everything. I woke my husband. And I said, ‘I don’t know where you’re going to live when we retire, but I am going to live here.’”

I laugh out loud.

“We eventually divorced, but I kept my promise to myself and came back here as soon as I retired.”

Her voice is soothing and musical. She speaks like Ken, with her voice rising and falling. It’s a different cadence, though. Ken is like jazz; María is more acoustic guitar, slow and simple with unique punctuations in just the right moments in the story.

I find myself nodding in recognition as she speaks. There is just something about this place. It’s not the most dramatic, or even the most beautiful area of Costa Rica. The northwest has far lovelier white sand beaches, the center is more dramatic with its volcanoes and waterfalls, and the southwest is far wilder. But this area—the Talamanca region—has its environmental wonders too. Named for the Talamanca Range-La Amistad Reserves, a national park extending along the border between Costa Rica and Panama, it has wetlands, forests, and reefs that are mostly protected by the government.

“This area is the richest natural place in the whole of Costa Rica,” María says. “There are no McDonald’s or shopping centers, no movie theaters. The people who lived here originally—the Afros and the Bribri and the Cabécar, a smaller tribe—kept this place pristine. They never asked for more than what nature could give them. So when other people came here back then, they knew that they would have to live lightly on the land. That’s why the culture of this place is so intact.”

And there’s the rub. What the Talamanca region has that the others don’t—what draws me toward it—is its strong sense of Afro and Indigenous culture, and particularly its Afro culture. There is an effortless weave of Blackness here that you don’t find anywhere else in the country.

For starters, Puerto Viejo's cultural center is named the Casa de la Cultura Marcus Garvey, after the Jamaican political activist and Pan-Africanist. Garvey moved to Costa Rica in 1910 at age 21. He stayed with his uncle, who found him a job as timekeeper on a banana plantation. There, he witnessed horrific working conditions for Caribbean immigrants and started a provocative journal to inform outsiders of their plight and to spread a message of collectivity and self-determination among workers.

But it didn't catch on. White colonists burned down his office, and many of his fellow Afros just didn't get his message. In 1911, he left to visit Nicaragua, Panama, and Guatemala, where he would note the similarly appalling conditions for Caribbean immigrants who had arrived there searching for work on local infrastructure projects and for transnational fruit companies. Garvey's findings gave him fodder in 1914 to found the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League. Although he was not popular in Costa Rica in the early 1900s, his legacy a century later has come to serve as a symbol of resistance against cultural erasure in Limón Province.

And that's not all. Since the 1980s, the Afros on this coast have been celebrating Dia del Negro y la Cultura Afrocostarricense (Day of the Black Person and Afro-Costa Rican Culture). Every year on August 31, they host parades with music, family activities, food tastings, and poetry readings to promote the cultural contributions of Costa Rican Afro people.

Even the food holds the trace of African culture—jerk chicken, meat patties, plantains, and sorrel, which is called *bissap* in West Africa, for instance.

I love it.

But I'm puzzled about María. How did a desire to live lightly on the land and see the sun rise every morning turn into an organization for some 25 teen divers documenting slave shipwrecks? After all, this is not her direct history. How did she get from there to here?

"Well, when I came here, as I said, I was retired. In my life, I had been a human rights activist, a journalist, a professor, a community organizer, and a fisherwoman. But all I wanted to do was to be a fisherwoman again. I had a little boat; I just wanted to spend every day on the water. My neighbor, who is like a son to me, was a fisherman too. I said, 'Mira, I have a boat, and you have a motor. So let's fish together.'"

They did, and over time she got more involved with the community association that supports the local fisherpeople. She discovered that the association wanted to pass down their fishing traditions to the younger generation. But the young people no longer seemed interested in learning about this heritage and seemed to be struggling.

Though Talamanca is rich in nature, biodiversity, and culture, it is considered the poorest region in the country, with more than a third of the local population unemployed or underemployed and largely marginalized with limited access to health care, education, and infrastructure.

It wasn't always this dire. But in 1979, cacao trees in Costa Rica became infected with a fast-spreading fungal disease that wiped out more than 80 percent of them. Because cacao was a leading export, it devastated the industry. And Talamanca farmers were responsible for 95 percent of its production. Farmers were forced to clear their land and raise cattle, or cut trees for timber, or rely on other methods to produce short-cycle cash crops, all of which contributed to widespread deforestation. Families with hectares of land passed down to them through generations began selling it to survive.

Because the local university mainly offered technical degrees, and advanced studies were only available in the north or abroad, young people began migrating away in search of greater opportunity. Into this vacuum came the drug trade, sweeping up vulnerable young people who had been left behind. For many, their family fishing traditions were no longer the priority.

"So I convinced the association to let me try an intervention," María says. "A simple one. Every year, they host a lionfish tournament. Lionfish are an aggressively invasive species; they are huge pests and cause many problems."

One lionfish alone can reduce the density of young fish in a reef by as much as 79 percent and cause indirect damage to coral reefs, seagrass, and mangroves, so the lionfish tournament is a community effort to rebalance the marine ecosystem. The association gives participants T-shirts, a pole spear, and containers, along with a fueled boat and a captain.

"I got a boat and a captain and entered into a lionfish tournament with four of the kids," María says. "And they loved it!" She sweeps her hands up. "*Mira*, we didn't get one lionfish! But we won an award for the effort. And then the seed was planted.

“I asked the kids what they wanted to do next. Anything. The only rule was that it had to be something related to the water. I figured we had to get them engaged in the water on their own terms. We couldn’t just do it the way we’d done it in the past.”

She shrugs. “And the kids said they wanted to scuba dive.”

So María begged and borrowed equipment, then convinced the only Afro certified diver in the area to train the kids, who were all around the age of 13 or 14—for free.

“When I saw those kids coming out of the water after and the spark in their eyes,” she says, clasping her hands together, “I said, ‘This is it.’”

The night has gotten dark. María leans closer and I can see her eyes shining behind her glasses.

“Tara.” I hear Ta-rraaa with an intense declaration on the last syllable this time that tells me this is an important revelation.

“I said, ‘This is what I’m going to do for the rest of my life. Because the spark in their eyes is the possibility.’”

She shakes her head. “I remember one of the kids, Roger, saying, ‘I have never seen those reefs in my whole life!’ He’s been swimming since he was three, Tara! He said, ‘This is where I fish to bring food to my family, but being able to stay under the water is so different. I didn’t want to come out.’”

María and the association decided to start a school of diving for teens that would also focus on ocean conservation. More adults became involved, and the community grew to 15 teen and adult divers. But María soon realized that not everyone was going to want or even be able to dive.

So she started looking around for other ideas. Eventually, she came across a paper, published by two American archaeologists in the Society for Historical Archaeology, revealing the possibility that two slave shipwrecks existed in Cahuita National Park. It piqued her interest. Centering the school around this work could be a unique way to honor the kids’ interest in scuba diving and help deepen the community’s sense of its own history, while imparting them with a transferable skill set for future opportunities.

The next day she called the archaeologists and invited them to come to do an expedition and to help train the kids in their archaeological techniques. Because, well, why not? But she clarifies that she didn’t make

this request naively, and that she didn't do it without the community's consent and participation.

"Oh no," she says and shakes her head, her black strands shining under the solar lamps that have flickered on. "I made sure that the archaeologists came under a memorandum of understanding. I wanted to be sure they understood they were coming to work with us. Under *our* invitation."

I ask why she thought that was so necessary.

"*Mira*, I am a journalist, and I have worked in the U.S. I have also worked in academia. And I have learned my lesson. This memorandum was about negotiating dynamics—the dynamics of power. I said these archaeologists could come with their students. But they could not come to just do their own thing. They would recognize the community's stewardship!"

"I reminded the community that we know what we're talking about," she says, her lips thinned into a straight line. "To trust our instincts. So we framed the memo in such a way that the archaeologists would need to center their work around creating local capacities. And all who came here have been great about that and trained us through the Nautical Archaeology Society."

This is what intrigued me about María's work from the start: public archaeology, a newer discipline that puts the community at the center of the scientific work. It's a branch that has not gained widespread acceptance, mostly because archaeology sits firmly within a traditional academic framework that is often rigid, fragmented, slow to change, and deeply entrenched in colonialism.

In the past, archaeologists—often from the United States and Europe and often White and male—typically parachuted into "other" communities and determined the story for that community. They often prioritized stories and historical characters familiar to them, highlighting European and White American contributions over their local or marginalized counterparts. These archaeologists often concluded that the most valuable artifacts of the community belonged in museums in the United States and Europe, believing they should not be kept where they were found, because local people would steal them or not exhibit them properly.

Today, many "othered" nations, including Benin, are calling for their artifacts to be returned and often face a paternalistic blowback from

European and American museum representatives. So to see a rural community in Costa Rica determining the rules of engagement and owning their power is extraordinary and instructive.

María says, “The real problem is that in Western culture, science is seen as separate from ancestral knowledge. Archaeology is about objects, but it’s also about culture. And culture is not just about objects; it’s about the stewardship of the community. So when you integrate the objects with the cultural dimension, it takes the archaeological work to its deepest level. And that’s what is happening here in our community: that integration.”

She smiles, a glint in her eye. “We are very sophisticated. And we do not take shit,” she declares. “We struggle for what we believe in. And we have developed a savviness about doing it. We don’t have scholarly adults in the field here, but our people are very wise. They can read people, they can read nature, they can read relationships. They can read everything, even if they don’t read books.

“We are not trying to sideline the scientists. It’s not about that either,” María explains. “We assure professional scientists that when we bring them in from the outside, we will be assistants in the technical work and learn from them.” She shakes her head. “But we let them know that we are the stewards of the overall process.”

With that, I leave María on the deck. I’m tired now. It has been a long day.

I heat up a big pot of water on the two-burner stove in the little kitchenette, pour it into a big bucket, and take it into the bathroom for a quick rinse using the metal dippers in the shower stall. It’s a different way for me to bathe, but I feel refreshed—and like I’m living lightly on the land of the ancestors too.

I close the door of her spare bedroom, put on a clean T-shirt, and lie down on the twin bed nestled beneath a window with a long screen to keep out mosquitoes. I close my eyes and contemplate this daring countermove by the community as the night’s sounds build in rhythm.

But I also think about María, this 72-year-old Puerto Rican who has managed to find a home in Costa Rica. Also childless, single, and living on her own, she has managed to burrow into this community like a vole and to build a nest. María was an outsider. But she became an insider. She claimed this place, and they claimed her back. And now she belongs.

She has found her home.

I wonder...again, a flicker of hope behind my eyelids...what if...what if...I could find the same here?

I hear crickets and cicadas, the calls of frogs and night birds. And I'm lulled to sleep by their song.

**A LONG WOODEN TABLE WITH** a blue fish-patterned tablecloth sits in the middle of a small outdoor neighborhood restaurant. And a huge pot of *rondón*—a Jamaican stew made with garlic, onion, tomatoes, hot peppers, coconut milk, yams or plantains, spices, and leftover fish—rests on top. The name is a variation of the word “rundown.” Although there are different interpretations of the name’s origin, most say it refers to the fish being cooked until it falls apart, or “runs down.” It’s one of the most popular dishes here, and I’ve been looking forward to trying it.

About 20 of us altogether—six kids and their guardians, plus me and María—all line up with our bowls to receive scoops of stew and a plate of rice from Ms. Elena, the owner and our chef for the night. Ms. Elena is famous throughout the community for her good cooking, particularly for her take on *rondón*. After our bowls are filled, we settle in wooden chairs at an adjoining table with a pink-and-red flower-printed tablecloth.

I look around. Banners emblazoned with the words CENTRO COMUNITARIO DE BUCEO EMBAJADORES/AS DEL MAR hang on the wooden screens that protect us from mosquitoes; vases of flowers sit on the other 10 or so tables in the space. I’m so touched that María and her team pulled this dinner together for me and even convinced Ms. Elena to cook.

The kids, who are now between the ages of 16 and 19, are a bit shy, but polite. They smile at me but cluster together to catch up among themselves. They’re a mix of cultures—Afro, Bribri, and European-descended—and skin colors, with complexions that span from beige to dark brown.

As we dig into the stew (which is as delicious as it looks), the teens introduce themselves—Yara, Roger, Salvador, Sangye, Pete, Esteban, and Kevin—mainly speaking in Spanish with María translating in my ear. I get to know them each over the next week. But for now, I learn that Pete, Esteban, and Kevin are cousins—part of the Brown family, which I hear

includes some 200 people in the area with Jamaican and Bribí roots. Stories passed down in the dark over campfires through the years say that the first Brown ancestor in these parts may have been on a slave ship. But a disappearing line of breadcrumbs has made the trail go lukewarm and now it's mainly conjecture. The family thinks that their Jamaican ancestors, who originally came from West Africa, may have mixed with the descendants of the Africans who escaped from the ships and ran into the Bribí highlands. The family hopes that research from the slave ships will provide more answers.

Sangye and Salvador are best friends. Sangye is of Asian, African, Spanish, and Costa Rican ancestry. He's a surfer and a beach volleyball player who spends a lot of time in the sand and waves. Disarming, with a quick smile, he likes to say "yo" and "like" and "you know" a lot. His mother, Gloriana, who is Costa Rican, is one of the coordinators of Centro, along with María.

Salvador is of Croatian and Indigenous Costa Rican ancestry; his father owns one of the most popular hotels in Puerto Viejo. He's a big bear of a kid, at least six foot two, quiet and thoughtful with an aura of kindness about him. I think he'll break someone's heart one day.

Then, there is Roger, who is of Afro and Bribí descent. He's the teen María said was astonished by the first scuba dive. He wears a little diamond stud in his ear, is stout, and has a deep set of dimples that he flashes often. He and Esteban are close friends.

And finally, Yara, the only girl, is of Jamaican and Costa Rican ancestry, and is here with her mother, Gaia, who is so proud of her daughter. Gaia wanted to be a marine biologist when she was Yara's age but got waylaid by life. She loves that her daughter is learning to dive and is planning to take the course herself next year so that she can join Yara.

They're all different. But what they have in common is that they are the descendants of the fisherpeople who love the water and want their children to love it too.

Most leave after dinner, but Pete and his grandmother, Irma, his aunt Sonia, and Sangye and Salvador sit with me and just talk.

I want to know why they're doing this, why they're so passionate about this work that they have stuck with it for close to four years now—a lifetime in teen years.

Pete is smaller in stature than all of them. I hear he used to be quite shy but has gained a lot of confidence because of this work. He's the most changed, María whispered to me earlier during introductions. Now, he partners with Roger on a social venture supported by Centro called the Puerto Viejo Old Town Tour. He and Roger guide visitors around town and conduct short snorkel excursions, providing a running commentary about the town's historic and underwater archaeological sites.

Pete speaks in a clear voice, with Salvador translating for me this time. "Since I was five years old, I've been going fishing with my cousins and my friends on the seashore. But to know you can breathe underwater and you can learn about sunken ships...the first time I dived, I felt like I was coming out of my heart."

Pete strongly believes that he might be descended from the West Africans on those ships. "I really want to know the history of what happened. I want to know how these ships may be connected to me."

The legend of the ships existed in the community long before Centro and the archaeologists began this work. I'd heard about a man named William Smith—"Old Smith," as he was known. Born in Panama, he's considered the founder of Cahuita. He had a reputation as a frisky, bold, English-speaking Afro man who traversed miles and miles of the Central American jungle to settle in Cahuita. He built a thatched-roof house in a grove of lime trees that ran right to the seashore and planted coconuts, yams, cassavas, plantains, and flower gardens. He also became pretty friendly with quite a few local Bribí women, ultimately fathering 52 children.

According to legends, Smith and his large family lived in 15 "pretty houses," making a living by extracting rubber and fishing. They say he was the one who found the two wrecks on the north side of Cahuita Point, and that he often dove them with his grandson Selles Johnson, who was born in 1894. Selles told stories, also passed down over the years, about finding all sorts of objects, including a large cannon, on the seabed.

I wonder why, if the community knew about these wrecks already, is their rediscovery making such a big impact today?

"But we didn't know!" says Sonia. She's not only Pete's aunt, but also his guardian, and has raised him since he was young. She has watched him blossom in Centro, and his transformation has made her even more

interested in this work. She reminds me of Karima and Gisela from Mozambique—an effortlessly pretty, brown-skinned girl with braids and a soft voice. “The elders knew, but they didn’t share the stories!”

I try to clarify. So it wasn’t until the kids started diving the wrecks that the elders’ memories cracked open and long-held stories began to pour forth?

“Yes! The kids started asking questions of the elders,” she says. “They would say, ‘Oh, yeah, in my house, we have a part of the ship.’ Or ‘My grandfather found this piece on the beach.’ We were like, ‘What??! How did this happen?’”

“It got all of us thinking, you know?” Sangye says. “Of course, in school, they taught us about Christopher Columbus, and the story of his discovery of Costa Rica. But about these ships? Nada. The school didn’t teach us any of this.”

“But I did research, and it got, you know, personal real quick,” says Sangye, warming to the tale. “I started talking to my maternal grandfather, and he told me that there is like this mulatta slave woman in our family tree! I guess the daughter of the governor of Cartago had three slaves back in the 1700s, and before she died she asked her husband to free the men and sell the woman. But her husband married the mulatta instead, and they had a child. And guess what? That child’s last name was Madriz. My grandfather’s grandfather’s last name was Madriz. It’s wild!”

He shakes his head. “I never knew.”

“All of this makes me ask myself a question,” adds Sonia quietly. “I say to myself, ‘Well, who I am?’ And I think that is the most beautiful question anybody can ask of themselves.”

Who I am? Who am I? Where do I belong? Where are my roots? I feel relieved to know I’m not the only one turned upside down by the discovery of slave shipwrecks. I don’t say anything. But the yearning to find that belonging here, with these people as my neighbors and friends, blossoms.

I turn to Salvador, wanting to bring him into the conversation. “But you don’t trace your ancestry to Africa. Why is it so important for you to be involved?”

Salvador is thoughtful. “I remember the moment when I first felt really connected to the work. It was when we went to Cahuita to tell the community there what we found. Everyone came; and they told us they

were so proud of what we were doing, and that they appreciated us. And that made me feel good. And then it's all my friends too: This is their history. It feels nice to be able to help my friends find their identity."

"I want to be proud to be Afro-Costa Rican," says Pete. "I want more people here to support this project, because this is the root of many of us. And that means this work is part of us all."

"We live along the coast of Puerto Viejo," says Irma, grandmother to Pete, Esteban, and Kevin. She is of Jamaican ancestry but was raised by the Bribrí in the hills. She married a Bribrí man and raised her children, including Sonia, there too. "We love the ocean. And my grandchildren love this project. What they are finding is so interesting. And I think part of my blood may have been coming on those ships." She sighs. "I am so proud of all of them."

I smile. I think I get it now. I wonder what they have been finding underwater.

A mix of voices tell me:

"A cannon."

"Pipes."

"Bricks. Lots of bricks."

"An anchor."

"Teapots."

Then I learn that Sangye found the smoking gun: the biggest clue of them all. He flips his hair out of his eyes, grins, and tells me a story he has clearly told many times before.

"The water was clear that day. It was, like, amazing and beautiful. Like you could see the sunlight on the coral, you know. Everything was alive with a lot of colors.

"But we had been diving for a really long time that day. And I was so, like, tired. I closed my eyes; I was trying not to fall asleep in the water. I was just feeling the water, floating.

"Then, suddenly, I saw something out of the corner of my eye. It was brown, with some sand on it. And I thought it was something like glass—from a beer bottle. I don't know. It felt important. So I took it and went up with it."

Wait: Aren't we supposed to leave artifacts where they are found?

He shrugs. “Yes, you learn that you don’t touch artifacts on the bottom. You don’t pick things up because it can, like, it can damage history. Or you can miss something or you can break it. So before I picked it up, I called over the professional archaeologists and took the GPS position. I snapped pictures of it, measured it. I did all the mapping work. I got all the information because I planned to put it back. But I wanted to see what it was first.”

So what was it?

“It was an old blown bottle seal. It had a letter and logo on it. The logo was like a crown and the letter was popping out. It was made of glass. And concave. I hadn’t seen anything like it before.”

“Salva was my buddy,” Sangye says, nodding to Salvador. “When I got out, I showed it to him. I’m like, ‘Look. Yo, look what I found. What do you think this is?’”

Salvador smiles as he remembers too. “I didn’t actually know. I said it could be something. And if it is, I think you just found the missing piece!”

They both laugh and Sangye continues, “Yeah, he was like, ‘Man, if that’s it, like, you have it all. Like you’re the chosen one. Right?!’ We’re all a little competitive when we dive. Just a bit of friendly competition; everybody wants to find something important. And I had a feeling. I then told my mom, told María. They were impressed. They said maybe it might be the same age that the boat was. I took it to the archaeologists, and they were also impressed.”

After some investigation, the archaeologists determined that the bottle seal did indeed date after the 1700s. So it was not the smoking gun Sangye had hoped for. But it was the first time the team felt they were close to their hypothesis, to scientifically confirming that artifacts from these wrecks matched the story of the *Christianus* and the *Fredericus*.

The boys rightly gave themselves bragging rights from then on.

“Yeah, the archaeologists said, ‘Wow, you guys find things that are not even the things we would think to look for!’” says Salvador.

“Now, we have articles on the internet that tell the story of what we have done,” Sangye says. “We have Facebook posts, you know. And there is a book that tells all the things. I saw my name in it, saying how I found the bottle seal. And I’m like, ‘Oh, hell yeah, that’s my thing. A whole page for

me in a book that other people will read?” He grins, “I don’t know, I feel pretty excited and happy about it.”

Dinner ends, and the group bids me goodbye. María and I hop in her little jeep to head back to her tree house.

As we drive, I share with María how wonderful it was to see the pride the kids have around the work, and to hear Sangye’s words about his appearance in a book.

“*Mira*,” says María. “This was also a part of the negotiation with the archaeologists. We were clear they couldn’t author papers that don’t mention our contributions. We had to negotiate authorship because it is critically important for the kids to appear in what they do. You see the impact on Sangye, the pride. I wanted to make sure that when they lift things from the bottom of the ocean, they get the credit.”

She adds: “It matters. And the archaeologists who came got it. They were actually great about this.”

**ABOUT 1,000 FEET OUT AND** 30 feet straight down in Cahuita National Park, the two wrecks that are likely the *Christianus Quintus V* and the *Fredericus Quartus IV* lie submerged in fractured pieces. I gear up to dive the site: fins on my feet, mask on my face, borrowed BCD and tank on my back.

I’m on a boat with María and all the kids, about to roll backward in the water. But I’m nervous. As I look out over the ocean, I flash back to my last visit and remember that I have unfinished business here with Yemayá. I owe a debt to her on this side of the world.

I had first come here in 2005, almost to the day, broken and dispirited, to heal and recover my confidence in myself.

The magazine I’d started had crashed and burned—ironically almost exactly 10 years before the nonprofit that I’d moved to D.C. to recover from had also crashed and burned. We’d managed to get actresses Lisa Bonet and Cree Summer for our first cover; we’d scored an interview with former prime minister Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan before she was assassinated; we sold ads to hotel chains and small businesses; we were printing 25,000

copies each print run and had even secured distribution in all the major bookstores in the United States and Canada.

But it didn't matter. Five issues later, I was more than \$120,000 in debt and my team had grown disillusioned with me. I had sunk all my money, including my savings and my 401(k) earnings, into this venture. I had borrowed from my family, taken out a loan with a high interest rate, put a second mortgage on my loft in Atlanta, even sold my car to pay salaries. But it wasn't enough.

I remembered the day—June 15, 2005, a Tuesday—when I called it. Soon after, I was dodging bill collection agents who threatened me daily with legal action.

I was so tired back then. Depressed, gaining weight, sleeping late, not leaving my apartment for days. I felt like such a failure. My mother and my boyfriend at the time became concerned and conspired together to send me away for a month, using frequent-flier miles and savings. They knew I needed time and space alone to stitch myself back together. They said I could go anywhere I chose, and that they would help me get there.

I chose Costa Rica by chance. I was sitting in the café of a Barnes & Noble bookstore with a messy stack of Lonely Planet and Frommer's travel guides on my table and a dazed look on my face. I had no idea where to go. But then a random woman passing by with her coffee in hand paused, glanced at the titles, and said in an offhand manner that I should really go to Costa Rica.

I took that as a sign from the universe and reserved my ticket that night.

The next day I booked myself into a yoga retreat on the Caribbean side of the country because the program sounded wonderful—not because I knew anything about the area. And I went.

The retreat included sparsely furnished huts in the jungle, yoga classes three times a day, wholesome meals, and so much quiet. After seven days of writing in my journal, practicing my breathing, and detoxing my body, I felt calmer. On a whim my last day, I took the bus south to Puerto Viejo, the nearest town, only about 20 minutes away. I'd never heard of it, but the retreat owners said it would be a good place to eat delicious food and visit the beach.

I thought I'd stay a few days before heading to the northwest of the country, which all the guidebooks said was so beautiful.

So I traveled by bus down the same two-lane paved road that María and I would later drive.

I arrived in the small center of Puerto Viejo. And I fell in love with it immediately.

Dancehall reggae pumped from the speakers of a few restaurants along the main stretch. Long locs framed the faces of brown-skinned fishermen and shop owners. The beach stretched miles down the coast. People spoke English and greeted me warmly. I felt like I'd stepped into paradise.

On my first day, I'd found a cheap cluster of small huts right across the street from the beach. All the hotels back then were one-story affairs with varying degrees of finishes to fit different budgets. All were situated on the jungle side of the road, due to a law that restricted development on the beach to grant access to all. In some spots, you had to walk through thick canopies of trees to reach the ocean from the road, but you could always access it.

Just a few trees and sand were in front of the hotel. I could see the beach clearly from the hotel's snack bar, where I sat each day nursing fresh mango juice and writing in my journal. It was technically a swimming beach, but sometimes it had rolling waves that were big enough for surfers to catch.

I could hear her talking all day long, and especially at night. Yemayá. She was loud then, her whispers rising in tempo and intensity in the dark.

I didn't mind it so much during the day. It was soothing to sit at the bar or on the sand and listen, or to stand waist-deep and jump with the waves as they rolled over me. But at night, her voice triggered thoughts of monsters and violence, scaring me. Now, I wonder if those thoughts were unconscious fears of the Atlantic and her buried African history—if they foreshadowed what I would be choosing to face today.

It seems almost ludicrous for me to ever have been afraid of the ocean. I had always loved the water but didn't really know anything about her, other than the moments during vacations, where I would wade out waist-deep or hang by the shore. I swam mainly in pools in Atlanta.

When I was five years old, I actually taught myself to swim in the pool in front of our apartment on Wells Drive. I remember that glorious day in summer: my mom in her floppy straw hat and patterned one-piece blue swimsuit reading a magazine on a plastic lounge chair, her long legs on display; me in a solid blue suit with a cutout on one side, deliriously happy,

laughing, splashing, shouting, and jumping in and out of the water with my plastic donut.

It was just the two of us that day, and my mom was not paying much attention to me because she was absorbed in her magazine. I was running in the shallow end of the pool, forcing myself through the pressure of the water one foot in front of the other like I was a marathoner.

On a return jog, I stopped in the middle, jumped up high in the water, and tried to force myself below the surface while holding my breath, cheeks puffed all the way out. I wanted to sit on the bottom. I tried again and again, but the pressure kept bringing me back up. Frustrated, I held my breath as long as I could the next time I went down, moving my arms around to show the water who was boss. But surprisingly, my feet came up, and suddenly, I was moving through the water. I peeked my head above the surface to take a breath but kept moving my arms and feet. And I realized I was swimming. I remember shouting up at my mom. “Look, look, Mama! I can swim! I can swim!”

She stood up and clapped in delight. She still held herself with the grace she’d had as the homecoming queen of her college class back in the 1960s. I didn’t get a lot of time to interact with her most days, because she was so busy working; when she got home, she was often tired and would fall asleep on the couch. I craved her attention, though, and now she was finally giving it to me. She didn’t join me because she could not swim, but she sat on the side and put her legs in the water. She asked me to show her again, and I did so, happily. She watched me scuttle back and forth across the pool for the rest of the afternoon. Thus began my love of water.

But the ocean—that was a whole other thing.

**IN MY AFTERNOON JAUNTS ON** the beach in Puerto Viejo, I’d seen a swimmer in a wet suit, doing the front crawl each day, going from one edge of the peninsula to the other, back and forth. He must have put in at least two miles of exercise each time, which is a lot in swimming terms. When he came to shore, he looked wrung out but content. I started to envision myself swimming like him early in the morning.

It took a few days to work up my courage. I was still feeling so down and very much like a failure. But finally, on my next to last day in town, I decided to try. I didn't need to swim as long as he did or go as far out. But I wanted to challenge myself to do something I'd never done before. I wanted a win under my belt during this trip.

I woke up at 6:00 a.m. It was still dark. I stared at the ceiling in my hut till 6:30 and watched the light move across my room. Then I put on my swimsuit—a black one-piece and swim socks. I grabbed my goggles and swim cap, and wrapped a beach towel the property provided around my waist.

I walked across the street to the ocean.

No one else was on the beach then. It was just me. I dropped the towel on the sand, walked over, and put my toes in the water. The water was warm and felt good. I waded out till my ankles were covered.

I felt a gentle pull, an invitation to go farther.

I waded out till the water hit my waist. The pull was stronger and dragged me forward.

I checked around again, but no one else was in sight. My breath came a little faster.

Birds swooped around me. They were my company. Herons, plovers, pelicans, sandpipers.

The water lapped around my waist. I closed my eyes. The temperature was perfect—about 80 degrees.

I willed myself to go forward, bend over, slip down and get my hair wet.

But when I tried to take another step, I couldn't get my feet to move again. They'd planted themselves.

I didn't think it was that deep a bit farther out. But I couldn't get rid of the image of waves pulling me all the way out to sea from my mind. Of the power of this vast water body subsuming me, bending me to its will. Of riptides forcing me farther and farther out. Of currents ensnaring me and my arms tiring. Even of sharks nibbling on my bones and no one knowing what happened to the Black American chick who came to Costa Rica to mend.

That's how vast and beautiful and dangerous the ocean looked to me that day; that's how it felt as the pull dragged me a few steps farther, chest-deep now. Yemayá was wild here. She looked gentle closer to shore, but she

wasn't. She was naughty, and she tugged like that friend who dares you to do something you know you shouldn't but somehow talks you into it anyway.

But I couldn't do it.

I turned around and walked out of the water.

Another person was on the beach by then. Perhaps the swimmer. I walked in the opposite direction with my head hung down.

I felt so disappointed in myself: another failure to add to the list.

I left Puerto Viejo that next day as planned and traveled around more of Costa Rica, to see the northwest and to spend some time in San José. And eventually, I felt ready to face the problems back home. The time away helped me develop a renewed courage to deal with my creditors and try to resolve the situation.

But as I traveled, I stayed away from the ocean. A fear of Yemayá's wild side had taken hold of me. I was afraid to go deep, afraid that she would sweep me away so completely that I would never find myself again.

It wasn't until I met Ken and the DWP divers in 2017 that I approached her again. Their mission overrode my fears, and I found a way to connect with her in the depths of the waters in Asia.

**AND NOW I'M BACK ON** this side of the world. And it's time to redeem myself with her here in Costa Rica.

I do a back roll into the water.

I descend.

The water is murky blue and green. It feels warm against my skin. Schools of fish swim by.

Sangye is right. The sunlight lights up the corals, with dusty blues, greens, and pinks surrounding me. *It is* amazing. *It is* beautiful.

I exhale and descend farther.

Then I see it.

The outline of an anchor, partially submerged on the sandy ocean floor.

I peer into the depths where the hull of a ship purportedly rests and see other vague outlines. Bricks were often used to offset the weight of human beings in cargo holds.

It's all hard to see—you really do need eagle eyes—but it doesn't matter. I'm amazed to be diving on an archaeological site, an open-air museum anyone could access if they knew to look. Finally. After being thwarted in South Africa and Senegal, after so many months of trying, I'm finally diving the site of a slave shipwreck.

I remember Kamau's feeling of sadness with the *São José*. And I marvel because I feel nothing but joy and power beneath the surface. Maybe it's different here for me because the majority of these ancestors survived. On the bottom of the ocean, I feel agency instead of sorrow. I feel like I'm part of the story being told. I'm so proud to have come to help resurrect this legend from almost three hundred years ago.

I think of the kids here. I think of María. Even though I'm not part of the community—yet—I understand their commitment and sacrifice for this work. And I honor them too.

I'm also no longer afraid of Yemayá. I've grown and matured. I can dance with her on the ocean floor. Now she feels like a part of me.

The thought that started in María's spare room begins to grow. I imagine living here, on these shores, with these people, pulling their mission even closer to my heart and communing with Yemayá every day.

I feel light and full of possibility as I climb back onto the boat.

**OVER THE NEXT WEEK, MARÍA** drives me to a number of meetings around Puerto Viejo and Cahuita. She wants me to meet more community members to ensure that I understand the complexity of what they're trying to do.

I'm up for it.

We drive first to Cahuita to meet with Edwin Cyrus, director of La Amistad Caribe Conservation Area. As the conservation officer in charge of the entire Caribbean region in the south of Costa Rica, he oversees Cahuita National Park. Cyrus (who goes by his last name) is tall with a button nose, soft eyes, and a kind expression—in a word, reassuring.

We sit on the patio of a restaurant built with repurposed wood. Conch shells hang from the walls and palm trees surround us; it's peaceful, and Cyrus has a calming voice. I find myself relaxing and listening intently.

He is Afro and from Puerto Limón, and he will tell me what the shipwrecks mean for him. But first, he tells me a fuller story of the community and its relationship to Cahuita National Park.

The park became a nationally protected area in 1978. Before the government swooped in, the area had been owned and maintained by mainly Afro descendants—whose great-grandparents had passed down land to their grandparents, who had passed it down to their parents, who had eventually passed it down to them. But around 1970, the government of Costa Rica decided to claim the area, because it was pristine and in a prime location right along the coastline. The territory they took over included close to 3,000 acres and was filled with animals—including sloths, toucans, vipers, and howler monkeys—and more than 56,000 acres of marine habitat, including a 600-acre reef with more than 30 species of coral and 123 species of fish. With the stroke of a pen, the people born on this land, whose ancestors had been buried in the soil, lost their inheritance.

When the decision was made, the locals were not informed and therefore didn't even know to fight back. Lawmakers in the capital of San José were legally required to put notices of such rulings in the city's newspaper and allow potential dissenters a month to file appeals. If no one objected, the law would be finalized and passed. The lawmakers did this. Most in the small town of Cahuita didn't read San José publications at the time, though. Most didn't speak or read Spanish, as they'd been kept segregated on the Caribbean coast, initially barred from traveling out of the region because of segregation policies. So the law passed quietly. And fortunes were lost in an instant.

The government decided to turn the space into a park and charge high admission fees. The community was furious and rallied in response. It couldn't reverse the decision because the lawmakers had followed the letter of the law. But the people could demand to be part of the governance of the area. After many meetings and visits of ministers and even presidents over the course of 30 years, the community eventually prevailed. Today, locals don't pay park fees, tourist income is invested back into the community, and the park is staffed by community residents.

I see even more why María says the community is savvy. Cyrus tells me that not only the divers but also the people who live here made the decision to center the ships in their community activism. “We are the authorities, and

we decided that this find was of archaeological significance,” says Cyrus. “And that the tourists who come here should not only learn about the biodiversity in the area, but also its history.”

I want more details. Why, I ask again, did these ships become so important to the community? Why did they think these two ships could change the perception of the history of an entire people?

“Most people in Costa Rica think that Black people came here from Jamaica to build the railroads. But that doesn’t hold water. Why are there so many Afro-Bribri who were here before the railroad then? The shipwrecks help bring to light new theories about why this is so,” Cyrus explains.

Right. As Cyrus said, most of the history of Afros in Costa Rica points back to their arrival from the mid to late 1800s, when coffee had become a major export and local officials actively recruited workers from the Caribbean to help build the railway. A railway would make it possible for coffee to pass through the jungle terrain in the highlands to Puerto Limón on the coast. And the transference of Jamaicans, in particular, to the country makes sense. Jamaica is located almost directly perpendicular to Costa Rica; the Papagayo trade winds provide a direct route from the island to Costa Rica’s Caribbean coast. A small number of Jamaican fishermen arrived in the area as early as the 1820s. They stayed in temporary camps during the fishing season, and most returned home. Only a few settled into permanent homes.

In 1872, the first big boatload of 123 workers from Jamaica arrived on a ship called the *Lizzie*; thousands more would arrive over the next 50 years and stay even after the railway was completed. They often took on agricultural work or, like Marcus Garvey, labored on banana plantations.

“I am also personally interested,” Cyrus continues. “My ancestors came here from Barbados and Jamaica to work on the railroad, but I know there was also slavery in Costa Rica. It occurred all throughout Central America and South America. So a lot of Afro-descendant communities come directly from the slavery traffic out of Africa, not just from Jamaica or other places in the Caribbean. Not just to work the railroad.”

“Why is it important for people to understand exactly when Black people first arrived in Costa Rica?” I ask.

“It helps,” Cyrus says in his measured tone, “because then, you don’t consider yourself a migrant in this land. That’s how we are made to feel

here in Costa Rica. Like we are not an essential part of the creation of this place. But Black people were a part of this from the beginning.”

“It’s also about the land, Tara,” adds María. She emphasizes the first syllable this time—TA-rra. “Indigenous land is protected here because they were here first. Everyone knows they were here. It can never be taken away from them. But Afro land has been taken away because they think Afros are migrants only. Proving otherwise means they can’t take it away anymore.”

Cyrus clasps his hands together on the table and leans forward. “There is a lot of misinformation out there; they think we are less than we are. It is believed that the local Afros here do not have the knowledge or the capacity to manage this area on their own. That is another reason why they felt justified to take the land, although the actual evidence says otherwise. It’s a very paternalistic system that we have in Costa Rica. But my hope is that now that we see the tricks and know how to come together, the local people will finally be able to self-govern.”

María also leans forward. “In 2003, the ninth article of the Costa Rican Constitution was changed to say that we don’t have just three governing powers—the judicial, the executive, and the legislative power—but four, now including the sovereign power of the people. It is huge. A change we are trying to make operational.”

“We have a lot of opposition,” Cyrus adds. “It is difficult for us. But we have to keep fighting in order to make a model like this work. Because this is the model that will give us all more opportunity.”

**MARÍA TAKES ME TO MEET** Enrique Joseph, Costa Rica’s presidential commissioner for Afro-descendant affairs, next. We travel to his office, which is up in the hills.

Enrique is younger than Cyrus and filled with a kind of coiled energy. He shakes my hand firmly and then leads me to a conference table, where we sit across from each other.

“My job is to make sure the Afro communities all over Costa Rica have a voice in the local government,” he says. “I walk forward their policies and different issues.”

I ask if the Afro community is the only marginalized one to have representation in the government.

“No,” Enrique answers, “the Indigenous have had it for 10 to 15 years, and the LGBTQ community also has a commissioner.”

“How big is the Afro community?” I ask.

“We were 8 percent of the population. But now, with the new census, we think we’re about 15 percent. The thing is that the younger generations—30 and under—don’t see themselves as African descendants. So it’s sometimes hard to count us that way. They do consider themselves Afro-Caribbean because most of our population has relatives from islands in the Caribbean. Mine are from Trinidad and Tobago. But they don’t make the leap to Africa. I think it would make a big difference if they did, and we could become an important representative political group with opportunities for real economic empowerment.

“If we were in this country from day one, that means we developed it from the very beginning,” he continues. “It means we were there before the current laws and decrees. It means those lands are ours. But now, we are only able to live there because the local government gives us permits.”

I hear the frustration and anger in his voice.

“They take from us the best of our lands—not because we were destroying them, because obviously we were conserving them. The reason it looks so beautiful and so pristine is because the Afro population that lived there had been good stewards of that land this whole time. This happens all over the world with communities like ours, where the government just comes in and takes the land away.”

He’s right. The history behind the most popular national parks in the United States, like Yellowstone, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon, is tainted with a dark legacy of theft, coercion, and violence. The U.S. government took millions of acres of Indigenous land—forcibly removing its Native inhabitants and resettling them elsewhere—and then barred them from ever returning to make way for White settlers and tourists. Work is being done to reclaim those lands, but it’s a slow and fraught process.

I shake my head and blow out my breath.

“So we need to educate the people and let them know that we have rights,” says Enrique. “Not only the Indigenous populations here have rights, but so do we. So we have to create a different connection to our past,

one that helps people see that we are an essential part of this country—that we belong to this country.”

My perception of race in Costa Rica is changing now. The country had always seemed to present such a united front about a seamless mixture of different cultures into a singular Costa Rican identity.

I ask Enrique, “Do you experience racism here as an Afro descendant?”

“Yes,” he replies without hesitation. “I grew up with a lot of teasing about being Black—you know, you smell like a monkey, you look like a monkey. But that is normal: kid stuff. I don’t worry much about that. Even now, as a grown person, when the security guard watches me closely until I leave the supermarket or when the cab won’t stop for me but stops for the lighter-skinned people farther down the street—I can deal with all of that. It gets more serious when you wonder why the area of the country with the most Afro descendants has the highest mortality rate. Or why when Afro descendants commit the same crimes, we get more jail time.”

There it is: the systemic racism that has been so hard for some people to see and understand. The kind people feel most helpless to confront because it’s insidious, buried neatly between policies and age-old laws.

I ask him his thoughts about the need to document the sunken slave ships.

“If María’s research shows that the first Afro descendants came here by the ships, it’s going to change history,” he says with excitement. “It’s going to fertilize and strengthen what we are and how we feel about ourselves. Because we’re very proud of being Afro descendants.” He pauses, reflecting. “But if that happens, we will not only be Afro descendants. We will be Africans direct. And I think that will mean everything.”

**LASTLY, I MEET WITH LAURA** Wilson, a community leader who fought for the self-governance of Cahuita National Park. I want to understand how people who live near the wrecks view this history.

María drops me off in Cahuita. I walk to Laura’s house, cutting through a downtown area with a small grid of mostly empty restaurants and shops to the residential part of town. No one is out; the town feels sleepy compared

with the vibrancy of Puerto Viejo. I find Laura's house and knock on the door. Soon, we're talking in her kitchen.

Laura is small, probably about five foot two. She's in her early 60s, an Afro descendant with roots in Jamaica and Nicaragua. She reminds me of a neighborhood Black auntie from Anytown, U.S.A., with her big glasses and grayish black, straightened hair curved in a swoop in the front and pulled in a knot in the back. Laura has lived in Cahuita for some 50 years and has been married 49. She has four kids, nine grandkids, and two great-grandkids. She's a community leader and an Afro activist focused on women's and girls' rights and culture.

I ask what she felt when she heard about the work the teens were doing to document the slave shipwrecks in the park.

"I had so much feelings," she says.

"Like what?" I ask.

"I felt sad first. I felt like crying. I wondered where those folks went. How were they communicating? I wonder if there were kids, babies. And then I get angry too. Why has this history not been told? I never heard about this, not once. The saddest part to me is that I live in a country that don't know this history, or that pretend they don't know this history. It just makes me so mad."

She agrees with Cyrus, María, and Enrique that it's important for this history to be surfaced.

"It helps us remember...I remember hearing about this town called La Puebla de los Pardos up north in Cartago. *Pardo* means 'brown.' It meant a town full of people who were even browner than me. Who they are? Why there are not more stories about them?"

Slavery existed in Costa Rica from approximately 1502 until it was officially abolished in 1824. I haven't been able to find reliable numbers on just how many Africans were enslaved here, but I've read that most served in domestic households in colonial Cartago. By the 18th century, a large population of Black people lived in the designated "township" of Puebla de los Pardos, right outside of Cartago—just as Laura remembers. The rest worked on cattle ranches in the northwest of the country and on cacao plantations in Limón Province, just an hour or so drive from Cahuita.

Despite the national mythos that enslavement was easier and kinder here—which may or may not be true—what Cyrus, Enrique, and Laura

want most is for the fullness of that history to be shared, not summed up in a paragraph or two. They want names and places...stories of sadness, joy, outrage, drama, horror, beauty...the experiences of 300 years of living and dying in an unchosen land...told. They yearn for this knowing, for this connection to the past. They want to believe that their Afro ancestors and the Africans somehow recognized each other—maybe through music, language, food, traditions, intimate encounters. And they fear the erasure of this history means an erasure of who they are at their core.

I yearn for this knowing and fear this erasure too.

“Some brothers and sisters in the community are angry about this,” Laura continues. “They say they don’t want to be a part of Costa Rica anymore. Some think that we should become our own nation. The Limón Province should secede from Costa Rica, or become a part of Panama instead.”

She sighs. “But I think there is no other place we can go in the world where there won’t be the same issue. They don’t want to accept us. In many places in the world, Black people face this issue of not belonging.”

Not belonging.

I am not the only one.

Because we’re talking about not belonging in the deepest sense possible—not just to a community—but not belonging because of the terrible weight of White superiority we’ve been forced to bear...a weight that has bent us all so crooked that we can no longer stand up straight.

Even here in the seemingly idyllic paradise of Costa Rica.

I ask how the rest of the community has been affected by the ships.

“Well, at first, the community didn’t believe it,” she says with a sigh. “Some were suspicious of María. They thought, well, María is coming from the outside and she is not an Afro-descendant woman.”

“What?”

“Some people believed she was making money off the work,” says Laura. “They say that not even 20 percent of the kids she is working with are Black, and so they frown and say, why is that?”

“Oh.” I feel my heart sink a little in the face of such skepticism and blowback.

“They thought that she was using people and that she wasn’t really trying to help us,” Laura continues, shaking her head.

“But I love María like a sister, and I am going to stick with her,” she says. “She’s making a big difference in these children’s lives. And she is doing the work. They are wrong. I’m happy that she is here. It’s taking time, but more and more people are finally seeing the value of what she is doing.”

I feel tired suddenly.

I ask her why she thinks so few Black kids are involved in the work.

“I don’t think it’s María’s fault. She says she invites them, but they just won’t come. And she is right. Even my grandkids. I talk to them and tell them, ‘You have to get more involved.’ And they’re like, ‘Yeah, but we have school.’”

Enrique said young people here don’t want to claim their African heritage. Likely, there is psychological resistance at play; psychologists call it anti-Blackness and say that under White supremacy, all races can have anti-Black attitudes. In a famous 1940s study by Kenneth and Mamie Clark, known as the “doll test,” for instance, Black children were shown two dolls: one with dark skin and one with white skin. Asked which was nice and which was bad, the children overwhelmingly viewed the white dolls positively and the dark ones negatively.

“But even if there are not so many Black kids,” Laura says. “I am still just glad. I still feel proud to know kids from our communities will know what has happened and where to find the proof.”

I ask if she thinks the wrecks will help change the larger story about race in Costa Rica.

“Yes, I think it will help change a lot of things,” she says. “One is the mentality—a way of clarifying that Costa Rica has much more to say about slavery and the slave trade.”

**I HEAD BACK TO PUERTO** Viejo in a taxi, my mind racing. I’m leaving Costa Rica tomorrow morning, and María and I are meeting in town for a late lunch: our last meal together.

I meet her at a fancy Asian fusion restaurant. We settle in at a table on the edge of the open-air dining room near the street, which is starting to fill up and buzz, and order curry verde, fish ceviche, and tacos al carbon. It’s a

Friday afternoon. Reggae bumps in the background. Motorbikes zoom and bicycles swoosh past.

I try to keep it light. I'm still processing all that I've learned from these conversations. So we laugh and talk about my experiences during my time here. María tells me more of her outrageous stories as a journalist working all over the world. As we clean the last bit of food off our plates, I realize María and I haven't talked about the DWP plans in Costa Rica. So I ask about the satellite office that Ken wants to open and when she thinks it can happen.

María bristles just a bit.

"We are not doing a DWP satellite office here," she says with a little frustration. "We are doing a joint project. Centro and DWP are partners in this. We are *combining* our efforts."

"Oh," I say. "OK."

"But people always think that Ken is presenting us. Or it becomes, 'What you are doing with those kids in Costa Rica is amazing, Ken.' Or 'The school you created down there in Costa Rica is unbelievable.'"

She shakes her head. "That also used to happen with a woman who is an Anglo-Saxon American and who came to our radio project 10 years after we had already built it. She came to produce with us. Her heart and mind were well placed, like yours and Ken's. But people would always assume that she created the project, especially when we traveled around the world. Give me a break."

She continues, "People think we don't know anything because we are from this small country. It's just like with the bricks. We sent the bricks to the University of Costa Rica's laboratory, and they did a chemical analysis—but it wasn't enough. We had to send them to the laboratory in Denmark for a different kind of geothermal testing, because they said our methods were no longer considered sound science. They said we had to wait for them to verify the findings and couldn't announce until they'd verified it. Sound science. The academics of the U.S. and Europe have access to technology that we don't, and so they get to call all the shots."

She pauses. "And it's not even about race or color sometimes. It's about who has credibility in the world."

I feel a little uncomfortable. She's talking about the power of the Global North over the Global South. She's complexifying this conversation of race

even more, because although Ken is Black and I'm Black—and although we care deeply about the story of the slave shipwrecks and Black people in the diaspora—we carry this other power when we leave the United States—a power that we certainly don't see or feel at home.

María may be an outsider to the Costa Rican Afro-Caribbean community. But as a Puerto Rican who grew up in the shadow of the United States, she is an insider when it comes to these dynamics. As a territory of the United States, Puerto Rico has no formal representation in the federal government or official say in its governance. Puerto Ricans have been fighting hard to gain the right to self-governance since 1967. So both María and Costa Ricans share familiarity with a form of paternalism by the United States and other Global North countries.

She shakes her head. "Still, we know that we are sophisticated here too. Look at the innovation we have used to link the ancestral to the scientific. We don't have the big machines, but we have this. And it is very important."

After we finish eating, I tell María that I want to walk around Puerto Viejo before I head back to her house to pack. I want to remember this place. And I need to make sense of what I'm learning.

After all the conversations, I have to be honest: Puerto Viejo looks different to me now. My rose-tinted glasses have slipped away, and I'm seeing it with different eyes. It feels a bit like the aftermath of the Women's March and the trip to Vermont. As I walked around my Washington, D.C., neighborhood afterward, I saw cracks in the foundation that had been out of focus before. And I saw how unmoored I felt as a Black person trying to make sense of my place there and in the world.

Something similar has begun to happen in Puerto Viejo too.

I wander into a vegan smoothie shop. And as I drink a fresh lemon, apple, and beet cold-pressed juice and look around the café-style co-working space, I notice that the clientele are foreigners—mainly American and European, and mostly White. Most have ordered giant salad bowls with fresh greens and fruits and alfalfa sprouts, quiches, or freshly baked slices of vegan pumpkin bread as they work on their laptops.

I leave with my juice and walk down one of the main streets. There, I see even more of this demographic, hanging on street corners in their swimsuits and sarongs, or slamming shots in bars with their baseball hats

and cargo pants. I hear German, British and American English, French, Italian, Russian. Per the chamber of commerce, the residents of Puerto Viejo also encompass more than 54 nationalities. That sounded so exciting when I heard it. What diversity, I thought. But now I see this diversity more as an invading species, like the lionfish, taking over the natural habitat and unbalancing the ecosystem.

I walk past sustainable clothing stores and more fusion restaurants, gelato bars, and fancy chocolate shops. Eventually, I end up near a real estate office, where I glance at the price of listings. And I do a double take.

Fifteen years ago, when this was a largely undeveloped town, I considered buying property. As I investigated, I chatted with a friendly Jamaican Afro descendant who invited me for tea at his house near the beach. He owned a lot of land and spent the afternoon regaling me with stories of finding boa constrictors in his eaves and cutting down weeds with a machete as he cleared his plots. I was intrigued and asked the cost; he told me acre lots were going for about U.S. \$5,000 then, a bit more near the beach. But now, a third of an acre costs U.S. \$100,000 or more.

I begin to cross the street to head to the beach, but I stop mid-stride suddenly; I connect dots that I should have connected earlier.

When the cacao trees failed in the late 1970s, Europeans and Americans must have snapped up the land that Afro descendants were forced to sell. And over the next 20 to 30 years, they began settling into town, building their dream houses, and opening side businesses that reflected their interests and hobbies: places like yoga studios and smoothie cafés. As the character of the place changed, it became more attractive to foreigners willing to pay even higher prices. So land values increased exponentially and quickly grew out of reach for many Afro locals who could not compete against the dollar, euro, and pound. Not only did they lose their land and incomes, but they were also forced to cluster in cramped neighborhoods in the hills as foreigners grabbed the prime spots close to the beach that their ancestors used to own.

And then I make another connection—of the perceptions, values, and cultural priorities that must have come with these settlers—many of them from countries that spent hundreds of years invested in a narrative of the inferiority of Blackness.

Before I arrived in Puerto Viejo, I found several blogs and articles questioning the Caribbean part of Costa Rica. Tourists wanted to know how safe it was to visit or live here, leaving comments and questions that weren't often asked about other areas of the country. One blogger said he thought Costa Rica's Caribbean coast was the rape and kidnapping capital of the world. Another reassured visitors that police now patrol the main road and beach regularly, that residents have installed security cameras on possible getaway roads, and that bars where drug dealers were known to peddle have been closed down.

This is happening in a place where local workers make about U.S. \$2 an hour. But my meal with María cost close to U.S. \$40, and my juice cost U.S. \$10. The U.S. \$50 I spent today without a second thought is what a local worker might make in a week.

I think of Jozi and all the walls and security booths around houses in neighborhoods throughout South Africa. I imagine Costa Rica's Caribbean coast mirroring it in 20 more years with these same installments, including guards from the community who are paid to protect these new residents from their own friends and families.

No one talks about the violence of settlement and gentrification. There are no police or security cameras for that. No guards or police to protect against its invasion.

Damn.

I pull back from my reverie. I've been sitting on the beach in front of a bar with my toes burrowed in the sand, staring into the water for quite a while now. The sun has gone down, and the sounds of town pick up around me. More people arrive for drinks and dinner. It's time to pack and prepare for my flight in the morning.

As I stand, my fantasy of being a meaningful part of this community begins to evaporate. I would be an outsider here. Maybe I could fit in one day, after months and perhaps even years of trust building. But even then, they would likely still see the cloak of American privilege around me. And maybe they would be right to do so because I would inadvertently slip it on.

I mean, I really do like lemon, beet, ginger cold-pressed juices and yoga retreats. And you just cannot find land, even a third of an acre, within walking distance of a beach and vibrant town anywhere in the United States for close to \$100,000.

Damn.

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# CHAPTER TWELVE

I know it's time to go home. I feel in my heart that I'm finally ready to face the legacy of the place in which I was born.

But first, I decide to make a quick stop in St. Croix. Ayana and Justin, the two young archaeologists I met last year during the DWP training, invited me to come to their field season there, and I'd agreed. I want to honor my promise.

I also want to see archaeology from their point of view. Ayana told me that Black people make up less than one percent of all archaeologists in the United States. "We have a very big issue in this field when it comes to representation," she said.

In response, she and Justin founded the Society of Black Archaeologists (SBA) as a connection and rallying point for Black archaeologists around the world. I want to know what happens when Black folks are at the helm of this kind of work.

After a stopover back in the States, I stand on the expansive lawn of the Estate Little Princess sugar plantation, about two miles northwest of Christiansted, the largest town in St. Croix.

Five young women with headscarves, sun helmets, khaki pants, and bright T-shirts sit under a tent. They trade jokes as they sift soil through pans and mesh screens, looking for bone fragments, pottery sherds, metal rivets, and pieces of glass. I learn later that they are sophomores and juniors from Spelman College, Morgan State University, and Howard University.

Farther along the lawn, beneath a centuries-old, partially renovated stone building with 14 arches and walkways, are five men and women—all archaeologists. They work at the University of California, Berkeley; the

University of California, Los Angeles; and the University of Tulsa. They wipe sweat from their brows, sip from bottles of water, and trade snippets of information about the progress of the students under the tent, along with three more young women working beyond my sight. Those three, also from Spelman and Howard, are in the acreage of thickets surrounding the main building. They kneel in dirt, using trowels and brushes to dig a one-square-meter pit. Methodically, they remove soil and scrape thin layers of earth into buckets that will then be distributed to the students under the tent.

Just arriving on the scene is a busload of 20 middle and high school students from nearby neighborhoods who are participating in a weeklong course about the fundamentals of archaeology. It's taught by a Washington, D.C.-based archaeologist named Alexandra Jones and is steeped in the methodology of community archaeology with the assistance of Sydney, who was with me in Florida at the DWP training and graduated from Georgetown University with a degree in archaeology.

The students spill across the lawn slowly and in all directions like lava after a volcanic eruption. Some head to the tent. Some join the archaeologists to share news of what they've been learning. Others grab water and snacks from a cooler and sit together in folding chairs under the tent and out of the sun.

It is very hot.

I think I'm melting.

But I also think I'm dreaming.

I count their numbers silently in my head: 35 practicing, budding, and potential archaeologists. All Black. All right here before me. All focused on telling the history of this small Caribbean island.

I'm in awe, since aside from Ayana and Justin, I'd never met a single Black archaeologist before. And when I was a teenager, I had dreamed briefly of being one.

The summer I was 15, I spent my days curled in a chair, devouring books from the Amelia Peabody series. Written by archaeologist Barbara Mertz under the pen name Elizabeth Peters, the novels centered on an English woman in the late 1800s who inherited a fortune and married an archaeologist specializing in Egypt. Together with her family and cast of colorful friends, she thwarts nefarious plots of theft and murder, all while helping to unearth artifacts from pyramids. Today, I see vestiges of

colonialism in the books. But back then, I just liked the idea of a spunky woman who was upending ideas of what women—well, White women—could be at that time. That year, I had also read Clarissa Pinkola Estés’s *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, a nonfiction collection of myths, fairy tales, and folktales aimed at helping women reconnect with their wild selves.

Both authors had inspired me to think more carefully about the power and ingenuity of women. When I put down the books, I imagined myself standing on a hill in a desert, archaeological tools that would help prove the existence of thriving ancient matriarchal societies scattered all around me. I was a mother in those dreams and had my baby strapped to my back; we were fearless and adventurous together. The fantasy faded as soon as the school year started, when I realized I’d have to deal with geometric measurements. But to see all these people for whom such a dream *did* stick is thrilling.

I wipe the sweat from my brow, swig down a bottle of water, hoist the bag with my camera and recorder over my shoulder, and begin to wander. The grounds are green with palm trees and rosebushes, as well as other stone structures in disrepair.

I want to see if I can feel a connection with the past.

**IF I'M HONEST WITH MYSELF,** I also decided to make this quick trip to St. Croix because of all the people I’d spoken with in Costa Rica who had roots in the Caribbean. Admittedly, I hadn’t thought much about the impact of the slave trade on this area, although it sat squarely at the core of the industry.

I knew that 40 percent of captive Africans were transported directly to Brazil. But I hadn’t realized that another 40 percent had been taken directly to the Caribbean islands, which ultimately became the principal market for enslaved labor to the rest of the Americas. That means that around four million people were either enslaved on plantations here or “processed” and shipped on to places like the United States. That means I might also have roots here.

We think of Doors of No Return as common to the African coast. But the concept also applies in the Caribbean, where Africans were kept for days, weeks, months, sometimes even years, only to be shipped onward... again...only to see another land disappearing from view.

The Caribbean was also the place where the *institution* of slavery began. In 1661, the Caribbean became the first place to codify the Slave Code. Under its auspices, Africans would not be governed by the same laws as Europeans because they were considered subhuman: a form of property—in other words, chattel, owned by purchasers and their heirs forever. This code started in Barbados, spread across the Caribbean, and became the model implemented in many other places, including the United States.

So the Caribbean was absolutely central to the trade. But I had not connected it to the larger global pattern that this journey is finally revealing.

And St. Croix proved interesting not only because of Justin and Ayana's work with SBA but also because St. Croix is a sister island to St. Thomas, the original destination of the *Christianus* and *Fredericus* slave ships. Both islands, along with St. John and a group of 50 islets and cays, are a part of the U.S. Virgin Islands today.

In 1493, Christopher Columbus “discovered” the islands during his second voyage. He gave them their original Spanish names—Santa Cruz, San Tomas, and San Juan—and called the collection of islets, cays, and rocks surrounding them Santa Ursula y las Once Mil Vírgenes (or St. Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins). This was eventually shortened to Las Vírgenes (or the Virgins).

Over the next century and a half, the Spanish, English, French, Danish, and Dutch would all lay claim to the islands at different times, declaring war on one another like impetuous kids while decimating and displacing the Indigenous populations that had lived there for more than 3,000 years, as well as importing captive Africans.

By 1665, the French controlled St. Croix, but they would abandon it by 1696, declaring it not profitable enough. It would stay uninhabited until 1733, when the Danes came around looking for more land to build sugar plantations. They had already grabbed St. Thomas in 1672 and St. John in 1718. And in 1733, they completed the set with St. Croix for a price of 750,000 livres (about U.S. \$71,000). The three islands became known as the Danish West Indies until 1917, when they were sold to the United States.

Sugar production in the Danish West Indies drove the economy, particularly in St. Croix. At its peak in the late 18th century, more than 58 percent of the land there was in use for sugar cultivation. They used the rest for cotton, indigo, and tobacco production, which all relied almost exclusively on enslaved labor for the work.

Even after slavery had been abolished on St. Croix and the island became a U.S. territory, production continued—until the 1960s. Archival documents reveal that many of the newly freed stayed on at the estates and continued to work as paid laborers, likely in conditions similar to those they experienced during enslavement and for rates that kept them in poverty.

It seems right, then, to follow in the wake of the Danish ships. It's almost as if a divine web has been woven to help me understand how these individual threads contribute to a larger global story. Denmark, West Africa, St. Croix, and Costa Rica are connected only because the Danes made them so. Perhaps, this is Yemayá's handiwork. After all, the threads stretch and connect along the currents of the sea.

**I FIND JUSTIN IN A** thicket, near the ruins of a structure with no roof. He's using a stick and a dustpan to methodically sweep across an area the size of a coffin that has been cleared and roped off with red string: an excavation pit right next to the highest standing wall. The house itself is about 180 square feet: the size of a small hotel room. This, he tells me, is one of only five of the 38 houses for enslaved people on the property with still standing walls.

Likely, whole families lived in the small space.

Justin stands and leans against the aluminum poles of the blue tent protecting the space. I sit on the ground, a bit away from the activity in front of him, so we can talk.

Justin is a study in contrasts. He has greenish blue eyes, brown skin, long, thick, ropy locs like a Rastafarian, and the build and energy of a teen skateboarder. He prefers polka-dot button-down short-sleeved shirts and Adidas sneakers, which make him look like a tech nerd. But he often accentuates them with African beaded bracelets and hats. Today, he wears a

T-shirt with a fish on it and has all that hair stuffed in a big canvas hat with a small brim.

He's considered brilliant by most. Not only did he graduate from high school at age 15, but he started at Howard University at age 16 and finished his Ph.D. in anthropology at age 25. Now, at age 31, he is an assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles.

He tells me that he and Ayana met at the University of Florida, where Ayana was an undergraduate and he was a grad student. They lived on different floors in the same building, and his girlfriend used to cook meals for them both. They are best friends, co-conspirators, and partners in crime.

"I've met her family, she's met my family," he says when I ask about their friendship. "You know, we have ties to each other. When we go through personal situations, we ask each other for guidance. People mistake us for husband and wife, because it's very rare for a man and a woman to have a relationship that's intimate but not, you know, sexual."

Ayana concurs; she told me earlier that the two of them share "a true love and care for one another. It's like a foundation," she'd said.

Now, they have launched this field school in St. Croix in partnership with the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Nature Conservancy, and the National Park Service. Its goal: to give voice to the hundreds of enslaved Africans who lived and walked on the grounds of Estate Little Princess between 1749 and 1848.

Unfortunately, contemporary records and archives reveal almost nothing personal of the enslaved during these years. So the interns, students, and archaeologists of this field school squat with buckets between their legs and comb through dirt on their hands and knees. By finding fragments of the past, they hope to flush out stories that will help the world truly understand the lives of the enslaved that lived there.

I ask Justin how the field school got started.

"We did a survey of the area first," he says, dusting off his hands on his pants. "And we located this Little Princess site, which is currently the headquarters for the Nature Conservancy. We had long conversations and determined that this would be the ideal place to do excavation work. When we started, it was a small crew. But now we have five principal investigators—myself, Dr. Ayana Flewellen, Dr. Alex Jones, Dr. Alicia Odewale, and Dr. Bill White."

I notice how anytime he talks about a Black archaeologist, he makes sure to use their titles and last names. I get it. Perhaps given their relative youth—most are under 40—they’re not always taken seriously. So they may feel they have to lead with their credentials.

“This place was almost completely overgrown,” Justin continues, sweeping his hands around. “So our idea was to cut back some of the bush and begin excavations to access the artifacts. We wanted to learn about what the housing structures looked like for the people who lived here.

“From there, we brought in youth from St. Croix for a week. Dr. Alex Jones took that on. They received background training in archaeology and did the excavations with us. Later on, we decided to bring in university students from HBCUs. Now, they do the field season for four weeks every summer. We conduct the work here in partnership with the Virgin Islands Caribbean Cultural Center and CHANT, Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism.”

“But why St. Croix?” I ask. “Why did you choose this country?”

“Well, there was infrastructure here already with the Slave Wrecks Project, which included the National Park Service and DWP. So all that activity helped.”

“It sounds like partnership was important to you,” I say.

He nods. “Yes. And on the ground too. At Howard, we actively studied community organizing. We weren’t interested in the idea that the purpose of academic work is to write a publication to be held up in the annals of academic history. We learned that archaeologists are telling people’s stories, and if you’re not actively allowing them to tell their own story in a way that gives them control over the narrative, then you’re not doing them or the work justice.”

Exactly what María believes.

“This is why Ayana and I got our Ph.D.’s,” Justin continues. “There were not a lot of Black archaeologists with Ph.D.’s, and you need one to actively lead an excavation.”

“I remember Ayana saying that Black archaeologists ask different questions. It stuck with me,” I say. “What did she mean? What questions do you ask differently?”

Justin pauses.

“Well, for me...” he says. “One thing I’m actively thinking about on these sites is, What does it mean to indigenize? We’re often talking about the importance of decolonization, which is about withdrawal. But what does it mean to restore? What does it mean to focus on building a new system, with the local community at the center?”

I feel my eyes go wide. To indigenize: to make indigenous, to increase local participation and ownership. Interesting.

“I’m also thinking a lot about the environmental impacts of slavery,” he continues. “Growing up in the United States, we don’t think about that much because we’re not actively grappling with these questions. But it’s not just about what happened to individual people. It’s also what happened to complete landscapes.”

It’s a fair point.

“We’re often told that when Europeans came here, this is just what the land used to look like,” he explains. “But no, there were rainforests here. Enslaved Africans were forced to clear them to make way for cane fields. Sugarcane is a notoriously thirsty crop, so the enslaved dug irrigation ditches and changed the course of rivers to feed the new fields. They cut trees to fire the boilers used to cook the cane, which burned day and night. It created a whole new environment: the deforested island of today.”

Justin is elegant and relaxed in his body, like a professor in front of his favorite students. His legs are crossed and one hand is on a pole, while the other moves back and forth to illustrate.

“Then I think about the sea,” he continues. “The mining of the coral to build the piers and docks required huge shifts in landscapes. It dropped the water table—the boundary between water-saturated ground and unsaturated ground. It lowered rainfall on the islands. And it also drove some native species of plants and animals to extinction.”

I think of the ships as battering rams along the coastlines of all four continents ringing the Atlantic Ocean.

“We haven’t begun to understand the fullness of the harm of the Transatlantic Slave Trade to entire ecosystems. And yet, we keep trying to close this chapter.”

Makes sense.

I wonder how Justin feels he belongs in the world as a young Black man doing this work of the past. I wonder if he carries any of my rootlessness.

“I see myself as a child of the African diaspora as a whole,” he says, shaking his head.

“I’m not really fixated on trying to trace myself back to a certain location. As a historian and archaeologist, I know how ephemeral all of that is. For example, I could say I’m from Gabon, but that’s a very small country that didn’t necessarily exist 100 years ago. You would have had to belong to a group or tribe. But maybe that group is a part of a group that didn’t necessarily exist 1,000 years ago.”

He leans back against the pole. “In the end, I think knowing that I am a person in this world and my job is to expand knowledge and make it a better place is enough for me. Because of that, and because I am brown and most of the world is brown, I feel like I am able to live anywhere, with people from all over. Because these are my people, regardless of where they come from or what they look like.”

He shrugs. “I just focus on trying to be a good person.”

**I LEAVE JUSTIN AND CIRCLE** back to some of the students who are quietly at work, chattering occasionally among themselves. They’ve settled into a determined rhythm—pour, shake, peer closely. So far, they’ve discovered glass that may have been used for storing water or medicine; hook-and-eye fasteners for clothes; buttons, nails, fragments of pipe stems; a pewter spoon, most likely from England; and a clay marble that might have been used in a children’s game or for adult gambling. There is a sense of accomplishment as they clean and sort the artifacts to be placed carefully into labeled plastic bags. They’ll be stored at the lab of Dr. Alicia Odewale, an archaeologist and professor from Oklahoma, until a secure facility can be built on St. Croix.

What do they make of these discoveries?

I pull aside one student named Armani. He’s a tall, lanky Crucian with locs sprouting from his crown like upright stubby vines. He’s 15 years old, and he tells me that this is his third year participating.

“When I started two years ago,” he says, “it was like I wasn’t really too sure about archaeology. Like, I didn’t want to try it. But then, after my first class, I was like, man, this is actually better than I thought it would be.”

He laughs.

I smile and ask how he heard about the class.

“Les Burke told me.”

“Who is that?”

“Oh, you don’t know him? He came down from Florida a few years ago and paid for a bunch of us to get scuba-certified through the boys and girls club and the organization he founded called Junior Scientists in the Sea. So I am actually a scuba diver now.”

His pride in his accomplishment is endearing. I smile again and say, “Congratulations.”

“I love the water,” he says. “I grew up being in the ocean, and scuba diving was always something I wanted to do. And now I can do it. I love it and go almost every weekend. But then Mr. Burke said to some of us, ‘Hey, this archaeology program is coming in. Why don’t you try it?’

“At first, I was like, how does archaeology have anything to do with scuba diving and stuff? But when I did the class, they broke archaeology down and explained that there are different branches, and one was underwater archaeology. I was like, oh man, maybe one day. Maybe one day I might be able to try this underwater archaeology thing.”

“What excites you about possibly doing it?” I ask.

“It’s like, I can see myself going down. And I am really digging and excavating and finding stuff that maybe my ancestors might have had something to do with, or they might have built something, and then I’m going down and helping to find it and bring it back up. I will have a story to tell about it. So I’m gonna keep working on my skills on land so I can go underneath the water and do what I love.”

He has such an infectious smile, and I find myself nodding and grinning back at him. “I am wondering how far back you can trace your ancestry. Do you know if your ancestors were enslaved here?”

“I can’t go past my grandfather, but I believe one day I will be able to trace back more.”

He was born and raised on the island.

“You love this place, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I think St. Croix is a great place. I can wake up on Sundays and go horseback riding or fishing or I can jump off the Frederiksted Pier or swim at the beach. It’s great. I love the water,” he says again. “It’s why I

really want to get into marine biology or now, maybe underwater archaeology. Either would be important for us Crucians, because the coral provides a home for the fish that we go out and catch to eat. And really, if we don't have coral reefs, then they wouldn't be protecting our islands from tsunamis and hurricanes or big waves coming in. So it's important to plant corals and stuff like that, and to really care about what's going on in the ocean. I want to be able to help."

I leave him to get back to sorting and sifting. And I make my way through the brambles again. I come across Jewell, who is 20 and a junior at Howard University, and Nailah, who is 19 and a soon-to-be sophomore at Spelman College. Jewell's major is Africana studies, and this is her second year participating. Nailah is double majoring in international studies and French.

I ask why they are here and what they want to get from the field school. Jewell, who has a bushel of curly hair, long coils that spring from underneath her scarf, ruffles her hands through her puff. This is her second year as an intern. "Well, I would love to be an archaeologist," she says. "Justin was a guest speaker at my class, and when I heard about this work, it fired something inside of me. So I raised my hand and signed up.

"The experience last year really changed my life. I was very lost then and didn't know what I wanted to do. Like, I was so scared to try this at first. But I'm really grateful that I didn't let that fear stop me. My life has just grown so much since then."

Nailah nods. "I am so glad I signed up too. I'm a person who grew up in spaces where others around me were Black, but not necessarily African American. And oftentimes, other Black people would make comments indicating that they looked down on African Americans, as opposed to the way they saw other Black people from the continent or from the Caribbean. I was always really interested in understanding those dynamics."

She is so poised and well spoken.

"Plus, I have an interest in languages. I speak French, and I have begun to learn Arabic, Swahili, and a little bit of Spanish. I just love to see the way that linguistics and anthropology and culture create language. I want to study how language enhances the ability of people to get along with each other and to build community."

To be young, talented, and Black.

The media lament the youth. But I stand in the hot sun on a plantation in the Caribbean and I feel so thankful for them.

**I DON A LIFE JACKET** and hop in a kayak for a bioluminescent tour of Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Reserve. Only a few of these bays exist in the Caribbean. With me are Ayana and several others from the field school.

We were told to not wear insect repellent, deodorant, perfumes, or sunblock to protect the marina's fragile ecosystem. A group of eight other people join us for a 30-minute safety briefing, then we load up in our kayaks.

It's late and quiet. The moon is below the horizon, and the water looks black underneath her gaze. We paddle out on open water for about a mile, following the headlamps of our guides. It is eerie. Without the lamps, we'd be in complete darkness, but for the occasional sparkle from the shoreline and stars above. When we arrive in the marina, our kayaks begin to agitate billions of bioluminescent microorganisms—living creatures or plankton, also called dinoflagellates—that emit light designed to scare off would-be predators. They streak like stars past us as we paddle. I think of fireflies, like the ones I used to catch and let go when I was young, only underwater.

Our guide gathers us all around when we arrive in the reserve, offering tales of local history and playing games with us to help us learn facts about the island. Then she encourages us to go and explore on our own.

Ayana and I are left alone in the middle of the marina. We sit on the water, rocking in the wake of the other kayaks. Our boats nudge each other as the water settles.

Ayana is now a postdoctoral fellow at UC Berkeley. She sports a nose ring and keeps her hair shaved closely on both sides to accentuate the thick coils on top. She likes flowy dresses with dashiki prints, cowrie shell necklaces, and bright red lipstick. But tonight, she has pared her look down to shorts, a tee, and a life vest.

I consider all the sad parts in this work.

"Is it ever just too much for you?" I ask quietly. "Do you ever need to look away?"

“I have never needed to look away,” she responds just as quietly, her voice barely audible even though I’m only a few feet away. “I have needed to pause, though. I have needed to breathe. Especially when I think about my own family history.

“I think I’ve shared with you that my family goes back to the 1850s in Central Texas, right outside of Waco and Falls County. And if you don’t know anything about Waco, just know that it had one of the largest seasons of lynching in Texas.

“There is a way that I think of the Brazos River there. I think about the trees that grow along it, and I think about all the people who hung from those trees. I think about just how horrible humanity has proven it can, in fact, be. We’ve seen that with the Transatlantic Slave Trade, but we’ve also seen it with other forms of slavery that existed before that time.”

Her hand waves back and forth lazily in the water, stirring up a glow from the plankton. “You know, there’s something really beautiful that Toni Morrison wrote in her book *A Mercy*. She was talking about what it meant for Europeans to dehumanize Africans and treat them as animals. And she said that they were only able to do that to Africans because they had already been doing that to each other. There’s a way in which this practice of dehumanization is just so deeply ingrained in all of us.

“But I think, for me—especially as someone who has literally placed their hands in the ground on which enslaved people have walked, on which enslaved people have lived, labored, and been tortured—there is no way to be in those spaces and not feel, as the scholar Avery Gordon would say, the haunting of those histories and those truths.”

Her voice is melodic. Something about being under the moonlight on the dark bay makes this moment feel surreal...and sacred. It feels like we are the only two people on Earth.

She continues, “I think, Tara, that there is so much more to this history than pain and death. And I know that because the work that I do focuses on how people lived. And doing archaeology—doing African American archaeology, examining the everyday lives of these people—means that I’m looking at and excavating and examining how people lived, not how they died. How even in the midst of great harm, pain, violence, rape, sexual exploitation, that people forged families together, built communities with

each other, loved on their own bodies and the bodies of others.” She pauses. “And that is beautiful.”

Droplets of water plop as she brings her hand out and shakes it in the silence.

How they lived: Planting, harvesting, crushing, squeezing, and boiling sugarcane to make table sugar and rum under brutal conditions. Laughing, crying, falling in love, making friends, raising children, trading jokes, growing old together. Finding ways to stay human, despite the inhumanity around them. I lean forward slightly, wanting to enfold her words.

“I will never know, not truly know, the harm they experienced. But what does it mean to actually be OK with that? I hope that 500 years in the future, my great-great-great-grandchildren will also not be able to fathom what we are going through right now. I want the same ways in which it is unimaginable that our ancestors lived through that kind of harm back then to be the same thing for our descendants. I want them to be living in such a way that our reality is unimaginable.”

“I hear you,” I say, reclining in the back of the kayak and looking up at the billions of stars in the sky. “I really hear you. I also think that you’re in a position that many Black folks are not in. Most of us are not digging in the earth on plantation sites contemplating the past in this way. We’re not finding the evidence that proves how our ancestors lived. Instead, we’re being bombarded with these stories and realities of trauma and pain without the balance of the other. How could the average Black person possibly come to this knowing too?”

“I believe we have to start talking to our elders and asking them how they lived, asking them how they loved,” Ayana says, her voice revving in intensity. “Actually, asking our grandmothers what brought them joy in their childhoods, asking them questions. I feel like those things bring us closer to the humanity of our ancestors and to what we know to be real and true. Which is that you are here right now, right? Like you, Tara, are here right now. What made that possible? What are the stories that made that possible?

“I asked my grandmother’s sister what their mother liked most. And I learned that she loved coconut cake. A Black woman from Texas loved coconut cake! It’s those things, you know? I want to know more about what Black joy was in the 1920s.”

She sighs. “And honestly, I think this is harder. It’s harder to do the work of searching for joy in the midst of all that we’ve been through. It’s easier to accept that all there was was only pain, that there could not possibly be room for more.”

“You know,” I say, “on her hallway wall, my mom has this black-and-white photo of my great-great-grandpa Jack and great-great-grandma Mary. They were probably in their 60s or 70s when it was taken. We know Jack was born enslaved in 1839 in North Carolina, but we don’t know much about Mary. We assume she was born enslaved too. I don’t have a lot of details.

“I typically just breeze past that photo. But I stopped to look at it right before I came here, after all my journeying with DWP. And this time, it spoke to me somehow. I always thought both of them were really handsome people. I mean Grandpa Jack has on a suit—it looks like brown corduroy. And Grandma Mary, she wears a stiff white button-down shirt with a bow tie. A bow tie, Ayana! She looks formidable but also soft. And they look like equals.

“I just remember thinking this time around, yeah, it couldn’t have all been pain and sorrow. I saw this kindness in both their eyes that just made me want to know them, you know? Like I would have liked to lean against Jack’s knee and hold his hand and hear his stories. And I feel like Mary would have swatted me on the butt affectionately and shared her lessons on how to live powerfully as a woman in the world.”

“Yes!” Ayana says. “I have my own collection of historic photographs that I’ve found at antique shops and flea markets, and they hold so much in them. I don’t know if you’ve ever read the work of Tina Campt, but she wrote this really beautiful book called *Listening to Images*. She encourages us to think about how, even though your eardrums can’t pick it up, sound might resonate from these images at such a low frequency that it can actually be felt. And that sound, that feeling, is knowledge, is a knowing of truth.”

My eyes close and I feel her words run through me. “Do you feel like we’re actually healing, Ayana?” I ask. “Or are we just stirring up the pain more?”

“I definitely think this work is healing. I posted a picture on Instagram of me coming out of Lake Phoenix, walking up a ladder. And a friend of

mine commented that I looked like the prayer of all the ancestors who jumped off the ships. It was wild. It made me think that the work we do on the water is healing for all of us who are doing it, but it is also healing for those who are witnessing us. I think in many ways that the Atlantic is pulling us back toward it now—that there's a collective healing around Black people and the water right now that warrants further investigation."

I open my eyes and seek out her face in the dark, but I can only see the outline.

Ayana continues, "I've been in such beautiful connection with water, in ways that make it animate, that make it alive. Olokun is the deity for the depths of water and the mystery of those depths—and I feel like I have connected with her within my spiritual practice."

"Oh, how interesting—I've made a connection with Yemayá!" I exclaim.

There it is again: Black girl magic, moving and grooving, weaving its tendrils around us.

I smell the salty brine of the quiet bay. I want to dive in, headfirst, and immerse myself in her depths. Yemayá. Olokun. All names of the one goddess who surrounds us. And I realize just how much our stories have been written in her waters—and are being written in her waters still—all those shipwrecks, all those lives lost. But also, all those lives started, all those lines of connections that we are just beginning to see and understand.

The other boats are beginning to come back to us; they slowly glide to the center from the edges so that we can make our way back to shore. But even their meandering feels like a part of the mystery of the night. It's like they diverged so that we could concentrate on this conversation but are now converging to bring us back into community with one another.

Again, that thing I've been wondering about, that I asked Justin—one of the questions that has been fueling this journey for me: "What do you think of as home, Ayana? Is there a space where you feel you belong?"

"Honestly, Tara, I feel a pull toward the ocean as a space of home. We are a part of this nation, and this nation has boundaries on this land. But, well, what if we just say that we're not invested in those boundaries? That we can exist in something that literally cannot be captured because it's always in motion?

“If I can think about what my identity can look like if it’s not so attached to the land, it might provide some other kind of knowledge and guidance to what else is possible for us as a people.”

Although Ayana can’t see me, I think about what she’s said and bite my lip in excitement as we glide back. What if our displacement and enslavement—our unique ancestry and our very rootlessness—as African-descended people throughout the diaspora puts us on the leading edge of thought and creation? What if, through us, a new way of understanding identity can be articulated and lived—one that can help point a way forward for humanity?

This approach feels fresh and alive and full of possibility. My body is thrumming as we paddle back to shore.

I hug Ayana tightly as we drop off our life vests.

I finally feel like that thing that was rising up in South Africa is clicking into place.

I leave the next morning for Atlanta, my eyes bright again.

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# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“**T**hat’s a cute little car.”

My mom and I are standing in her driveway. She has come out of the house into the garage with her housecoat tied tight around her waist, and is leaning against a storage shelf for support. I have one foot on the ground, the other inside the Chevrolet Bolt I rented for my drive to Edenton, North Carolina.

“Yeah,” I respond as I fold myself all the way into the car. “It’s really little.”

“You drive carefully now,” my mom says, scratching her Afro. Her hair is all gray now, clipped short like a halo around her head. “You know, it’s crazy, things happening in the world.” She frowns. “Can you make it without stopping for gas?”

I raise my eyebrow.

She shakes her head. “Don’t look at me like that. People are doing crazy things out there, Tara. If you don’t have to stop, it will be better.”

“I’ll be fine, Mom,” I say.

She picks up two laminated sheets of paper from the storage shelf and walks slowly to the passenger side of the car; her gait has slowed considerably in the last year. She bends through the open window and places them on the seat. “This first one here is the family tree. That’s my dad and mom at the top. All your uncles and aunts, their children and then their children, are on the branches. I think you should have it on this trip.”

She pauses. “You know, it would be good if you can talk to your cousins in North Carolina about organizing a family reunion soon. I keep trying to get the second generation—that’s your generation—to take it on. I’ve even

offered to have it here at my house. But you know how you young people are. You just don't care."

She shakes her head.

Six years ago, my mom, along with three of my cousins and I, organized a family reunion at her house. Not many showed up, and no one has attempted it since. But she keeps trying to bring us together.

"The second sheet is the Lord's Prayer," she continues. "It will keep you protected as you drive." She leans back satisfied. "OK. Well, call me as soon as you arrive."

"I will. But Mom, please don't call me a gazillion times before I do."

She ignores me and continues, pointing at my sandals. "And get one of your cousins to do your nails. Your toenails are not looking so good."

"OK," I sigh. "I'm going to go now."

I settle behind the wheel and start the engine.

"When are you coming back?"

"In a week," I say.

"Alright, my dear, let's get a good hug," she says and shuffles around the front of the car to the driver's side. The hump in her back has become more pronounced. She looks so different now from her college yearbook coronation photo and the woman who cheered me on at the side of the pool. At 82, my mom is the youngest of all the aunts and uncles remaining. I realize with some sadness that eventually, she (and they) won't be here at all.

I unfold myself from the car to give her the hug. She feels so little and frail.

"God bless. And don't forget to call me."

I back out and take off down the driveway, my mother waving in the rearview mirror. I wave back. When I get around the corner and out of her sight line, I put the laminated Lord's Prayer in the glove compartment and the family tree in my bag, crank up the first song on my road trip playlist, and head to Interstate 85 for the nine-hour drive.

Nina Simone's "Feeling Good" fills the car. It's a new dawn, a new day, she sings; her sultry contralto steadies me.

This trip to Edenton, North Carolina—to my mom's hometown and the birthplace of my great-great-grandpa Jack—has been a long time coming. At least five years have gone by since I last visited, and then I was in and

out quickly for my uncle Marvin's funeral. Decades have passed since I used to spend weeks there with my grandmother.

But I felt it was time to plant my feet in Edenton's earth again, to walk its dusty roads. In Costa Rica and St. Croix, I learned just how much ancestral land mattered—and how it could change the way we understand the past.

And I realized that the tiny town of Edenton—incorporated in 1722, with a current population of 4,391; located in the far eastern part of North Carolina on the shores of the Albemarle Sound; considered the first colonial capital of North Carolina; named for Charles Eden, the second governor in North Carolina's history; topping many travel lists as one of the prettiest small towns in the South—is *my* ancestral land.

So, the least I could do was walk there. Walk on the land where my great-great-grandpa Jack and great-great-grandma Mary walked, where Jack and Mary's son John H. walked, where John H.'s son John Addison walked, and where John Addison's daughter—my mother, Lula—and her 13 brothers and sisters walked.

For at least two hundred years, my family filled this place. They scuffed their knees, climbed trees, mucked stalls, picked vegetables, killed chickens, played jokes, and ate fried chicken, skillet-fried corn bread, and collard greens at a loud and lively dinner table. They loved, lived, married; some even grew old and died there.

If I want to go beyond the black-and-white picture of Jack and Mary on my mother's wall—if I want to follow the threads of the silences and sounds in that photo—I need to go to that place where it began and smell its air. I need to feel the weight of its humidity on my body and hear the wind rustling through stalks of wheat, corn, and soy. I need to see—and not with the eyes of my urban 10-year-old self, bored to tears during hot summers spent in the kitchen snapping green beans with Grandma Lizzie, and not with the eyes of my cynical 25-year-old self, who only saw the county's poverty and reduced its inhabitants to caricatures and statistics.

No, I need to see beyond those surface details and sink into this place with my spirit.

**I HAVE THE WINDOWS DOWN** and the wind feels good on my arms. I cross the border into South Carolina and think about how just two weeks ago, I crossed the border on the other side of Georgia, into Alabama, learning that ancestral land could also be a thing of hope and dreams—something that could glue a community together.

I had driven to Mobile, Alabama, right after returning from St. Croix at an invitation from National Geographic. Divers, historians, and archaeologists had found the remains of the *Clotilda* slave shipwreck. A National Geographic film crew and the Society's resident archaeologist were on the scene to confirm the findings and help tell the story. They asked me down to meet with descendants of the people who had been on the boat. Actual descendants—people who knew the names and stories of their African ancestors. People with a direct and incontrovertible link to a slave ship.

Of course I had to go. It was an incredible story.

Plus, the archaeologists and divers searching for the ship had found the *Clotilda* perfectly preserved—something that had never happened before. Most slave ships were built in the 16th and 17th centuries, and wood was the primary building material, so wrecks would disintegrate over time. But this ship went down in a river composed of sand, silt, clay, and organic matter, which together form mud. The cloudy, dark brown waters surrounding Mobile would likely not appeal to most swimmers and divers. But that muddy water had purpose: It preserved this historic ship for more than 150 years. It may be the only actual intact slave ship from those times that we will ever see.

Its discovery in the Mobile River in May 2019 became national news; many networks came a-running. And for these descendants, it validated the story of their ancestors as important national history, worthy of being told broadly.

I knew I would learn a lot in Mobile, but I never suspected that the journey of these descendants would point me back to my own ancestors in such a profound way.

Their story begins in a bar in the middle of Mobile, Alabama.

**BY 1860, THE SLAVE TRADE**—not slavery, mind you, just the transportation of captive Africans across the Atlantic—was illegal. It had been so since 1808 in most Western countries, including the United States. But ships still sailed the Atlantic in defiance of the law. And the *Clotilda* made history as the last recorded U.S. ship to make this illegal journey.

A Mobile plantation owner, shipbuilder, and shipyard owner by the name of Timothy Meaher heard that ethnic groups were at war in Benin and that King Glélé of the Dahomey Kingdom had captured a big load of enemy prisoners to sell.

King Glélé, like his father Gezo, was handsome and strong and clever: his father's true child. How he got word all the way to Mobile, Alabama, is unknown. But Meaher, having heard the story, made a bet in a bar one evening that he could sneak captive Africans into the country without being captured by federal agents.

I imagine the bar, maybe right downtown in the heart of Mobile, as a wooden building with brightly colored shutters. I picture a beautiful mahogany bar with stools and a shiny countertop that the White barkeep continuously wipes down, only pausing to pour tumblers of whiskey as new patrons come in. I imagine drunk White men in overalls and rough-hewn shirts, some with big bellies, nursing drinks at wooden tables sprinkled liberally throughout.

And there, tucked in a corner, I think, is Meaher: a middle-aged man with hard but determined eyes, neatly turned out in a pressed suit, his hair slicked back off his brow, and his beard neatly trimmed. He is one of the wealthiest men in the city, and he sits with a few other local plantation owners facing a group of men from New England in long waistcoats to talk business. They are cordial, discussing pleasantries until Meaher looks around to make sure no one else is listening, leans in, beckons them closer, and proposes the wager. The other plantation owners are surprised, but they catch each other's eyes and smile, nodding in agreement. The New Englanders take his measure. Then one nods, then another. Soon, they shake on it.

So agreed, Meaher refitted a boat he already owned called the *Clotilda*. It was a two-masted schooner, 86 feet long with a beam of 23 feet and a copper-sheathed hull designed for the lumber trade. He secured its captain, a man named William Foster, who already worked for him, to sail to Benin

for the mission. Foster gathered a crew of 11 who did not know the true purpose of the trip. He left Mobile on March 4, 1860. The crew arrived in Benin after a close call with a hurricane in Bermuda that damaged the ship. As it was being repaired, the journey's mission was revealed to the crew. To persuade them not to alert the authorities, Foster agreed to pay them double.

They arrived in Ouidah, Benin, on May 15, 1860, and were met by a prince of the Dahomey who took Foster to the barracoons. Some four thousand people from all over the area had been held captive there so far that year, marched to the coast from hundreds of miles away.

Foster must have walked in and out of the cages, inspecting people. Some had likely been chained naked to the walls for days, weeks, maybe even months; they probably hadn't been allowed to wash or had been fed much, and were despondent, afraid, and traumatized. Foster might have inspected their teeth, genitals, muscles. And then he chose: pointing to that child and then that woman and then that man until he had picked 125 men, women, and children. He doled out U.S. \$9,000, plus a bit of gold and silver, for the lot.

Only 110 made it onto the ship, though, as two other ships arrived. Fearing capture, Foster left the 15 remaining people. The 110 who made it were forced into a 23-by-18-foot space, the size of a large bedroom. Meaher's refitting plans were for concealing purposes, not comfort.

The ship left Ouidah in May 1860, following the same route as the *Fredericus Quartus IV* and the *Christianus Quintus V* across the Atlantic to the Caribbean Sea.

One of the captives in the cargo hold was a man named Oluale Kossola, who was later given the enslaved name Cudjo Lewis. He was the last male survivor of the *Clotilda* Africans to pass away in 1935 at the age of 94.

Zora Neale Hurston interviewed Cudjo in 1927 for her book *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo."* Cudjo's memories in the book date back to his capture from his village by a fierce group of female warriors when he was 19 years old. He details his thousand-plus-mile march across the country to the coast of Ouidah; his stay in a barracoon; and his journey across the Atlantic, where, terrified, he was kept in the dark for 13 days amid the continuous sound of loud water. He says he didn't get much to eat on the trip, receiving only small amounts of sour water twice a day.

The ship traveled a straight and narrow course past numerous islands, reaching Abaco lighthouse in the Bahamas on June 30. As it neared the borders of the United States and rounded the Florida Keys, Foster ordered his crew to take down the ship's square sail yards. These were used to help catch trade winds but would have given away the purpose of the journey, because mainly ships doing cross-continental trips used them. Foster hoped to pass as a ship carrying African captives for the domestic slave trade, which was still legal in the United States.

And he succeeded.

He sailed between Florida and Cuba into the Gulf of Mexico. His journal notes that he anchored in a place that was most likely Point Aux Pins, a port just past Mobile. He then traveled overland by horse and buggy to coordinate his arrival with Meaher. Then, he rode back and brought the boat onto the long stretch of river that fronted the city of Mobile, arriving by stealth in the middle of the night.

Quietly, the captives on board were taken off the ship and put on a river steamboat that took them to the edge of the river, where they were hidden while Foster tried to conceal the evidence. He set the ship on fire and sank it in the muddy river, not realizing that his actions would preserve it for discovery over a century later. He also paid off the crew, though not the double wages he promised.

Foster and Meaher kept the captives in the swamp for two weeks to throw off suspicions. In *Barracoon*, Cudjo remembers the many mosquitoes and how frightened they all were. Imagine these Africans naked in a swamp with clouds of mosquitoes biting their flesh, critters and slithery things swimming past their legs, unable to speak the language, unsure of what was going on.

After two weeks, Foster and Meaher began dispersing the captives slowly and quietly to the financial backers of the *Clotilda*. And Meaher kept 32 Africans on his plantation in the north of Mobile.

But in the end, the federal authorities discovered the subterfuge. They tried to prosecute Meaher and Foster and their partners in court but couldn't find the ship or evidence of the crime. So the government dropped the case.

Then came the Civil War. In 1865, only five years after reaching Alabama, the prisoners who came over on the *Clotilda* and were enslaved

were suddenly free. Their first wish: to return to Africa. But they didn't have the means to buy passage home.

And so the formerly enslaved Africans from the *Clotilda* started hiring themselves out and working as sharecroppers to earn money. A group, including Cudjo, decided they would pool their earnings to buy land. It took nine more years, but they managed to collectively save about \$300 to purchase 57 acres. They built three dozen houses, a church, and a school on the land. They even built their own graveyard. And then they christened the land Africatown to evoke home.

As time passed, the original “*Clotilda* Africans” had children who had children, all of whom lived on the land. Soon, other Black people from around the area came to live in the community too. In this way, Africatown expanded. In its heyday almost a century later, during the 1960s, Africatown had some 12,000 residents and a host of houses, shops, and services. It was a vibrant and dynamic community.

Today, the descendants of those Africans count in the thousands and live all around the country. But what each of them has done—no matter where they live now—is to pass down stories about their ancestors traveling in that cargo hold, hiding in that swamp, working on those plantations, trying to survive in Mobile. They have continued to spin the story of this thread from Africa to the Americas. Many have pictures, artifacts, recipes, songs—even the buildings their ancestors built with their bare hands still stand. And they make sure their children know these stories, know these places. Know from where and whom they come.

**I WALKED AROUND AFRICATOWN ONLY** a few weeks ago. I saw the church that Cudjo and his fellows had built. I saw the house where he lived. I stood in the graveyard where he was buried. I talked to some of his living descendants: Altevese, a great-great-great-granddaughter who is a math teacher in Philadelphia; Garry, a great-great-grandson who owns a string of restaurants in Philadelphia; and Cassandra, a great-great-granddaughter who still lives in the area.

And I marveled at the symmetry. My hero Zora Neale Hurston, a writer and explorer, interviewed Cudjo in 1927 in Africatown. Almost a century

later, I—a writer and budding explorer—was interviewing his descendants in Africatown.

I also met Delisha, a descendant of Gumpa Lee. Lee was royal and a relative of King Glélé, who had been sold into slavery, likely for falling out of favor with his sovereign. An engineer, Delisha lives in Baltimore, Maryland. In her blood is a mixture of the Dahomey enslavers, along with the DNA of those who were enslaved.

All this history coming alive in the present right here. It was a link to a complicated past through real people—through their memories and DNA. The descendants I spoke to had such pride and confidence, a clarity about who they were and who they were not.

And such a deep connection to the land.

Their stories made me think even more about my own history—about my great-great-grandpa John “Jack” Roberts, and about his hometown of Edenton. Jack was just two years older than Cudjo. We knew he was born enslaved, but we didn’t know anything about his mother. What if she had come over on a slave ship? Or what if his grandmother had? Since my great-great-grandpa Jack was born in 1839, it’s possible he knew the ancestor or stories about the ancestor who had been forced to travel in one of those cargo holds. This meant that I could be one generation away from finding a ship—and thus a direct route back to my familial line on the African continent—from knowing my whole story too.

I didn’t know if I could really trace my family back to a ship, but the stories of the *Clotilda* and Africatown made me want to try.

I had been afraid to do this earlier—to face the fact that Jack had been owned by someone, that he was someone else’s property. I knew his life must have had laughter and love and tenderness and beauty; surely, there were these things. But I feared the rest.

Until this visit.

I was finally ready for my family’s stories, for Jack’s stories. Ready to allow them in my heart and soul. And so, I decided to hire a genealogist to help me.

I find Renate Sanders, a genealogist in Virginia specializing in the ancestry of African American people, on Google. Right there in Africatown, one evening after a particularly inspiring chat with the descendants, I dial her number.

She answers after a few rings.

I launch straight into it. I tell her about my work with the divers and my experiences with the *Clotilda* and in Africatown. I tell her how inspired I am and ask whether she can help me trace my own ancestry back to a slave ship.

“I hear this kind of request a lot,” Renate says, sighing. “And so, I must caution you to not really get your hopes up.”

I feel my heart drop.

“I don’t ever really like to say it’s never going to happen because you never know. But it’s not realistic, especially within the time frame that you’ve given me.”

I’ve given her a month.

“People do research for years to get to that point.” I feel her shaking her head. “So, I don’t know if it’s possible. But I am going to do the best I can for you. My hope is that maybe I can at least find out who your great-great-grandfather’s parents were.”

My heart flutters back to life. I ask how she’ll do this.

“First, I will work to verify all of Jack’s children and his marriage. And then I’ll read through court records from Chowan County and the Freedmen’s Bureau, since Jack was freed right after the Civil War. I’ll look for any mentions of his name. It’s very time-consuming work going through all the records—especially with common names like John and Jack. You have to always check to be sure you have the right John or Jack. Everything has to be proven.”

“OK,” I breathe out. “I just want to find out whatever I can.”

“My advice to you is to be patient,” she says gently. I think she understands the palpitations of my heart. “And I’ll do my best for you.”

We hang up.

I cross my fingers. Now that I’ve decided to do this, I want the results so badly, it kinda hurts.

**IN THE MEANTIME, WHILE RENATE** begins her work, I continue to walk around Africatown.

I meet more descendants of other Africans on the *Clotilda*. And I take in the current state of the place.

Since its peak in the 1960s, the community had fallen on hard times and shrunk considerably in size. It's no longer a vibrant place—mostly because the city of Mobile turned Africatown into an industrial waste dumping ground during the 1920s. Initially, the city placed two paper factories there; eventually, it added a chemical refinery and an asphalt plant that released vast amounts of pollution into the air and waterways. Residents say the debris in the air was so thick you couldn't see three feet in front of you. This remained the case all the way up until the 1980s, when Environmental Protection Agency safety measures finally kicked in. But by then, many longtime residents were being diagnosed with cancer and dying before the age of 65.

The city had also constructed a highway through the middle of the community. So, the church that Cudjo helped build and the cemetery he was buried in are now divided by four lanes. Imagine, over the years, singing praise songs to Cudjo in the church, then breathing in exhaust fumes from 18-wheelers cutting through the city, as you run across the highway in between cars, putting your life on the line, to visit his grave.

I also sit down in town with archaeologists and divers documenting the *Clotilda*. Unfortunately, this is another shipwreck I can't dive; because of the mud and low visibility, diving is too dangerous for all but experienced technical divers. So I grab dinner with Jim Delgado, the historian and maritime archaeologist who helmed the mission to find the ship with his company, SEARCH; Fred Hiebert, National Geographic's archaeologist in residence, who's helped fund a portion of the search; and Kamau from DWP, who's there to dive and assist with the underwater mapping. I'm excited to see Kamau again; I love that we're turning up together in different spots around the world.

The four of us commune over pizza, grilled shrimp, fried crab, pasta, pints of beer, and sweet tea in downtown Mobile—perhaps not far from where Meaher had made his original bet.

In his soft voice, Kamau tells me how it all started. "Back in January of 2018, the water level of the Mobile River dropped, due to some meteorological conditions in the region. It exposed this old wooden vessel, which people thought could possibly be the *Clotilda*."

Jim, whose close-cropped white hair, neatly trimmed beard, and rosy complexion make him look like a sheared Santa Claus, takes a swig from his beer. “Yeah, a crusading environmental reporter named Ben Raines went to the site and was sure it must be the *Clotilda*,” he says. “Nat Geo called me and suggested I offer the Alabama Historical Commission, the stewards of all history and archaeology in Alabama, some help since I specialize in 19th-century wrecks, and they didn’t have a maritime archaeologist on staff. Nat Geo also offered a grant to get things started. Then SWP offered some small funding to cover hard costs. We all came down and met in March of 2018. We mapped. We measured...”

Kamau takes up the tale. “And came to the conclusion very quickly that this vessel was too big, too broad, based on the measurements we knew of the *Clotilda*. We know it had a depth of about seven feet, a length of almost 88 feet, and a breadth about 23 feet or so. But this ship was more than 100 feet long. So we knew right off that it wasn’t the right ship, but an interesting vessel, nonetheless.”

“So, how did you find it?” I ask.

“Ben had come to a pretty good idea of which stretch of the river the ship had been burned in,” says Fred, who has been with Nat Geo for some 20 years. He has sandy brown hair, pale skin, and a reedy voice.

“We went back twice,” Jim says. “We systematically scanned the bottom of the river with magnetometers that detect buried masses of metal.”

“We’re out there on this iron barge towing this sonar behind us, making a beautiful map of the bottom,” says Fred. “But Tara, it was so hot! It’s like there was no shade, there was just—I don’t know, relentless sun. It felt like 120 degrees! We had people who were fishermen who came by and they kind of laughed at us and said, ‘What are you doing there? It’s so hot, even the alligators aren’t out!’”

We all chuckle together.

I learn that during this sonar sweeping process, they’d found hundreds of anomalies. It turned out the area was a ship graveyard, containing wreckage and debris from many vessels.

“One target stood out, though,” Jim continues as he digs into his pizza. “It was the right size. But sonar records alone weren’t good enough. It needed to be systematically examined. We knew we would have to dive and look at everything.”

“We also realized it’s a very dangerous sort of environment too, simply because the wreck could actually collapse at any point,” Kamau says.

“SEARCH needed to put a technical diver into the water. So, they did, and it was pretty intense. He couldn’t see a thing. He started feeling his way around, and we all could hear the communications on the boat. Then he said, ‘I feel something here. It could be the bow. I’m running my hands up it. It’s over the top of my head and I can feel it.’ It was very exciting.”

Jim jumps back in. “So, we put another diver in the water. And both divers came back with enough material for us to analyze the wood. And that analysis confirmed it.”

Fred throws up his hands, “And then we were able to announce that we had identified this wreck as likely the *Clotilda*!”

“And I will just say this simply,” Jim adds, putting down his slice. “When you are in that space and you see how small it is—very tangibly, physically, viscerally—it gives you a glimpse of just what happened here. It’s a very sobering and terrible place to be, and yet it serves as tangible physical evidence. Not only of the crime that was done, but of the ability of this site to continue to help tell this story.”

And telling that story made a difference: The city of Mobile is now committed to this endeavor. It’s making Africatown a historic site and contributing a million dollars to help preserve the ship. It’s also beginning to address the decades of environmental abuses in Africatown and marking the area as a historical center.

But getting here took years of fighting. And it’s only happening now because we have something to rally around—evidence—along with a community of descendants that refused to let their history fade away.

“I see my story as part of the *Clotilda* story, even though my family did not come over on that ship,” Kamau says as we walk back to our hotel together. He can trace his ancestry back to his great-great-grandfather in South Carolina, but no further. “The *Clotilda* and Africatown stories play into the whole history of race—the efforts of White supremacy and the deconstruction of Reconstruction in the U.S.,” he explains.

He is referring to the Reconstruction period from 1865 to 1877, which happened right as Africatown was being built. During those years, the U.S. government tried to tackle the inequities of slavery and its legacy with political, social, and economic redresses for Black Americans. But a

campaign of terror and violence by some White Americans undid any gains, keeping Black Americans segregated and subjugated for the next hundred or more years, arguably until very recently.

“The *Clotilda* is a big part of U.S. history, if not world history. If we don’t tell its story, I really don’t think we’ll be able to get where we want to go,” he says.

We hug, and I leave Mobile the next morning.

**NOW, A WEEK LATER,** I continue on I-85 North and pass the “Welcome to North Carolina” sign. I keep going, past Charlotte, Greensboro, and Raleigh-Durham, until I get to U.S. 17. The trip starts to feel endless for the next hour—probably because the road has turned into a two-lane highway, alternating between small town clusters and tightly packed rows of trees lining either side of the road. The sky is blue and clear, and the weather is even warmer now. Though the air is hot on my skin, I keep the window down.

As I drive, I start to see pickup trucks and tractors with slow lines of traffic behind them. I notice fields of cotton—outfitted, thank goodness, with modern cotton harvester machines, rather than brown bodies toiling in the relentless sun. I pass tidy trailer homes sitting squarely on neat plots of verdant green grass. American flags wave at me in welcome.

It feels like I’m entering a different world.

I turn off at the exit with the McDonald’s and the Wendy’s and follow my GPS instructions along the back lanes to my grandmother’s house. I park just at the edge of the property, where a rope tied to two poles blocks access to the dirt-packed driveway. I sit here for a moment, just looking.

The house—a two-story white structure with shingles, green shutters, columns, and a porch—sits back about a quarter mile from the road. From this distance, it looks grand. Two big willow trees frame it, with smaller trees lining either side of the dirt driveway. It’s pretty.

My mother has a coffee-table book that lists historic houses in Chowan County. This one, which used to be owned by an enslaver named Coffield and called the Coffield Plantation, is in it. The place was built as a shack in

the late 1700s; additions were made over time that made it the house it is today.

I don't know why it just dawns on me now, but my grandfather John Addison, who only had a fourth-grade education, managed to buy the plantation and about 100 acres of land in the rural South in the 1930s during the Great Depression. He bought it as the world teetered on the edge of World War II, the laws of Jim Crow strengthened and tightened their grip, and violence toward Black people escalated. It's a significant achievement. Actually, it's more than significant; it's remarkable.

Perhaps it's the story of Africatown. Understanding the legacy of that land puts this acquisition in a new light; it makes me realize just how much of my family's history I haven't noticed.

I never met my grandfather; he died of an illness before I was born. But I know he was a farmer. My aunts and uncles say he was loud, gregarious, fearless—maybe a little less afraid than he should have been growing up Black in North Carolina in the early 1900s. They also say he could be cheap. My uncle George jokes that he bred 14 kids so that he wouldn't have to pay anybody else to work the farm. He left the house to Grandma. And when she died in the 1990s, she left the house to all her children, who allowed it to fall into disrepair over the years.

No one has lived in it for the last 15 years or more.

I get out of my car and walk toward the house. There, to the left, is the trailer where my uncles and aunts moved my grandmother in her later years when the house became too big for her. The trailer is decrepit, overrun with weeds. I imagine that snakes, spiders, and all kinds of other critters now call it home.

I keep walking until I get to the place where the landscaper, Mr. Beale, waits for me; he tends the yard when no one is there and has agreed to let me into the house. He stands quietly while I take it all in.

It is so still on the property—just as I remember it as a child. Only the occasional sound of a passing car and rustling leaves breaks the silence. After greeting each other, Mr. Beale and I stand looking out at fields that seem to stretch forever.

"What's planted here?" I ask him.

"These little plants," he points, "those are soybeans. See that dark green stuff way back yonder? That's corn. Right across the edge here."

Local farmers rent the land from my aunts and uncles and farm it year-round.

“Do you know if that’s our land? If that’s my grandfather’s land?”

“Well...”

“You’re not sure?”

“No, I’m not sure because all the way back is another path where you can come in. And I know people hunt deer back there. I think your granddaddy’s land might be mixed together with other people’s land.”

I nod. That’s right. My grandma divided up the land and gave plots to each of her children. Some of the brothers and sisters have since sold theirs.

“Alright, Ms. Tara. I’m going down and finish taking care of this grass here. Here’s the key to open the door.”

I stand there a bit longer, then walk over to the house.

Up close, it’s in a state.

The side wall has a hole big enough that I can actually bend my leg, stoop down, and walk through. I don’t need the key after all.

My skin crawls once I fully stand in the space. There is plaster and debris everywhere, with visible mold on the walls. The windows have all been broken. The wallpaper is peeling; I see a wasp’s nest inside. Most of the ceiling in the kitchen has fallen down. The house smells old. I’m afraid I’ll breathe in black mold, so I only take in tiny sips of air through my mouth.

An old piano sits in the front room. I open it and brush off the dust to pluck a few notes. It’s out of tune. Like the house: She is neglected and tired. But I see the elegance of her bones. Her ceilings are high. Her layout feels spacious and good. Two big rooms, with a kitchen and bath downstairs. Two big rooms that the boys and the girls would have shared and a room for my grandmother and grandfather, along with a bonus room, are upstairs.

Our house has managed to remain standing for some 200 years. She feels like warrior stock: a ride-or-die soldier you’d want with you to the end.

My grandfather acquired her somehow—I still don’t know exactly how—and managed to hold on to her long enough to pass down to his children.

Jack would have known John Addison. When Jack died in 1916, my grandfather, his grandson, would have been 20 years old. I wonder if Jack

would have been proud of him for buying this land.

I think so.

**EDENTON IS CONSIDERED ONE OF** the loveliest small towns in the South, largely because of the 20-block or so downtown stretch. Colonial mansions that likely housed enslaved people or profited from the business of plantations in the county rise majestically above tree lines on carefully tended lawns. Boats bob at private piers. The district has a charm and easy flow.

I had booked a bed-and-breakfast here because in all my years coming to my grandma's house while growing up, I had only ever set foot downtown a few times. But on this trip, I wanted to experience Edenton in its totality. I settle into a charming attic room called the Samuel T. Sawyer Suite, replete with a window seat and low eaves.

The next morning, I go for a walk, my shoulders a bit hunched when I encounter locals, bracing for ignorance and subtle racism. But I'm surprised: Friendly faces wave at me as I cross streets. Shop owners and waitresses go out of their way to chat me up, and the twang of the Deep South rings pleasantly in my ear.

I was also prepared to observe an intentional erasure of the Black part of Edenton's past—but again, I'm surprised. Several historical markers to African American rebellion and accomplishment are located along the sidewalks, including a marker commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr.'s visit to Edenton in 1962. Considerable investment has been made by the city into restoring the 1897 Kadesh A.M.E. Zion Church, the downtown location of the first African American congregation; its reconstruction is under way on a quiet street.

As I walk along the path around the Albemarle Sound, I meet a Black man walking his dog. I didn't think Black people hung out downtown, but he tells me that quite a few live and work here. He explains that he's a birder visiting his cousin, who lives around the corner and runs a popular local truth and reconciliation committee that meets every Thursday.

But I see the other markers too—one for James Iredell, a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, and one for Joseph Hewes, a representative in

Congress who signed the Declaration of Independence and is considered the godfather of the U.S. Navy. Both owned enslaved people.

Then I come across a big Confederate monument, which graces the town square.

I feel flummoxed.

The contradiction.

But then I remember what Lonnie Bunch III, the founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, said to me. “What good history does is it teaches you nuance,” he’d explained. “It teaches you subtlety. It teaches you complexity. It teaches you ambiguity.”

I decide I want to learn more about how else Edenton embraces its complex past. I sign up for a tour in the morning.

**AT 9 A.M. THE NEXT** day, I meet Charles Boyette, who is White and the local historian, at the Edenton Historical Commission. I’m his only guest, so the two of us hop into a golf cart and sit side by side. As we drive around town, he tells me the incredible story of Harriet Jacobs, who is featured on several markers and has an exhibit in the Penelope Barker House, right at the water’s edge. Her story, I think, exemplifies the ambiguity that Edenton embraces well.

Harriet was born in 1813. So, she was here when Jack was alive, I realize.

She was born enslaved and then sold at age 15 to James Norcom, who desired her. But instead of being a tale of rape and sexual violence, Harriet’s is one of escape and survival. She managed to repel Norcom’s advances for six years, even starting a relationship and having children with a White lawyer named Samuel Tredwell Sawyer to gain a measure of protection. But it didn’t work. When she turned 22, Norcom became more insistent. And so, for seven years, Harriet ended up hiding out in the tiny crawl space under the roof of her grandmother’s house in downtown Edenton—a scenario not unlike the more widely known circumstances of Anne Frank, a German-born Jewish girl who hid with her family from the Nazis for two years in a secret room.

Harriet's space was so small, though, that she could not even stand up. It was only three feet tall at its highest point. She stayed there, never leaving or seeing the rest of her family, because Norcom lived nearby and had not stopped searching for her. Her family worked for him, and she couldn't risk involving them.

Eventually, "Harriet's grandmother raised enough money so that Harriet could escape on the Maritime Underground Railroad dressed as a sailor," Charles explains.

Wait.

"I'm sorry, did you say the Maritime Underground Railroad?"

"Yes," Charles says. "They called it MUR."

I am incredulous.

Charles smiles and says, "Yes, MUR. It was the hidden network of connections that allowed enslaved persons to seek their freedom along the waterways."

"I've never heard of this!" I say. Of course I've heard of the Underground Railroad, the network of secret routes and safe houses that enslaved people in the South followed to get to freedom in the North. But I didn't know about a maritime version.

"Back then, the waterways were the major arteries of trade—before, you know, paved highways," Charles continues. "And a very large portion of the sailors, dockworkers, fishermen—just people who made their living off the water—were African American, either free or enslaved. So they would help people make their way north."

He tells me that the MUR operated for years, leveraging the shipping routes already delivering goods from the South to the North. Edenton was one of the stops.

"We have a marker down here on our waterfront," says Charles as we drive to it. "It has a picture of the type of boat Harriet probably was able to escape in." We get out of the cart to look.

"Wow. This is just a wooden boat," I say. "It looks like a rowboat."

"Yes, she would have gotten to the bigger ship on that," says Charles. "They were used to row from the pier to the ship." Like the pirogues in West Africa or the dhows in Mozambique. The rest of the journey would have been on a much bigger ship.

Harriet Jacobs escaped to Philadelphia and went on to write about her experiences in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Published in 1861, it's one of the few printed firsthand narratives of enslavement. Harriet also became a journalist and an abolitionist, even returning south to Virginia to open the Jacobs Free School, which taught newly freed Black people.

I marvel that I had never heard about either the Maritime Underground Railroad or Harriet Jacobs—who was from my family's hometown. She was courageous, adventurous—and she became a journalist. She might have been my role model as a kid.

We pass another marker and Charles tells me the story of Josephine Leary, an enslaved local woman who became a millionaire. She started a barbershop and then began investing in commercial real estate. By 1894, at 38 years old, she had accumulated more than \$10 million in today's currency.

I find myself leaning into the rest of the tour with an attitude I never could have predicted of myself, even just a year ago. When I'd traveled to touristy places before, I would observe people trailing behind guides with their cameras or coming in and out of museums. I would always brush by; I was more interested in the now.

But this feels different. *I* feel different.

Charles and I end our tour. I grab a bite to eat, then head back to my bed-and-breakfast for the night, tired after the day's revelations.

When I get to my room and see the name Samuel T. Sawyer on my door, it clicks. He was the father of Harriet's children—the White lawyer who would eventually become a U.S. congressman. The man she thought would afford her some protection from Norcom. But in the end, he didn't protect her, and she still had to go into hiding.

And I'm staying in a room named after him. I could not have planned this if I tried.

How fascinating that Edenton believes both these stories are important. Again, the contradiction.

The next morning, I wake up at the crack of dawn and walk to the pier. I want to be outside in the fresh air, absorbing even more of the energy of this place and feeling it in my heart.

Although no slave ships wrecked in the waters here in Edenton, the Albemarle Sound leads to the ocean. And the ocean, Yemayá, still calls to

me in a whispered voice. I sit in communion with her on that pier, just breathing and being, allowing myself to be present to all my feelings. I sit there until the Penelope Barker House, which also sits on the waterfront, opens.

When it does, I'm the first to enter. The place is named after the woman who led one of the first organized suffrage movements in the United States —the Edenton Tea Party, which protested taxation without representation by the English. Edenton, then, has as much to say about gender as it does about race.

I roam around, taking my time, browsing through books and photographs. Eventually, I make it to Harriet Jacobs's exhibit on the top floor. I read everything I can about her and buy her book. Then I sit and chat with Alexis, a White historian with the Edenton Historical Commission whose office is upstairs.

We exchange stories for about two hours. I tell her about the house and about Jack. She tells me even more about Harriet. But she also has information on notorious local enslavers with the last name Roberts who might have enslaved Jack. They were not nice people, she says.

I'm captivated.

Because here, in this place, real stories abound. This is not abstract history anymore. No, it is alive, pulsating with meaning.

**IT HAS BEEN A LITTLE** over three weeks since I spoke with Renate. While I wait for her call, I decide to visit relatives in the area. First, I drive to Elizabeth City, the next town north and the place where my aunt Myrtle lives. Aunt Myrtle is three years older than my mother. Only she, my uncle George, who is one year older than my mother and lives in Florida, and my mother are left of the 14 children.

I wonder what she still remembers.

I pull up to her house and see her sitting on the front porch.

“Hey, Niecey!” she calls.

“Hey, Aunt Myrtle!” I call back.

We hug on the porch, and she tells me to go in the house and get some iced tea and a slice of the sweet potato pie she just baked. I bring it out, and

we sit companionably as I eat. She asks after my mom; I tell her she's good. I ask after her kids; she has five. She tells me that Keith, who is the president of the local NAACP chapter, and Kirk, who will soon be the mayor of Elizabeth City, have both been leading marches in town for the last 100 days to protest the killing by police of an unarmed Black man named Andrew Brown, Jr.

Elizabeth City is the big city in the area with a population of about 18,000 people. What they are doing is impressive, and I'm proud of my cousins.

I finish the pie and tea and put the plate and cup aside. Then I ask her if she remembers any stories about my great-great-grandfather Jack. I hope to learn more of who he was as a man. But she says she didn't know him. He died before she was born.

"All I know, Niecey, is that this area is full of Robertses, and we come down from his line or his brother Granville's line."

She tells me that she believes Jack had 11 children, although she doesn't know all their names or their descendants.

"Good Lord. I think we are related to most everybody here. But my memory is just not so strong now to tell you a lot more."

She pauses. "I do remember my daddy's daddy, though."

That was John H., Jack's son.

"He was one of the richest Black men in the area. I know that. He was a logger. He worked the land that he inherited from Jack."

She looks off into the distance. "I remember my granddaddy used to drive down the road in this fine white carriage with a big horse, and his wife, Harriet, who was part Cherokee, would sit next to him. She had hair so long that she could sit on it. I would run to the gate of the house and watch them go past."

I love the details and wish she also had stories like this about Jack too. But she doesn't.

Instead, Aunt Myrtle spends the afternoon telling me stories she does remember readily—about John Addison—and about Grandma.

She stirs my memories. John Addison's wife. Elizabeth. Lizzie.

Grandma lived with me and my mom for a year in her older years; she and I shared a room in our little apartment on Wells Drive. Her tall body had rounded and softened by the time she came to us and would shake as

she laughed silently, often with her hand covering her mouth. Her face would also scrunch up as she “pshawed” and waved her long fingers at whatever she didn’t believe in.

As the mother of 14 children, Grandma spent more than 30 years of her life pregnant or nursing. She was quiet after so many years around all those kids and her talkative husband, but strong-minded and rather sly. She once told me I was her favorite grandkid, but I suspected she told all of us that. After all, her immediate clan eventually numbered about 100 people.

I listen and remember and laugh with Aunt Myrtle until it’s time to go, so thankful to have brought back into memory Grandma’s energy. I haven’t thought about her in years.

As I stand up to take my leave, though, she takes my hand and says, “Niecey, Jack’s grave is right there in Greenhall.”

Greenhall is a neighborhood—really, a long road—in Edenton.

“The grave is supposed to be in the back of the Warren Grove Baptist Church.”

“Seriously?”

“Uh-huh. That’s right. You should call your uncle George. He might know more. Or your cousin Arnold. He can take you round there if he’s in town.”

I hug her and get Arnold’s number. He’s one of the many relatives I don’t know.

I call him on my way back to Edenton. He’s in town and agrees to meet me at the end of the week.

**THE NEXT DAY, I VISIT** with my nieces who live in Williamston, the town on the other side of Edenton toward the south. They are my half-brother Chris’s kids, Shy and Wu. They are 11 and 12 years old, respectively.

I take them out for a Chinese buffet meal. I want to know what they make of all this history being resurrected. As we sit in front of a spread of noodles, chicken wings, fried rice, and dumplings, I ask if they’ve heard of Harriet Jacobs or the MUR. Even though I didn’t learn about any of this history myself as a kid, I’m hopeful that they’re learning it in schools now,

especially since these events happened in such close proximity. Turns out, they aren't.

"Do you think history matters?"

"I think it matters," says Shy, whose given name is Chrishiya, an expansion of my brother Chris's name.

"Do you realize, Shy, that your ancestors from way, way, way back came from Africa?" I ask her.

She shakes her head and frowns a bit. "No."

"What about you, Wu? Did you know that?"

Wu, whose given name is Christen, another expansion of my brother Chris's name, stops eating. "Yes. I did know that, Aunt Tara," she says seriously. "I did know that my ancestors came from Africa."

"Do you care about knowing your roots from so far back?" I ask.

They both nod; Shy even does so vigorously. "I definitely want to know where I come from!" she says.

I ask if they know about the work I'm doing.

"Yes, you are looking into the history of the slave ships and learning about your family," says Wu.

"Yep. I'm following Black divers as they search for slave shipwrecks. So, what do y'all think about that?"

"I think it's pretty cool," says Shy. "You get to explore the world, and you get to learn more stuff that you didn't already know. And I think that's cool." She nods her head enthusiastically while threading a noodle into her mouth.

Wu nods in agreement.

"It's awesome," Shy says definitively. "Like when we get older, we'll be able to tell people that, like, we had this cool aunt, and she did all this stuff. And she got to explore the world. And she came back and told us about it."

"I wish I could do it," laments Wu, pouting and crossing her arms in a huff. "But I still got school to finish out. Which is borriing. If I didn't have school, I would have joined you on it, of course."

I smile. I believe her. But I also think back to what Laura said about the Black youth in Costa Rica being too busy with school to participate in the diving work there. An unconscious deprioritization of our history. A quiet version of anti-Blackness at play in the next generation already.

“Well, will y’all come scuba diving with me one day?”

“Yes!” They both intone together. “Yes, we will!”

I think to myself, instead of Barack Obama’s “Yes, we can!,” it should be, “Yes, we will!”

I grin back at them and shove fried rice in my mouth.

**WHEN I GET BACK TO** my room, I see that Renate has sent me an email. She has results.

Excited, I suggest a Zoom call for that afternoon so she can share what she has found, and she agrees.

When we hop on, she confirms that Jack was indeed enslaved, and that she had managed to find out that his enslaver was likely James L. Roberts. I guess Jack probably gets his name from him. She confirms his marriage and his 11 children.

She tells me that she couldn’t find a ship or his parents for now. But she has found out other things about Jack that are news to me.

First, he had land. A lot of land. Well, I knew he had some land because my great-grandfather John H. had inherited it, and my cousins live on it now. But I didn’t know it was close to 174 acres. Renate sends a link to the deeds outlining its boundaries. Interestingly, it’s only about a mile from my grandfather’s house and property.

So, my once enslaved ancestor bought about 174 acres of land in a former slave state.

This is an astounding accomplishment, even in today’s terms. But I begin to wonder. If the *Clotilda* Africans and my great-great-grandpa were able to do it, I wonder how many more formerly enslaved people in the South did the same. They may have displayed a collective resilience and entrepreneurial ingenuity that we will never fully understand because many were often cheated out of or run off that land and the records are poor.

Still, 174 acres feels extraordinary. That’s about 130 football fields back-to-back.

Also, evidence shows financial dealings between Jack and the community. It looks as though he loaned and bartered land to help his neighbors become landowners too.

Second, Jack was a chosen delegate to the 1865 Freedmen's Convention in North Carolina to discuss constitutional rights for newly freed people. "If this is really your ancestor, it's a huge deal," says Renate. "It means he represented Chowan County in the convention for the state of North Carolina. It's major."

Finally, we had evidence that Jack fought in the Civil War, in the United States Colored Troops. Second Regiment, Company B.

I knew my family had a long history of service in the military: more than 200 years combined. But how incredible to add Jack's service to this list.

Renate also tells me that Jack may have owned a speakeasy. "There is evidence that he may have spent a brief time in jail for running an illegal juke joint," she says.

At once I think of the scene with Harpo's juke joint in *The Color Purple*. All the Black people in their finest. Alcohol flowing at the tables. A piano playing, a singer crooning. The guests dancing, grinding, laughing, finding release with one another in the smoky air.

Maybe she thinks of it too, because we both chuckle at the same time. I shake my head in amazement.

"That's it for now," she says. "But I would be glad to keep looking. I think there is a lot more to be found."

Before we conclude, Renate, seeing how this news affects me, offers a bit of wisdom.

"What has happened in those generations before us—it develops us," she says. "The traumas of our ancestors live within us, yes. But learning their stories can help us understand ourselves better."

"So, you think this work of digging in the past makes a difference?" I ask.

"Absolutely. It helps us come to terms with who we are as individuals and who we are as a group. And to have that understanding can be so healing. It can transform us from being wanderers and people who don't know how we connect to our ancestors into a community with a profound connection to each other as we discover our true history together."

I think about what may have been passed down to me. How I've been inclined toward real estate at a fairly young age (I've owned six properties that I financed with little money). How I started my own businesses (the

magazine and my own nonprofit). And how I've been inclined to do work for the equity and justice of people. Just like my cousins Keith and Kirk. Perhaps these are characteristics that I—we—inherited from Jack.

I feel a stirring of pride.

I am not a descendant of sad people, of victims, of faceless slaves.

I am a descendant of Jack, who has become real to me...a full-fledged human being who is not perfect. Just real.

**THE NEXT DAY, I REALIZE** that I'm in Edenton on June 19, 2021. Oh, how the universe works...again, I couldn't have planned this if I tried.

On June 19, 1865, enslaved people in Galveston, Texas, received word that they were free. (Although President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation declaring them liberated on January 1, 1863, the news didn't reach those enslaved in the state of Texas until almost two years later.)

Black communities in Texas started to gather every June 19 to celebrate with food, drink, prayers—even reading the Emancipation Proclamation. This day of celebration spread to other Black communities around the country and became a quietly acknowledged day of remembrance. But just two days ago, on June 17, 2021, President Joe Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act, making the 19th an official national holiday.

And here I am in Edenton. I had planned to leave this morning but decide I must stay to experience the newly declared national holiday in this place bursting with family.

Edenton decides to celebrate all out, with a live soulful band, clothing vendors, food stalls right off the pier—even a popcorn machine. People of different races come out to commune; curious eyes follow me as I stroll around with all my recording equipment. I want to capture as much as I can and remember this day forever.

As I walk around, people stop me and ask who I am. They also ask who my people are. And surprisingly, I can say I'm of Jack Roberts's clan—Jack who begot John H., who begot John A., who begot Lula, who begot me. And there is recognition, laughter, stories. People know my mom, they

know Aunt Myrtle, they know Uncle George, Uncle Sonny, Uncle Marvin, Aunt El...

On hearing my name, Carol Anthony, a stranger passing by, stops to listen for a minute. Realizing the connection, she tells me that she's married to my uncle James's stepson.

"Hi, cousin," she says, delighted to meet me.

We hug. I feel astonished. I didn't even know my uncle James had a stepson. As the evening wears on, I keep running into people who claim a familiarity with my family.

How did I not know *this* place?

Many African cultures believe that the ancestors never die, that they never lose their connection with the living. They say that energy is still there, supporting us, pushing us, loving us. What would it be like, I wonder, if all African Americans could look back and claim their ancestors? See them fully? Know their whole stories? Walk their ancestral lands?

Would that change everything?

**IN THE EVENING, I ATTEND** a vigil. The organizers light a candle and burn sticks of citronella around the Confederate monument to dispel the negative energy of plantation culture. They also burn sage to bring in positive vibrations.

I've spent my life thinking that this area was dull and that Black people were disregarded, at the bottom of the heap. Coming here depressed me. But no longer. As I sit on the porch of my bed-and-breakfast on Broad Street after all the activities have concluded, feeling the breeze, I think about what I've learned so far.

The necessity of telling this history. Of who tells this history. Of involving the community as framers of this history once it is known. I think about this new idea of a global Blackness that is not based on geography. I think about the notion that we are more than something created as a juxtaposition against something else. I think about the power of ritual around the ships to heal our collective past trauma. And I think about the connection to the ancestors—how seeing the fullness of their lives changes something almost imperceptible in us.

I realize these stories of life are ones I was afraid to see and embrace. If I acknowledged the ways that they lived, did that mean I was disrespecting the ways that they died? Do we have to continually stir up that pain to make sure the world doesn't forget? It was bad; we feel we have to keep shouting to get justice. But it's not easy to stay in a place of anger and pain, just as it's not easy to stay in a place of guilt and shame.

This journey following Diving With a Purpose—of learning about the slave ships, and of digging into the past—has helped me experience that healing. Although it's dispersed and quiet, it's under way everywhere.

We're not at the start of this process. Warriors, healers, scholars, storytellers, artists, scientists, and on and on throughout the centuries have been doing the important work. All over the world.

People like Kamau, Lonnie, Karima, María, and Ibrahima have known this all along. I'm late to the party.

But it's OK. I'm just so glad I finally accepted the invitation.

**I DECIDE TO CHECK IN** with Karima. I call and ask her if she thinks I've changed at all.

"Oh, yeah," she says. "I think you've come to a certain level of peace and grace around this, Tara. It's beautiful. And you know, all migrations or movements or journeys aren't traumatizing. They are actually creating and re-forming and rebuilding. They are adaptive too. I'm glad you are experiencing that."

I also check in with Ken, Kamau, María, Justin, and Ayana. I want to know where they think we go from here in the search for more history through the prism of slave shipwrecks.

Ken tells me, "I am closer to the end than to the beginning at this stage in my life. And one of the things I have realized is that I can't change the world."

He laughs and says that's why he wants to concentrate on educating youth.

"I think I have proven that if you educate our children, they will turn into magnificent human beings. We have to get the story of the African diaspora taught in our schools. That needs to be DWP's overall mission."

Kamau says he wants to train more people—especially young people—to accompany DWP on missions. María tells me she wants to dig into a new field called archaeomythology, which states that to understand the objects of the past, you have to understand the myths, languages, legends, and cultures of the territories from which these objects originally came.

Justin wants DWP to take on a mission from beginning to end.

And Ayana laughs with a tinkly sound. “I don’t quite know what any of it looks like right now, Tara,” she says. “But I just know it feels free. You know?”

I do.

**BEHIND WARREN GROVE MISSIONARY BAPTIST** Church, an intact grave with a headstone reads:

Granville Roberts  
Died  
April 4, 1913  
Age: 89  
At Rest

Granville was Jack’s older brother. He was born in 1824, also enslaved. Renate confirmed that info.

The remains of another grave peek out from under grass, soil, and leaves right next to it. But you can’t read anything. I think it’s Jack’s grave. My uncle George says that he was buried behind the church, and the most likely place would be next to Granville. My cousin Arnold, who brought me here, says that he heard the pastor at Warren Grove say that Jack is buried right at the back steps of the church. Where we are standing right now.

I don’t know why I think this, but again, I think that Jack likely had big hands, dark brown hands, oversize, with thick knuckles. I imagine those hands in death: skeletal, long. I think maybe they’re under the soil beneath my sandals.

I'm likely the closest I'll ever be to Jack physically. On this drizzly, overcast day, standing behind the whitewashed walls of Warren Grove Missionary Baptist Church—set back from the road, behind rows of cotton stalks—it feels surreal. Jack may have helped build or at least finance Warren Grove. It was founded a year before he died in 1915.

Maybe Jack walked these fields. Maybe his big hands helped construct these walls. Maybe he and Mary dressed to the nines and stood framed in this doorway, looking in the same direction I'm looking right now.

Sometimes, I feel like I'm floating, like I'm a bouncy ball, touching down briefly only to bounce away again. I'm a free spirit. And this journey has helped me realize that's OK, *I am OK*—more than OK. I'm a part of wind, sky, of a larger universe that does not need to bend to humanity's provincial rules.

I look more carefully at Granville's grave, at the part he must lie beneath. There are more words:

Granville  
Asleep  
O  
From  
Ever wa  
Weep

I yearn so much to see such words on Jack's grave—to somehow solidify this invisible connection I feel with him—that it brings tears to my eyes.

I realize he is the anchor to my bouncy ball. I don't have to live on the African continent or even in Edenton. I don't carry around a picture of him, like my friends did of their ancestor Big Lu at the Women's March. But I have decided that I belong to him and he belongs to me. That he can be with me anywhere and everywhere I go, because we are a part of each other.

I feared this search for slave shipwrecks might be too hard. I thought it might only involve hands holding mine, rubbing my back, consoling my tears and my heartache.

Instead, I found strength. And power. And adventure. And camaraderie. I found laughter. Love. Life. Kinship. I found something to root and ground

me while I soar and create my own story.

I found Jack. I found belonging.

All this from a picture in a museum.

Welcome home.

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# EPILOGUE

**I**t's one year later, 2022. I fly from Atlanta to Paris to Cotonou.

I take a taxi to the hotel where I'm meeting the National Geographic film crew that I hung with in Mobile. Also with me are Garry, Cassandra, Altevese, and Delisha—all descendants of Cudjo Lewis and Gumpa Lee, two of the Africans who came over on the *Clotilda*.

The descendants have come to perform homecoming ceremonies for their ancestors. Cudjo guides the mission. Before he died, he drew up a simple map that showed his home village of Tarkar in the Bantè province of Benin, outlining his long foot journey to the coast under threat of knives and spears by the Agoji warriors. This handwritten map, with its scribbles and lines and circles representing hills, jungle, and other villages, has been passed down over generations, accompanying his request that his descendants use it to bring him home to Tarkar one day.

That day has come.

Cassandra, Garry, and Altevese took soil from Cudjo's gravesite and placed it in a decorative box they carried with them on the plane yesterday. They plan to honor his wishes by burying its contents in Cudjo's village.

Delisha also gathered soil from the gravesite of her ancestor, Gumpa Lee, the scion of King Glélé. She plans to do the same in the town of Abomey, the main seat of the Dahomey Kingdom. She doesn't need a map back to Abomey for Gumpa; everyone knows the way to the Dahomey.

The Nat Geo crew will witness and film the ceremonies. And I will serve as host of the film.

We greet each other at the hotel, hugging and exclaiming and catching up until it's time to head to bed to prepare for the long day ahead.

In the wee hours the next morning, 13 of us, including producers and crew, load up in two private buses and a jeep and travel the five hours to Bantè.

Red dirt extends along the sides of the paved road we travel, stretching forever into the distance. Improvised shacks of commerce—food stalls, repair shops, clothing stores—appear in clusters along the way, along with groups of children in school uniforms. The boys wear blue button-down, short-sleeved shirts with tan pants; the girls wear the same shirts paired with tan skirts. They walk or run or skip together with their school backpacks bouncing lightly against their backs.

As we ride past them, Garry, who is sitting across from me with his long legs stretched out across the aisle and his baseball cap turned to the back, pulls out Cudjo's map and shows it to me. "You see how it is numbered from one to 10?" he asks.

Cudjo's home village is marked number one on the map; more numbers are delineated until they reach the beach in Ouidah, which is labeled number 10.

"Cudjo is showing us how to take him home," Garry says. "He marked the way in his mind as he was marched all those miles. He remembered."

He shakes his head. "You know, a soldier, when he goes into battle and lives to the end, all he wants to do is...what?" He looks at me expectantly as I look back blankly and then answers his own question. "Come home."

"That's all anybody who has been separated from home for whatever reason wants to do," says Garry, who is the senior person of his family group at age 63, and whose idea it was to return Cudjo home. "What we are doing lets people know you can always reconnect to whoever or whatever you feel you've been disconnected from. Even your ancestors can come home. And this stretches across races, cultures, religions, generations."

We stop in Abomey two hours into the trip so that Delisha can perform her ceremony on the grounds of one of the compounds of Glélé's descendants. She removes her shoes and steps into the walled-off courtyard of a crumbling building with big trees in the center. She decides to honor Gumpa in private without the whole team. So we mill around outside and wait for her.

When she emerges from the building, she has a look of peace and relief on her face.

We all board the bus again and travel for another three hours to Bantè, where a motorcycle guard of riders ushers us deeper into the province to Tarkar: Cudjo's village.

We hear music as we get closer. When we step off the bus and walk down a dirt road and through a wall of brush, we see people—lots of people—waiting for us.

Soon these people surround us; we disappear in their midst. Mothers carrying babies, men using canes, kids running back and forth. They sing and dance and play drums for us. Some are even wearing traditional costumes. They grin and reach out to touch our clothes, our hair, offering words of welcome.

The women in front of me and Delisha—we are walking behind Garry, Cassandra, and Altevese—show us a dance they do with their shoulders. Hands planted on hips, their shoulders and arms move rapidly back and forth while the rest of their bodies stay still.

Delisha and I try to imitate them, and the people around us fall down laughing. We know we do not look as graceful as they do. We laugh back. And they shout encouragement for us to try again.

One young girl sidles up to Delisha and holds her hand for the rest of our walk.

We travel at least a mile from the edge of the village to its center under a great tree. There, the village elders sit in chairs, waiting. Altevese, Garry, and Cassandra kneel in front of them as villagers continue to pour into the area, surrounding us in concentric circles. The area becomes so thick with people that I can no longer see Altevese, Garry, and Cassandra.

I begin counting. How many people have come out to celebrate with us? My eyes sweep the crowd. I count in patches and realize that at least 700 people are here.

Seven hundred people welcome the faraway descendants of one of their own.

There is silence suddenly. I squeeze past a few people to see what is going on, and I bump into Altevese, who is heading back toward the crew and who looks stunned.

“What’s happening?” I ask.

“They are going to take us to his house,” she says.

“Oh, OK,” I say. “To an elder’s house?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “No, they are taking us to his house—to Cudjo’s house!”

Her eyes are wide with astonishment. “To Cudjo’s actual house. The place where he slept.”

The tears begin then. They stream down Altevese’s face and slide to the ground in fat splashes. Soon, my tears join hers.

We stand looking at each other despite all the noise in the crowd around us.

The descendants started this journey to bring their ancestor home, but they never expected this kind of welcome. And they never expected to find a remnant of Cudjo’s life—a place he might have touched with his own hands—still intact.

Altevese has found home.

And I...I feel...wonderment, peace. I feel like this is the rightful end to Cudjo’s story.

Garry stands up suddenly and becomes insistent. His eyes are a bit wild, and he says they must bury Cudjo’s soil right now. He tells the villagers it’s time to go.

They heed him and march us to the outskirts of the village—to a gazebo that has been newly constructed just for this purpose. There are chairs in a circle underneath it.

Garry, Altevese, and Cassandra sit together with the elders; Delisha and I sit on the other side of the circle. The villagers crowd behind the chairs and around the poles of the gazebo to watch.

It’s quiet, and then it begins.

Garry opens the container with the soil. Cassandra pulls out clear plastic bottles filled with muddy water from the Door of No Return in Ouidah. She then makes lines in the dirt and pours the water between them.

Garry hands out pieces of watermelon for everyone to eat. Then he tells us that we must all turn around, that this part is private for the family. An interpreter translates Garry’s wishes to the villagers, who are amenable but as bewildered as the rest of us. Delisha and I stand and turn too.

Then we hear Garry’s voice. It’s a guttural cry. “Cudjo, come home!”

He cries out again, “Cudjo, come home!”

And again, “Cudjo, come home!”

Over and over again.

And then we hear him say, “All of you, help me! Help me call Cudjo home! Help me call him!”

His words are translated. And then we hear the villagers add their voices to his cries, “*Cudjo, reviens à la maison, Cudjo, reviens à la maison.*” There is no need to cajole them into participating; they immediately get it. And they keep going in a rhythmic tonal chant. “*Cudjo, reviens à la maison.*”

I chant too. But then I stop. I’m overcome with emotion. I think Cudjo’s spirit must indeed be here in this place.

Garry stops. And we all turn around.

He’s drenched in water.

I later learn that Cassandra poured water over him.

Garry is calm now, his agitation siphoned off with the water flowing down his face. He sags a bit.

But it’s not over. Cudjo has come home, but now he needs to be embedded in the soil of his home village. The villagers take the descendants to a newly planted tree a few meters away. Garry sinks down on his bad knees and places the soil from the cemetery around the base of the tree.

Then we all head back to the gazebo. The elders invite a Babaláwo, an Ifá priest, to conduct a Yoruba religious ceremony to honor the descendants. Then the elders announce that they will gift the descendants three acres of land, so that they can become a part of the village and bring more of Cudjo’s descendants home to live.

Later, on the return bus, Altevese tells me that she’s already imagining building a school. You can see a light shining from within her as she speaks. “My heart is so at peace now,” she says, her body draped across the seat and her hand over her eyes. She looks boneless, like a rag doll.

We head next to meet the mayor of Bantè, who presents the descendants with a huge tapestry with Cudjo’s image woven on it. I wonder how long it took a seamstress to make.

When the meeting has concluded, we are taken to a nearby hill overlooking all of Bantè, high enough to offer 360-degree views of Tarkar village and the surrounding area.

And there at the top is a structure. It’s hard to see from the bottom of the hill. But as we get closer, we see that it’s a base with a bust on top.

And as we get closer, we realize that the bust is of Cudjo. It's intricately carved, capturing his likeness perfectly. It must have taken a sculptor months to make.

The curious thing is that in life, Cudjo was not royal or a celebrated member of his village. He was just a young man when he was captured—likely valued and loved, but just a boy who had recently turned into a man and was probably figuring out what he was really made of. He wasn't the only person taken during that raid by the Agoji; we know this for sure, because of his memories recorded in *Barracoon*.

But he is the only one to return. And so, his village chose to welcome him back into the fold, letting us know that for them, even the young, even the still growing, even some who might be considered the least of us still matter.

Cudjo proved his significance. By surviving a journey that so many did not. By accumulating land and building a community in a place that hated him. By spreading his seed, which now numbers into the hundreds and includes restaurant owners with gold chains and hats turned backward. By striving to remember his way home and thinking to document the path to share with his descendants.

Maybe in all these ways, Cudjo became the most of us. Even though he belonged neither fully to Mobile nor Tarkar, he transformed both places.

He is like Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, like Santiago in *The Alchemist*. Only he arrives home in spirit, rather than in the flesh, and he symbolizes the return for all Africans in the diaspora who cannot do it on our own.

I didn't realize until this trip just how special Cudjo is, despite the fact that I've been talking to the descendants for several years and know the story of the *Clotilda* and Africatown. But not until I stood in his village in Bantè did I truly understand the importance of Cudjo's life's offering to us.

Garry knew this all along, though. As we journey back to the hotel, he tells me, "I can rest now."

He does not mean to rest just on the bus. He means that his soul can rest, because his mission—Cudjo's mission—has been accomplished. I am humbled and thankful I could experience this with him.

**I HEAD HOME TO ATLANTA** after the ceremony, taking the reverse flights from Cotonou to Paris to Atlanta. I gather my bags and breeze through immigration. An Uber drops me off—not at my mom’s house in College Park, but at my little studio apartment in the Old Fourth Ward.

I’ve owned the place for years but have always rented it out; I always felt like it should somehow have been more than what it was. But after my trip to Edenton, I decided to move in. I had it renovated and redecorated—new paint, floors, closets, bath, kitchen. It’s not fancy in any way. The building is old and rather dated, and the furniture mainly secondhand. But the cool grays and tans welcome me almost as much as the crowd in Bantè when I open the door.

I look around and feel love for my papasan chair with the cream faux fur cushion, for the huge Beninese painting I had framed on one wall, for the painting of the Buddha’s face on the other. I feel love for my bathtub with the pebbly bottom that massages my feet when I shower, for the string of Christmas lights I have strung around the floor-to-ceiling balcony windows, and for my bright red Smeg milk frother, which I splurged on so that I can make cups of milky turmeric and rooibos tea without having to go to a coffee shop.

I also feel love for my little balcony. It’s just large enough to hold two chairs, a small tree, and a vase. Two planters have clusters of dark blue peonies that hang over the balcony wall.

I drop my backpack and reach into my pocket to retrieve two tiny vials of water. I step out onto the balcony that looks over downtown Atlanta. Standing before the planters, I loosen the tops of the vials. One contains water from the Atlantic Ocean in Ouidah; the other, water from the Albemarle Sound in Edenton. I close my eyes and breathe in and out three times. Then I pour their contents into my planters.

The droplets spread and sink into the soil.

I’ve come home too. Like Cudjo. Home. To my own silences. My own loudness. To my own unique life. I am fluid like water, I think...like Yemayá.

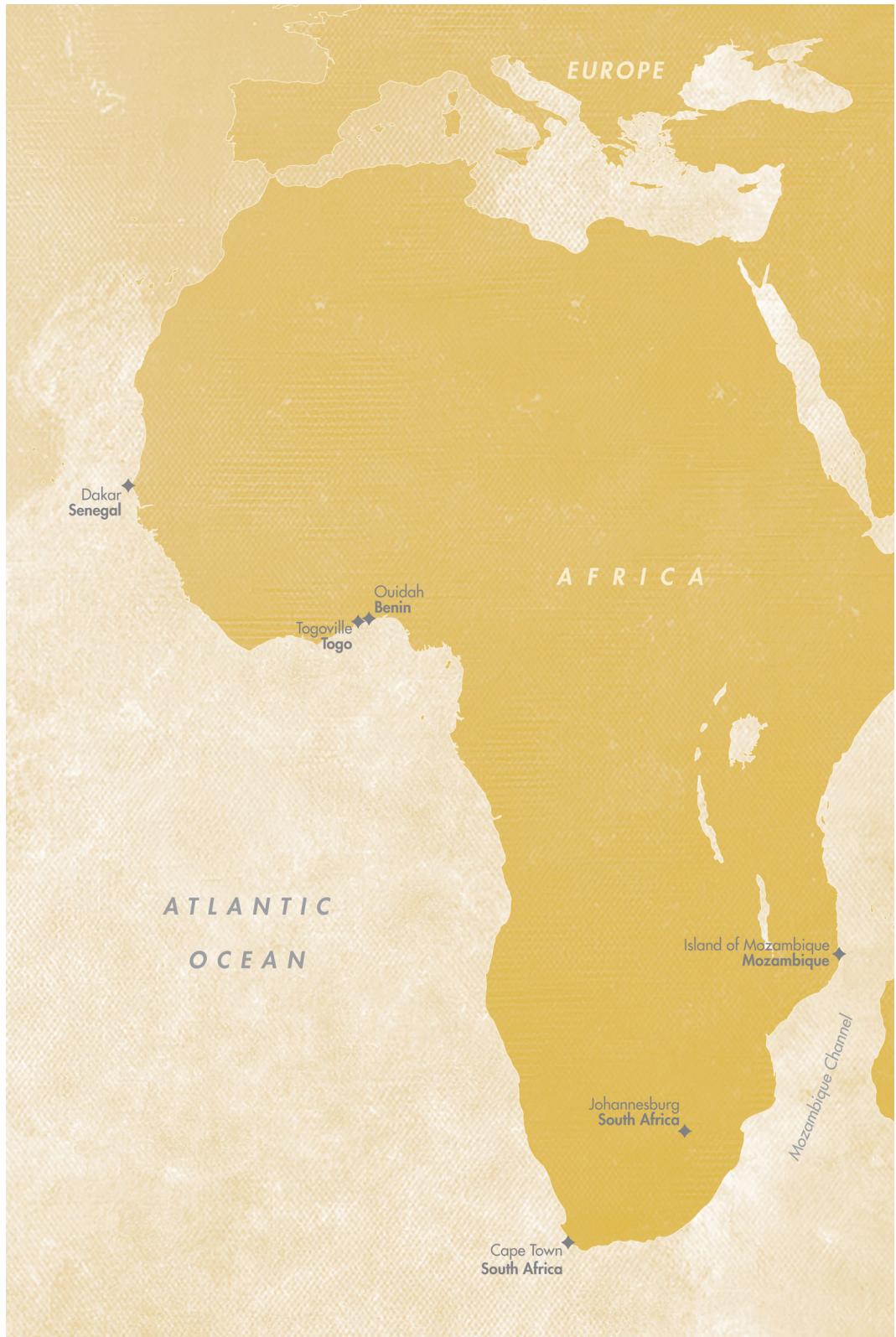
All my life, I’ve been shaping myself like water, writing myself within her waves.

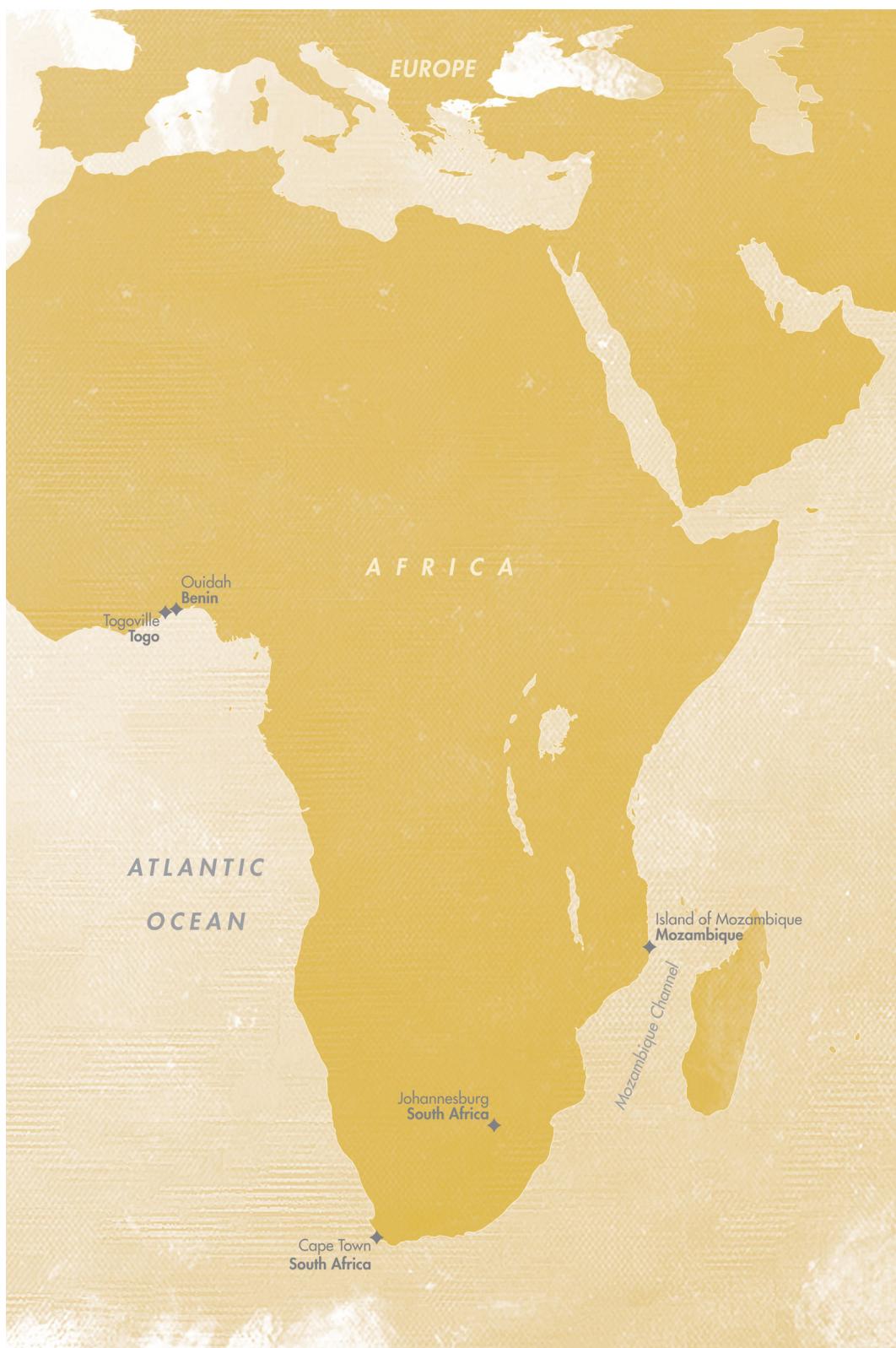
It’s a relief to name it.

Finally.

And it feels just right.









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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tara Roberts is a National Geographic Explorer in Residence who documents shipwrecks that once carried captive Africans during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Their stories—and the stories of the divers, historians, archaeologists, and communities she meets along the way—became the popular, award-winning podcast series *Into the Depths*. In 2022, Roberts became the first Black woman explorer to grace the cover of *National Geographic* magazine and was named the Rolex National Geographic Explorer of the Year. A former fellow at MIT’s Open Documentary Lab, she has worked as an editor for publications including *Essence* and *CosmoGirl*, published her own magazine, and edited several books for girls. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

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Since 1888, the Society has pushed the boundaries of exploration to better understand our world. We have awarded more than 15,000 grants to National Geographic Explorers—storytellers, scientists, conservationists, innovators, and educators—for work across all seven continents. Today, Explorers are advancing knowledge and leading programs with outsize impact to protect historical artifacts, communities, nature, and wildlife. They're documenting the wonder of our world—often from multiple perspectives to provide more complete stories—and inspiring people to care and act on behalf of our planet and its people.

National Geographic Explorer in Residence Tara Roberts is a writer and storyteller whose work shines a light on the origin stories of African people in the Americas—bringing empathy, nuance, and complexity to their journeys. In 2022, Roberts was named the Rolex National Geographic Explorer of the Year for her illuminating work to raise awareness of the more than 400-year history and legacy of the global slave trade.

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